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Science

Lousy Sex: Creating Self in an Infectious World
Gerald N. Callahan
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Who are we really? Callahan attempts some answers to the age-old question by making the science understandable to the rest of us.

How do we define "self?" For immunologist Gerald N. Callahan, self can be defined by the bacteria that have a hand in defining who we are and where we come from.

For thousands of years, philosophers have pondered what constitutes self. There are a variety of definitions and theories, but perhaps the most intriguing way of looking at self is from the microbiologist's point of view. Self can simply be defined as that part that you don't consume. The bacteria and actions of your body attempt and generally succeed in consuming any foreign invaders, but they tend to leave the self alone. From that point of view, Callahan takes the reader on a fascinating trip defining and clarifying how people, wood lice, clown fish, and various other forms procreate and create their own concept of self.

Rather like Mary Roach, Callahan has a knack for writing about scientific topics for the general reader. He peppers his ideas with often very personal stories that add depth and emotion to the points he is illustrating. A car accident that he and his wife had runs parallel to the story of Laika, the dog sent up in the first Russian space capsule, illustrating how cold and heartless science can be without concern for living creatures. The reader meets Lisa May, a true chimeric hermaphrodite. Through her story, we see how hormones and gender play into our sense of who we are.

Much of the science is very accessible in this book. Callahan goes out of his way to clarify and explain any terminology or concept that may be confusing for the reader, yet one never feels being patronized. To add to the appeal, Callahan's sense of humor comes through. In the chapter about Beethoven, auditory hallucinations, and syphilis, he tells the story of his uncle Henry, who contracted the syphilitic bacterium from a French prostitute during WWI. "And it

wasn’t bacteria that sent Henry off to war. That was Woodrow Wilson. Who knows what was infecting him.”

As proven in his other works, Callahan is a genuine storyteller who seamlessly combines scientific concepts with everyday life, giving his readers fascinating knowledge in an eminently readable book.

Lynn Evarts