

Death & Sex

By Tyler Volk, Dorion Sagan

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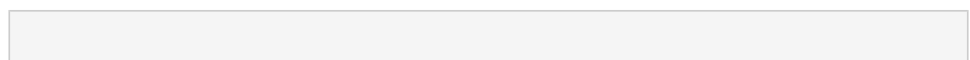
WINNER OF THE BOOKBINDER'S GUILD OF NEW YORK 2009 AWARD FOR BEST NONFICTION HARDCOVER!

On DEATH . . . What is shared by spawning Pacific salmon, towering trees, and suicidal bacteria? In his lucid and concise exploration of how and why things die, Tyler Volk explains the intriguing ways creatures—including ourselves—use death to actually enhance life. Death is not simply the end of the living, though even in that aspect the Grim Reaper has long been essential to natural selection. Indeed, the exquisite schemes and styles of death that have emerged from evolution have been essential to the great story from life's beginnings in tiny bacteria nearly four thousand million years ago to ancient human rituals surrounding death and continuing to the existential concerns of human culture and consciousness today. Volk weaves together autobiography, biology, Earth history, and results of fascinating studies that show how thoughts of our own mortality affect our everyday lives, to prove how an understanding of what some have called the ultimate taboo can enrich the celebration of life.

. . . and SEX

In *Sex*, Dorion Sagan takes a delightful, irreverent, and informative romp through the science, philosophy, and literature of humanity's most obsessive subject. Have you ever wondered what the anatomy and promiscuous behaviors of chimpanzees and the sexual bullying of gorillas tell us about ourselves? Why we lost our hair? What amoebas have to do with desire? Linking evolutionary biology to salacious readings of the lives and thoughts of such notables as the Marquis de Sade and Simone de Beauvoir, and discussing works as varied as *The Story of O* and *Silence of the Lambs*, *Sex* touches on a potpourri of interrelated topics ranging from animal genitalia to sperm competition, the difference between nakedness and nudity, jealousy's status as an aphrodisiac and the origins of language, Casanova and music, ovulation and clothes, mother-in-law jokes and alpha females, love and loneliness. A brief, wonderfully entertaining, highly literate foray into the origins and evolution of sex.

Two books in one cover, *Death & Sex* unravel and answer some of life's most fundamental questions.



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Death & Sex By Tyler Volk, Dorion Sagan Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #139635 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Chelsea Green Publishing
- Published on: 2009-10-13
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.25" h x 1.00" w x 5.25" l, .89 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 224 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this back-to-back double essay (flip it one way, it's *Death* by Volk, flip it the other way, it's *Sex* by Sagan), two curious scientist-philosophers ponder the relationship between mortality and the chain of being. Sagan (*Notes from the Holocene*), the co-director of Chelsea Green's science imprint, takes a romp through evolution beginning with a neatly detached definition of sexual reproduction: "the formation of new individuals from the genes of at least two different sources." Taking a playful run with a serious theory, Sagan doesn't skimp on trivia ("an estrous chimp may mate with sixty males in a day"; "the oldest ejaculation in the fossil record" is between 363 and 409 million years old, etc.) while pursuing vital ideas on the relationship between gene mixing and evolution. On the other end, biologist Volk (head of NYU's environmental studies track) presents a luminous essay on the way death is integral to life, the importance of each person's "cultural knot," and how "biogeochemical cycles" create "a personal form of immortality": "my chemicals will circulate in the biosphere and become clouds and oceans and many wondrous creatures." Though dissimilar, the essays share an off-center view of evolution that should be of special interest to those who enjoy pondering the alpha and omega of life.

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Review

Publishers Weekly-

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New Scientist-

WHAT could be more alluring than a book about sex? How about a book about sex that, when flipped over, is also a book about death? In this two-for-one, biologist Tyler Volk and writer Dorion Sagan tackle two of the most important processes in the human experience. They touch on their respective subjects' fundamental importance to human history, while the book's format shows how the two are interconnected. In *Death*, Volk investigates the biology of death across species and revisits death rituals throughout human history. Surprisingly, Volk's presentation serves as a reassuring affirmation of life, painting death as just another stage in an ever-repeating evolutionary cycle. In *Sex*, Sagan revels in covering what is clearly his favourite subject in a series of digressions, with playful prose that slips effortlessly from the complications of fertilisation to the widespread misconceptions relating to Marquis de Sade's lascivious nature. In this single compact volume, the two subjects are presented with many delightful touches and details that put our carnal desire and our mortality into surprising perspective.

"In a mere 90 pages, Tyler Volk's book *Death* brilliantly depicts the biology and psychology of its subject, putting death in proper perspective as an integral component of the life cycle. I've read many insightful books about death, but if I were to recommend one book to help someone come to terms with death, this would be it."--**Jeff Greenberg, Director of the Social Psychology Program, University of Arizona**

"Dorion Sagan muses ruthlessly on the topic of sex and the result is as twisted and tangled as a set of bed sheets. Hyena sex, cycad sex, lots of primate sex, and even a digression on why the Marquis de Sade was not such a bad guy: Sagan takes pleasure in revealing it all. He even makes bacterial sex sound fun. Tyler Volk succeeds in translating everything of the natural world with generous poetic details, from tree-filled landscapes to star systems, as one or another version of death. We humans are by-products of carbon dioxide from dead photosynthesizers, yet Volk manages to make even this a fact well worth celebrating." -**Betsey Dyer, Professor of Biology, Wheaton College, author of *A Field Guide to Bacteria***

"In just 100 pages, everything you really need to know about sex: Why? When? Where? With whom? Dorion Sagan slides effortlessly from seductive prose to bringing the reader sharp up against one astonishing scientific discovery after another." -**Denis Noble, Professor Emeritus of Physiology, Oxford University, Fellow of the Royal Society, and author of *The Music of Life***

"Dorion Sagan and Tyler Volk show us sex is optional and death is necessary, turning the tables on our lusts and fears, our origins and endings, in a surprisingly enticing way." -**Adam Daniel Stulberg, *Poetic Interconnections***

"Sex is the koan we can't stop from coming. Sagan shows us just how deep the riddle of sex goes--pulsing through the world from the Marquis de Sade's plays right down to the bacteria that make up our cells. This slim book allows us to be voyeurs and exhibitionists: Read about the sex lives of others and the other lives of sex to examine yourself. Whether you end up resonating more readily with the puritanical tendencies of the orangutans or with the orgiastic culture of the bonobo chimps, Dorion Sagan's *Sex* will provide a hilarious, thoughtful, and unforgettable time. It's more fun than my day job." -**Conner Habib, adult-film actor and writer**

"A boisterous Siamese twin of a book which looks at the two sides of the same molecular process: that of sex, and that of death, within the framework of life almost eternal. Enjoy, and know you are part of it."--**Crispin Tickell, Director of the Policy Foresight Programme, Oxford University, former Warden of Green College, Oxford University, and former British Ambassador to the United Nations**

"What delicious writing and reading! I love this wise and funny big-little book." -**Erica Jong, iconic author of numerous bestselling works of fiction, poetry and essays**

"This champagne cocktail of exploration and insight, not to forget the murkier passions of lust, or the despondency that comes from unrequited love, abandonment, or loss--what an inspired confection of two immensities, sex and death. I genuinely can't recall reading a more inspiring or entertaining book in years!"-**Frank Ryan, MD, author of *Violution* and *Darwin's Blind Spot***

"While New Orleans indeed boasts a streetcar named 'Desire,' returning in the other direction, as eventually it must, it runs, appropriately enough, to 'Cemetery,' circulating, like some great cosmic wheel of life and

death, endlessly between the two. Eschewing the taboos that surround discussion of both Sex and Death, and transgressing the disciplinary boundaries between philosophical metaphysics and biochemistry, this volume manages to be, at once, both playfully iconoclastic, and technically informative. Indeed it exhibits the very rare capacity to popularize, without 'selling out' or oversimplifying an intellectually challenging analysis of various physiological, animal, social and metaphysical manifestations and implications of this cosmic wheel of life and death. Where else is one going to experience such from chance encounters with de Sade, Monty Python, Basho and Poincare?" --**Simon Glynn, Professor of Philosophy, Florida Atlantic University**

"In *Sex*, Dorion Sagan writes with a wit that no other science writer of our generation can equal. And Tyler Volk's *Death* is spark to the tinder of insight."--**Howard Bloom, author of *The Lucifer Principle: A Scientific Expedition Into the Forces of History***

"In *Death & Sex* two of my favorite thinkers and writers ruminate on two of my favorite subjects and turn up all manner of unexpected interconnections. The result is a splendidly entertaining, informative and original piece of science writing."--**John Horgan, author of *The End of Science and Rational Mysticism***

"I happen to be a book buyer by profession. It is a rare instance when I open up a package of fresh publisher samples that a book brings my day to a halt due to its beauty, let alone its subject. *Death and Sex* is such a book. Its look and texture are as tempting and forbidding as its topics. This book begs to be given a design award."--**Garth Kopal**

"Dorion Sagan's *Sex* is truly fabulous. The flow of writing and joy in reading is not a surprise. Nor are the many fascinating sex factoids which demand an underline in this otherwise mostly 'feets-up' read. But the feets-up ease of Sagan's writing is, at first, misleading. Not unlike a Canterbury tale, we ease into a story only to be awakened--ah, to be enlightened about the cannibalistic origins of sex (nope, no Apple Tree) by the merging properties of Hannibal Lecter, raccoons, and quiet amoebas. Well known as a science writer, Dorion Sagan, shows, once again, that he is far more than that. Sagan is post- post-modern ... a new tack for deep thought, a funny philosopher. When you pick up *Sex*, you will meet a true fabulist."--**Lois Brynes, President, Deep-Time Associates**

"*Death and Sex*--really two books in one--is not a lurid tale of necrophilia. In it quotidian simplicities are dissolved in the acid of evolutionary theory. Death turns out to be more complicated than to be or not to be; and sex is seen to be far more complicated than a tale about a man, a woman and a garden snake. Together, they form a pair of insightful lessons in the application of Darwinian concepts."--**Andrew Lionel Blais, author of *On the Plurality of Actual Worlds***

About the Author

Tyler Volk is Science Director for Environmental Studies and Professor of Biology at New York University. Recipient of the NYU All-University Distinguished Teaching Award, Volk lectures and travels widely, communicates his ideas in a variety of media, plays lead guitar for the all-scientist rock band The Amygdaloids, and is an avid outdoorsman. Volk's previous books include *CO2 Rising: The World's Greatest Environmental Challenge*; *Metapatterns Across Space, Time, and Mind*; and *Gaia's Body: Toward a*

Physiology of Earth.

Dorion Sagan is author of numerous articles and twenty-three books translated into eleven languages, including *Notes from the Holocene: A Brief History of the Future* and *Into the Cool*, coauthored with Eric D. Schneider. His writings have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Wired*, *The Skeptical Inquirer*, *Pabular*, *Smithsonian*, *The Ecologist*, *Co-Evolution Quarterly*, *The Times Higher Education*, *Omni*, *Natural History*, *The Sciences*, *Cabinet*, and *Tricycle*. He edited *Lynn Margulis: The Life and Legacy of a Scientific Rebel*, a 2012 collection of writings addressing Margulis's life and work.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Bobby Bagwell:

What do you think about book? It is just for students since they are still students or it for all people in the world, exactly what the best subject for that? Merely you can be answered for that query above. Every person has different personality and hobby for every single other. Don't to be forced someone or something that they don't would like do that. You must know how great and also important the book *Death & Sex*. All type of book is it possible to see on many sources. You can look for the internet options or other social media.

Terry Matlock:

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Dustin Broach:

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William Burns:

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