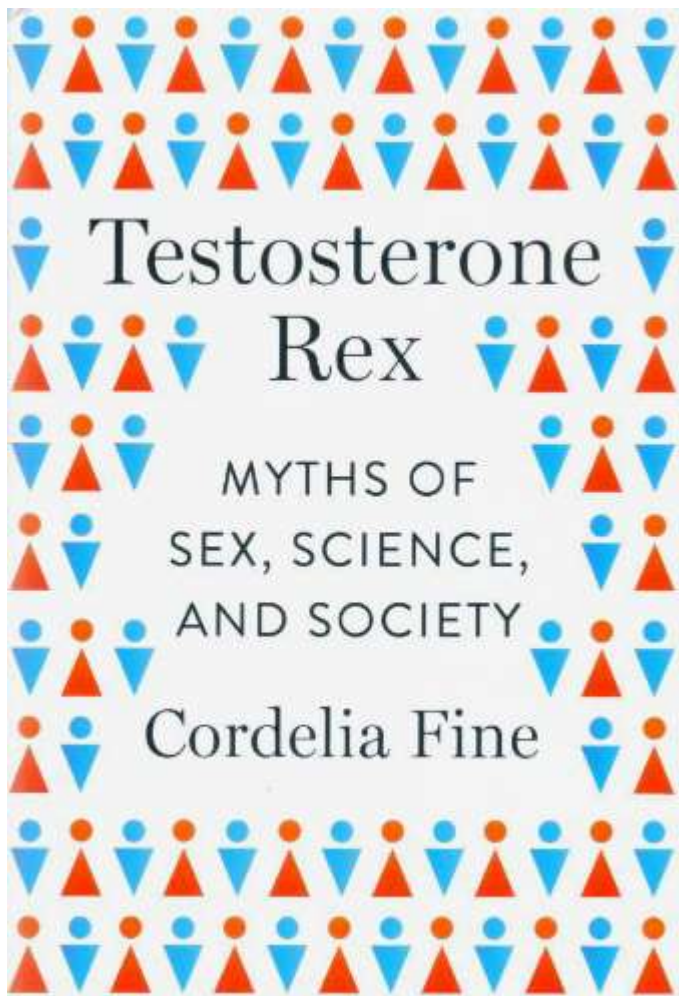


## ‘Testosterone Rex’ moves boldly in pursuit of truth

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*“Testosterone Rex: Myths of Sex, Science and Society” by Cordelia Fine. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017, 320 pages, \$26.95.*



“A while ago, my younger child ground to a halt in a homework assignment because he wasn’t sure whether to use the word ‘sex’ or ‘gender’ to describe a school-camp exercise in which every boy was paired with a girl,” Cordelia Fine explains near the beginning of “Testosterone Rex: Myths of Sex, Science and Society,” her new scientific foray into a subject that has fascinated the human race since time immemorial. “His uncertainty isn’t surprising. From the late 1970s, the word ‘gender’ began to be used as a way of drawing a distinction between biological sex, and the masculine and feminine attributes and status that a society ascribes to being male or female. The idea was that by referring to ‘gender’ you highlight the role of these social constructions – what society makes it mean to be male or female – in creating disparities between the sexes, as opposed to the relentless unfurling of biologically determined male and female natures.”

“But this approach was short-lived,” she continues. “From about the 1980s onward, the word ‘gender’ also began to be used in place of ‘sex’ as a way of referring to whether an individual is biologically male or female,

including even nonhuman animals. These days, for example, surveys regularly ask you to identify your ‘gender,’ even though typically the expectation is that your answer will be based on whether you have a vagina or a penis, rather than any gendered psychic qualities or preferences.”

As was the case with Fine’s two previous books, “Testosterone Rex” is extensively researched, with 49 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction and eight chapters comprising the main text. The manuscript is written in three discrete yet interrelated parts: “Past,” “Present” and “Future,” with each succeeding installment building on the previous section. And although this is true for most scholarly explorations, I found that in order to fully understand and appreciate the implications of her primary thesis, it is essential to read the book from the beginning and not jump back and forth in the narrative as I am sometimes inclined to do. Fine is meticulously constructing a framework from which to decipher key elements embedded in our culture; as such, it is imperative to navigate the architecture she provides.

The content Fine covers in this illuminating volume is familiar to most of us. Either indirectly through the expressed or implied expectations of our family and friends, or directly through formal venues such as public schools or religious institutions, we all have fairly defined conceptualizations of what constitutes the “appropriate” roles for men and women, boys and girls - the particulars may vary, but the universally accepted mythology tends to revolve around some comparatively straightforward maxims: women are generally more reserved and better suited to parenting functions while men are motivated more by status and the biologically driven urge to procreate. Fine argues these distinctions are actually more culturally-based than most people realize and, as such, help perpetuate entrenched inequalities at the core of contemporary societal structure. Claiming inequality has an organic basis, she asserts, lends it a credibility that is much more difficult to deconstruct and refute than simply attributing it to cultural forces.

Using a literary style that deviates somewhat from many of her peers, Fine traces the origins and development of traditional gender roles through a cross-section of evolving civilizations. I found her prose to be fluid and entertaining; she provides the full spectrum of thought on the issue at hand, drawing extensively from evolutionary science, psychology, neuroscience, endocrinology and philosophy. At the same time, she infuses these insights and perspectives with stories, vignettes and a variety of case studies that serve to make the content relatable to anyone with only a rudimentary background in the rigorous research in which her treatise is solidly grounded. She exposes many of the fallacies inherent in more traditional approaches to the question of what truly precipitates observed and experienced differences between the sexes, and in so doing, moves beyond the simplistic thinking that has historically couched the discussion as a “nature versus nurture” proposition.

Fine is an associate professor in the Melbourne Business School at the University of Melbourne, where, in addition to pursuing her research agenda, she also teaches courses on ethical leadership and social responsibility. Her work has been featured in the Financial Times, the New York Times and the Huffington Post. Her previous books include “Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society and Neurosexism Create Difference” and “A Mind of Its Own: How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives.”

“People have different reasons for wanting greater equality between the sexes,” Fine concludes near the end of the book. “Some people want fewer women assaulted or killed by their partners. Some want to close the yawning gap in retirement savings that puts disproportionate numbers of women in poverty in their senior years. Some want greater sex equality in their organizations because of the research suggesting beneficial effects for productivity and profit. Others want to stem the leak of talented, highly educated and expensively trained women lost in professional pipelines.”

I feel it is important to note that although Fine is dead serious in her pursuit of the truth when it comes to the detrimental role gender has played throughout much of our recorded history (and undoubtedly even before), she has obviously not lost her keen sense of humor. In fact, I found myself laughing out loud at many of the absurdities she so eloquently describes. For example, in challenging the widely held notion men are more likely to engage in potentially life-threatening behaviors than women, she points out that giving birth is about 20 times as likely to be fatal as is skydiving. Moreover, her discussion of the claim testosterone led to the Great Recession of 2008 was as hilarious as it was enlightening. Highly recommended.

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