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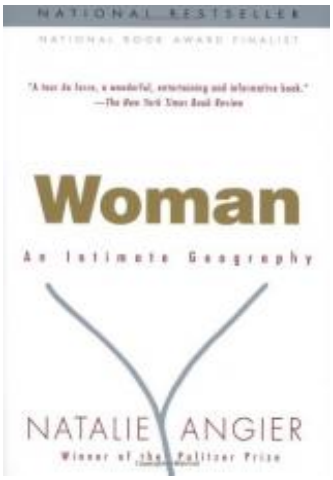
Woman

by Natalie Angier



About the Book

The questions, discussion topics, and author biography that follow are intended to enhance your group's reading of **Woman: An Intimate Geography**. In this extraordinarily wide-ranging exploration, Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* science writer Natalie Angier lifts the veil of secrecy from that most enigmatic of evolutionary masterpieces, the female body, exploring the essence of what it means to be a woman. Witty, irreverent, and sharply intelligent, Angier presents a powerful case against scientists who have given Darwinian evolutionary theories new life, and offers instead a thoroughly liberating and enlightening reading of the complexities of the brain, biology, and the female body.

Discussion Guide

1. Angier describes her book as "a celebration of the female body" (p. xiii). Having read her chapters on the intricacies of the egg, the clitoris, the uterus, the breast, and so on, are your ideas about the female body substantially altered? How?

2. In her introduction, Angier quotes cultural commentator Camille Paglia, who writes of the menstrual cycle as follows: "The ancients knew that woman is bound to nature's calendar, an appointment she cannot refuse. She knows there is no free will, since she is not free. She has no choice but acceptance" (p. xvi). Why is Angier so opposed to this kind of thinking?

3. Angier discusses medical evidence purporting that whether a person becomes a male or a female is a matter of chance, dependent upon the switching on or off of certain genes and the sensitivity of certain tissues to hormones while the fetus is forming. How does the evidence presented here affect your understanding of sexual difference, and the relative importance of biological and cultural determinants of sexual identity?

4. Do you agree with Angier's assessment that "the clitoris is designed to encourage its bearer to take control of her sexuality" (p.76)? What is the evolutionary purpose of the clitoris if, as it appears, it is an organ "dedicated exclusively

to sexual pleasure" (p.70)?

5. Given the cases of Jane Carden, Cheryl Chase, Martha Coventry (pp. 28, 84-85) and others like them, should surgeons alter the genitals of infants and children whose bodies they consider abnormal? How similar is such cosmetic alteration to the genital cutting practiced in many African countries? If it is true that surgical alterations are made to womens' bodies far more often than to mens', what are the cultural assumptions that account for such inequity?

6. The use of HRT--hormone replacement therapy--for post-menopausal women has stirred much controversy, as has the widespread use of hysterectomy as a solution to the problem of fibroids. How does Angier's approach to these issues affect your position? Should the body be left to follow its own natural course, or do such medical interventions improve upon nature?

7. Angier contends that the institution of patriarchy belongs exclusively to the human species: "Only among humans is the idea ever floated that a male should support a female, and that the female is in fact incapable of supporting herself and her offspring, and that it is a perfectly reasonable act of quid pro quo to expect a man to feed his family and a woman to be unerringly faithful, to give the man paternity assurance and to make his investment worthwhile" (p. 302). Is there any evidence that patriarchal thinking has weakened in contemporary American life? Why has patriarchy been so successful in suppressing most expressions of female power except for those crucial to the domestic and maternal areas of life?

8. Following her discussion of the role of post-menopausal women in primitive societies, Angier presents her opinion of the necessity of female bonding, both within and beyond the group of one's age mates. Extrapolating from her own experience, Angier claims that "we keep looking for our mothers and those mythical creatures our female mentors" (p. 257). How widespread is this desire among women?

9. Angier has said, "I really object to the idea of females as more cooperative and less aggressive than men, both in terms of sexual drive and ambition....I know it's not true that women don't have an innate hunger to succeed" [Interview in **Los Angeles Times**, June 28 1999, page E1]. What then explains the fact (p. 361) that as recently as 1996, only four of the Fortune 1000 companies were headed by women? If, as Angier claims, "our strongest aggressions and our most frightening hostilities may be directed at other women" (p. 295), is it possible that women inhibit one another's success?

10. Angier notes that "most female animals are promiscuous" (p. 381) and strongly disagrees with evolutionary psychologists who "insist on the innate discordance between the strength of the male and female sex drive" (p. 364). Do you agree with her that women are as interested in sex as men? Do you think women pursue their sexual desires as aggressively as men do?

11. What message is being sent in the movie **Thelma & Louise** about what happens when women go in search of independence? Why do you think the film ended the way it did? If the film was made today, would the ending be the same? Is there any evidence that Americans are becoming less conventional and more flexible in their thinking about the independence of women?

12. Epidemiological studies show that, in terms of longevity and health, men benefit from marriage more than women do. Angier points out that this data conflicts with the position of evolutionary psychologists "that men are 'naturally' ill-suited to matrimony" (p. 386). How do you make sense of this seeming contradiction?

13. Angier says, "It is still too costly to behave in a way that risks the investment and tolerance of a man, of the greater male coalition?We reject the idea of sisterhood and of female solidarity. We make fun of it" (p. 309). Still, she argues, female bonds are important, and women need them. Is she right in saying that in our culture, feminism gets no respect? If so, why have the energies of feminism dissipated since the 1970s?

14. Gloria Steinem calls **Woman** "nothing less than liberation biology," and says that Angier "proposes revolutionary possibilities for both men and women." How would women's lives be different if mainstream culture shared Angier's perspective on women's power and potentiality?

15. In Chapter 18 Angier takes issue with evolutionary psychologists who claim that we still live under the sway of prehistoric instinct when it comes to choosing a mate. Women, they say, seek stability and economic security, while men tend to seek youth and beauty. Why have the ideas of Robert Wright, David Buss, and others in their field gained such wide acceptance? Does Angier ultimately come closer than they do to answering Sigmund Freud's famous question, "What do women want"?

16. Why are women's relationships with their mothers often so difficult? What do you think of the wish Angier expresses for her relationship with her daughter, once her daughter is herself an adult, "that my daughter's need for me may prove larger, more enduring, and more passionate than the child's need for meals, clothes, shelter, and applause" (p. 258)? Do women in fact need their mothers more, not less, as they get older?

17. Woman is a very personal book for Natalie Angier. What has Angier risked--and what has she gained--by speaking of her own experience so freely, by making use of her quirky sense of humor, and by being so playful with language? How do the author's voice and prose style affect your experience of the book?

18. Remembering a conversation in 1987 between herself, her grandmother, her mother, and her cousin in which all four women agreed that if given the choice they would have chosen to be men, Angier ends the book by rejecting that wish: "the wish to be a man is a capitulation to limits and strictures we never set for ourselves. It is lazy"--and by inviting her women readers to celebrate their womanhood. "Our tribe is the tribe of woman. It is our tribe to define, and we're still doing it, and we will never give up. We live in a state of permanent revolution" (p. 401). Do you find this inspiring, liberating, or simply unrealistic?

Author Bio

Born in 1958, **Natalie Angier** grew up in the Bronx and in Michigan; she attended Barnard College, where she studied English literature, physics, and astronomy. She was a staff member at *Discover* magazine before joining*The New York Times* in 1990. In 1991 she won the Pulitzer Prize for beat reporting as a science writer. She lives in Takoma Park, Maryland, with her husband Rick Weiss, a science reporter for *The Washington Post*, and their daughter Katherine.

Critical Praise

"Natalie Angier's dazzling new book calls upon biology and evolution to celebrate the female body. Its upbeat message. . . is supported by rigorous scientific underpinnings."

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Publication Date: February 15, 2000

Paperback: 464 pages

Publisher: Anchor

ISBN-10: 0385498411

ISBN-13: 9780385498418