

The Sweetness of Venus: A History of the Clitoris

Sarah Chadwick

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A fun, straight-talking history of the clitoris, *The Sweetness of Venus* is a win for feminism.

The book opens with the scientific history of the body part, from the infamous treatment of hysteria to lesser-known Greek and Roman medical texts that acknowledge the existence of the site of sexual pleasure. In Victorian times, Sarah Chadwick shows, “hysteria” was a catchall term for anything that ailed women, and was treated with direct stimulation of the clitoris until the patient reached “hysterical paroxysm”—a fancy way to say “orgasm.” And every few decades, a male doctor would “discover” the clitoris anew.

The book also covers the cultural history of women’s sexuality as linked to the clitoris, from the Bible and classic literature to American politics and psychology. These observations are complete with sharp criticism: what would have happened if a woman president received cunnilingus under her desk? Why was Eve considered the reckless one in Eden? Noting that it’s too big of a topic to cover within the book’s context of Western culture, female genital mutilation is also discussed in brief, acknowledging another important facet of clitoral history.

Chadwick takes what could be a mundane history and adds flavor via biting commentary, mocking the ignorance of men about women’s bodies, and the longstanding implications that women’s bodies are lesser. Medical illustrations of anatomy are interspersed in the text, often shared with humor: the caption for an illustration of the Victorian interpretation of women’s reproductive systems, showing a vagina as an inverted penis (a notion that prevailed for centuries), is simply “This is not what you think it is.” Various feminist cartoons add levity to the book’s heavier topics of anatomical sexism.

The Sweetness of Venus is an exciting romp through the cultural history of the most taboo part of women’s bodies: the clitoris.

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