

★ **Man's World****Charlotte Haldane**

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A timely reissue of Charlotte Haldane's brilliant 1926 dystopian novel, *Man's World* is set in a future where individual desires are sacrificed for communal good, women's roles are prescribed, and genetic makeup is determined by eugenics.

Christopher and Nicolette are siblings who share a deep friendship and a rebellious streak. Both chafe under the constraints of a world in which women are "vessels singled out for ... propagation" and genetics are controlled to develop "just the sort of bees the hive need[s]." The civilization seems utopian: work and play are synonymous, art flourishes, science rules, war has been abolished, and "breeding grounds" are established in exquisite garden spots. But this seeming perfection has a dark side. Populations are controlled, communal life replaces family life, and there are strong undercurrents of racism, antisemitism, and homophobia. People are repelled by the haphazard and "dirty, bestial breeding of the past."

In time, Nicolette must submit to becoming a breeder or be sterilized by an injection. Conflicted, she rejects her first mate, befriends revolutionaries and artists, and considers the calm life of a neuter. Ultimately, however, she conforms to her expected roles. Meanwhile, Christopher—who is idealistic, emotional, and gender-fluid—composes a magnificent symphony before he meets a tragic end evocative of Icarus.

A precursor to books such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, the novel raises fascinating questions about liberty, independence, and women's roles; the costs of achieving peace and order; and the search for meaning when the earth is "one great laboratory." Philippa Levine's introduction shares challenging insights into the work's complexity and place in history.

Haunting, complex, profound, and relevant, *Man's World* is a compelling novel that forwards intriguing commentary on questions of gender, race, and social order.

KRISTEN RABE (March / April 2024)

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