

Biologist Emily Willingham explores humans' obsession with animal penises in "Phallacy"

The organ appears in religious texts, laws, daily speech and even in photos sent, often uninvited, to people's phones. But when we compare our species to the wild diversity of life, the human penis is comparatively un-remarkable, making our infatuation seem even more misplaced.

In Phallacy, biologist and science writer Emily Willingham takes readers on a historical, evolutionary and often hilarious tour of the penises of the planet... Along the way, she puts the human penis into much-needed perspective.

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There's great variety in intromittants because they — like every other part of an organism — have been shaped by evolutionary pressures... They come spiraled, mace-tipped, needle-barbed and multiheaded. Several species even exhibit members that are larger than the males that wield them.

In contrast, Willingham points out, the human penis is distinctly lackluster. It isn't covered in spines and has no penis bone, or baculum. It's not excessively large for the human body size. But that mediocrity reveals something crucial about ourselves. The human penis's lack of weaponry and its fleshy texture show that humans don't engage in large amounts of mating competition, with a male using his penis as a fencing foil or to scoop out a rival's semen. Instead, Willingham notes, it points to our tendency toward prolonged mating bonds within a social network.

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