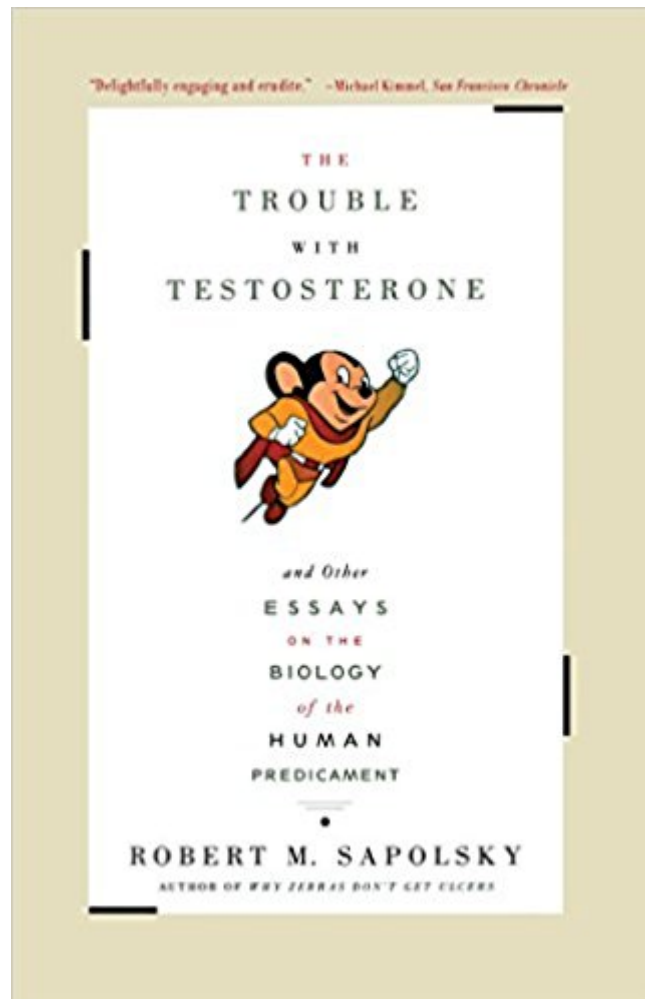


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# The Trouble With Testosterone: And Other Essays On The Biology Of The Human Predicament



## Synopsis

Finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize From the man who Oliver Sacks hailed as "one of the best scientist/writers of our time," a collection of sharply observed, uproariously funny essays on the biology of human culture and behavior. In the tradition of Stephen Jay Gould and Oliver Sacks, Robert Sapolsky offers a sparkling and erudite collection of essays about science, the world, and our relation to both. "The Trouble with Testosterone" explores the influence of that notorious hormone on male aggression. "Curious George's Pharmacy" reexamines recent exciting claims that wild primates know how to medicate themselves with forest plants. "Junk Food Monkeys" relates the adventures of a troop of baboons who stumble upon a tourist garbage dump. And "Circling the Blanket for God" examines the neurobiological roots underlying religious belief. Drawing on his career as an evolutionary biologist and neurobiologist, Robert Sapolsky writes about the natural world vividly and insightfully. With candor, humor, and rich observations, these essays marry cutting-edge science with humanity, illuminating the interconnectedness of the world's inhabitants with skill and flair.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

People have said some fairly stupid things in the name of socio-biology, but Robert Sapolsky isn't one of them. This is a distinguished researcher who can write like a best-selling journalist; a man who can address such deeply fundamental human concerns as growing up, growing old, and finding a god, and illustrate them with examples from baboon behavior, while not seeming to trivialize the issue; a man with enough courage in his observations to extend them into realms where science

has been forbidden to tread, yet with the honesty and modesty to always indicate where he is uncertain, and even to include a rebuttal to one of his essays. One of the reasons I read is to get a chance to 'meet' authors like this.

Is it possible for a man who has won a MacArthur genius grant to be underappreciated? Reading this set of essays I have to wonder why Sapolsky is not as widely read and commented on as Dawkins, Sacks, Gleick and those other few at the absolute pinnacle of popular science writing. The tales here cover his familiar subjects: the mind and emotions (one is tempted to say the soul), stress and our reactions, and how brain chemistry effects us every day. He also relates anecdotes from his baboon observations, and in the most touching essay talks about his father's life and death. The essays are gathered from several years and several magazines and each stands on its own...there is no particular theme beyond the aforementioned subject matter. The best is probably about how we sometimes take on the identity of another: illustrated by an anecdote where he watched Stephen Hawking give a lecture "through" the voice and body of a vigorous young graduate student, and Sapolsky's own odd reaction to his father's death. It is interesting, mildly disturbing and raises some ideas about individuality I certainly had never considered. In another essay, Sapolsky describes why so many illnesses have the same symptoms (its because it is our own immune systems that make us feel so crummy). Elsewhere he draws parallels between kids going off to college and male baboons switching tribes, and in yet another essay compares aging in baboons and humans. So, should you read this book? "Yes", if you have read other Sapolsky books and are looking for more. "Yes", if you have heard about Sapolsky and want an introduction before diving into one of the larger works (though I still think 'A Primate's Memoir' is the best place to start). "Yes", if you are interested in the brain and/or like good science writing.

The same qualities that make Sapolsky one of the most popular teachers at Stanford come through in his writing. Although I was an English major, I took his human behavioral biology class because the man has a well-deserved reputation for being entertaining and thought-provoking. If you attend one of his lectures, you'll find students from all disciplines, all wide-awake. Sapolsky makes the biology of the human condition come to life without compromising the integrity of its scientific underpinnings. This book is especially recommended to those with an interest in biology or psychology, but the appeal is universal.

Robert Sapolsky does a really nice job of tackling complex subjects in an entertaining, thought

provoking and accessible manner. *The Trouble with Testosterone* is a collection of essays covering a range of subjects more (or less) tied to behavioral biology - the study of the extent to which our behaviour is influenced by our bodies and our bodies by our behaviour. M. Sapolsky's approach is thoughtful and addresses not only some of the really nifty developments in the field, but also some of the thorny philosophical issues arising from what we think we know (and what we thought we knew but didn't). Whether discussing the social interactions of aging baboons, the extent to which testosterone does not affect aggression, an important difference between  $1/2$  and  $(1/4 + 1/4)$ , or the risks in deciding too readily what is normal, M. Sapolsky usually has something interesting to say, and for the most part says it well. *The Trouble with Testosterone* is a keeper on my bookshelf.

Robert Sapolsky has written a wonderful, fun and terribly informative book, and it's a lovely break to anyone who wants to put their endocrinology articles aside for a night and read something a little smoother. I loved "Curious George's Pharmacy" so much I devoted a day in my Great Apes syllabus to a discussion of pharmacognacy and assigned that chapter as a reading. I also quite enjoyed the last chapter on the "heterozygote's advantage" of schizotypal disorder as the root of major world religions (and read the bit about Martin Luther's clear obsessive-compulsive behaviors aloud to my boyfriend, where we both got a good gasp and a laugh). As an anthropologist and a student of primate endocrinology myself, I highly recommend this book to anyone with an interest in the biological basis of human behavior.

Stanford professor, Robert Sapolsky, not only knows how to make deep scientific research accessible to the general public, he also has a biting sense of humor. As a science text, Sapolsky does provide the mandatory data and research, loads of supplemental cross-references, and a standard objectivism necessary to his field. Beyond the 'givens,' though, are the wonderful puzzles he sets for us to explore. He does give us at least one of the answers to the puzzle, if not the only answer, and he makes that clear. But in true Penn and Teller fashion, he shows the behavior, then tells how it comes about, but then adds another puzzle unanswered to the previous answer -- exactly what science is about: one more question. His explorations of voyeurism and gossip (why DO we do it?), decision making between two evils, and even puberty are mesmerizing.

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