



# Defending the Cavewoman: And Other Tales of Evolutionary Neurology

By Harold L. Klawans

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## **Defending the Cavewoman: And Other Tales of Evolutionary Neurology** By Harold L. Klawans **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

"All superficial comparisons to the contrary, Oliver Sacks and I are really quite dissimilar," said Dr. Harold Klawans, in his essay "My Lunch with Oliver." He and Sacks were both neurologists, both with special interests in movement disorders and Parkinson's disease, and both writers. "The brain and how it functions is to Oliver a philosophical issue... I try to ask simple questions." Klawans's questions are not really "simple," but they're about evolution and development instead of philosophy.

In his clinical practice, Klawans thought about the evolution of the brain to try to understand his patients' problems, and vice versa. His theme throughout is that brain development is about windows of opportunity: many things can only be learned in certain periods, and after puberty in particular the brain has been largely "pruned to shape," so that skills like language and music may never be properly acquired.

The cavewoman of the title is the one who stayed home taking care of the babies while Man the Hunter was off spearheading the Ascent of Man (in what Stephen Jay Gould, one of Klawans's favorite writers, calls an "evolutionary just-so story"). Not so, says Klawans: because the window of opportunity for learning language is in childhood, especially early childhood, language *must* have arisen between mothers and children: "though few defend the Cavewoman, we all speak our mother's tongue." --*Mary Ellen Curtin*

#### From Publishers Weekly

Much in the manner of Oliver Sacks, neurologist Klawans (*Why Michael Couldn't Hit*, etc.) uses stories from his clinical practice as jumping-off points for discussion of how the brain works, and of how and why it evolved as it did. Klawans explains how doctors find out which half of your brain controls your speech, and why they might need to know; how a professor's stroke cost him his ability to read, and how he regained it. Later chapters lay out "how literacy changes the brain" (among other things, it teaches us to use abstract categories) and how mad cow disease alters it (by means of contagious proteins called prions). Bringing in modern European history, Klawans connects an obscure nerve disease to conditions in Nazi-occupied Norway. Straying into evolutionary genetics, he describes Cheddar Man, a specimen of early *Homo sapiens* found in England; his DNA matches that of a modern-day history teacher still living in Cheddar. The difference between the two Cheddar men shows how much human life has been controlled by cultural, rather than biological, evolution. Klawans strikes an admirable balance between breezy narrative and serious exposition, between clinician's anecdote and broad biological overview. His decision to build each chapter around a single patient gives some of his work the feel of short stories, each with a single scientific punch line. Readers familiar with similar science writers will zip through Klawans's work with pleasure; those new to the genre will learn lots of neuroscience, nontechnically and without pain. (Jan.)  
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#### From Library Journal

Neurologist Klawans (*Why Michael Couldn't Hit*) contends that the unique qualities that make us human evolved because of our extended childhood under women's care--which allowed for continuing brain development, language, and learning--rather than from men's hunting and tool use. He uses fascinating clinical anecdotes to lead into explanations of how our brains work and how they got that way. His methodology resembles that of Oliver Sacks, but Klawans concentrates more on the process of learning how our brains function, while Sacks is also interested in the philosophical and literary implications of neurology. Klawans has a wonderfully clear, entertaining style that makes him a pleasure to read while giving the reader important insights into how our brains work. Highly recommended for all types of libraries.  
--*Marit MacArthur, Auraria Lib., Denver*

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