Reviews for

**Grazyna Jasienska**

*The Fragile Wisdom: An Evolutionary View on Women's Biology and Health* 
(Harvard University Press 2013)

“Grazyna Jasienska's *The Fragile Wisdom*, subtitled *An Evolutionary View on Women's Biology and Health*, may well be the best of the lot. Jasienska—a professor at the Institute of Public Health at Jagiellonian University Medical College, in Krakow, Poland—could be described as an evolutionary/obstetric/endocrinologic anthropologist, uniquely qualified to explore women's reproductive health from a perspective that is not only cross-cultural but also infused with evolutionary wisdom…*Her book is a revelation.*


“Written by one of the leading scholars of reproductive evolutionary biology, *The Fragile Wisdom* is the ‘go to’ book for just about anything one could want to know about how human reproductive biology evolved, what factors have affected it in the past and today, and why our contemporary lifestyles may provide challenges to maintaining health. Each of fourteen chapters is packed with creative discourse and empirical data, much of which derives from research conducted by the author herself.” - Wenda Trevathan, New Mexico State University. Entire review in Journal of Anthropological Research, vol. 69, p. 412-413. 2013

“Women may aim for perfect health through diet, exercise and close attention to medical advice, but still develop breast cancer or osteoporosis. Reproductive fitness often wars with general physical fitness over a woman’s lifetime, argues public-health specialist Grazyna Jasienska. Drawing on a raft of research in evolutionary biology and beyond, she points to factors such as the disjunction between ‘palaeo’ and current lifestyles, hormonal disparities and longer lifespans as key to informing disease-prevention strategies.”—*Nature*

“The antithesis of the diet and get-fit-quick books we’re bombarded with at this time of year, *The Fragile Wisdom: An Evolutionary View on Women’s Biology and Health* by Grazyna Jasienska is an engaging examination of how our hormonal and reproductive systems are attuned to our evolving circumstances. Don’t expect instant solutions—Jasienska suggests our bodies are not so much ‘wise’ but ‘confused’ as they adapt to whatever life has thrown at us over the generations. Fascinating stuff.”—*Psychologies*

“Jasienska explores the ways in which modern changes in attitude (and medicine) with respect to the evolutionary role of women to reproduce might be contributing to rising female health problems. Jasienska demonstrates that long ago, estrogen levels were kept in check by the frequency with which women, lacking any suitable form of birth control, became pregnant; today, on the other hand, women—abetted by social and technological advances—can choose a life for themselves other than motherhood. However, this means that women are pregnant fewer times during their lifespan, therefore they cycle more frequently and thus produce more estrogen—a hormone which, at high levels, shows a high correlation with the incidence of breast cancer. Despite huge steps made in the last 100 years toward gender equality, Jasienska compellingly shows that the impact of millennia of biological evolution continues to assert itself.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Far and away the best book I’ve read in the field of evolutionary medicine since Nesse and Williams’s *Why We Get Sick*. The most sophisticated understanding of evolution combined with the best original
empirical science and the most creative theoretical thinking.” —Peter T. Ellison, author of On Fertile Ground

“Jasienska refuses to present a model of how modern women should lead their lives; rather she insists that each woman is an individual in her own circumstances and must make decisions about the trade-offs inherent to her personal life history.” —Jane B. Lancaster, Distinguished Professor of Anthropology, University of New Mexico, and editor, Human Nature

“Jasienska offers readers an engaging discourse on a critical part of the modern human condition, and the evolutionary and biocultural processes responsible for its development.” —Michael P. Muehlenbein, Associate Professor of Anthropology, Indiana University, Bloomington

“This book focuses on the reproductive health of women from an evolutionary perspective. The evolutionary adaptations that allow a woman to reproduce successfully do not necessarily engender longevity. For instance, hormones that increase the likelihood of pregnancy also increase the likelihood of breast cancer. Higher birth weight, linked to healthier infants, can lead to heart disease later in life. Evidence for these arguments is laid out clearly and effectively. Overall, the information is presented honestly, including contradictory reports, limitations of the different studies regarding sample size and testing, alternative interpretations of the data, and the need for additional research. An extensive list of references is included.

Verdict A great read for those interested in women’s health and evolutionary biology.” —Susanne Caro, Univ. of Montana-Missoula Library, Library Journal

“Evolutionary factors interact with a wide range of human characteristics, some that continue to be beneficial and others that have outlived their usefulness. For example, the human fight-or-flight response is counterproductive in situations of chronic stress. In The Fragile Wisdom, Jasienska (Jagiellonian Univ., Poland) offers new insights into evolutionary trade-offs between reproductive viability and other aspects of a woman's health. The book includes well-researched (48 pages of references) analyses of Paleolithic dietary patterns as well as hormonal fluctuations that support fertility of younger women and place these same women at risk for postmenopausal cancers of their reproductive organs. One of many strengths of the book is the author's refusal to settle for easy answers or to offer advice. Rather, she raises questions and argues persuasively that human evolutionary heritage is far more complex, more interesting, and more challenging than most readers may have imagined. Although the emphasis is on women's health, this thought-provoking, well-reasoned work is relevant for anyone seeking a better understanding of humanity's collective history and its implications for today.”

Summing Up: Highly recommended. Upper-division undergraduates through professionals; general readers. -- M. D. Lagerwey, Western Michigan University

“Grazyna Jasienska’s The Fragile Wisdom is a welcome addition to the literature on health and human biology through an evolutionary perspective. It gathers and synthesizes the multidisciplinary research related to women's health in evolutionary context and in doing so makes it abundantly clear why such a synthesis is worthwhile…..This text would surely prove to be a worthwhile purchase for a wide variety of biologists. Moreover, one need not have an interest in women's health per se for the book to be useful. It would be an especially valuable addition to the classroom (in whole or in part), perhaps best suited to upper-level undergraduates or above. **It is an engrossing text and is highly recommended.**

- Sean A. Valles, Lyman Briggs College and Dept. of Philosophy, Michigan State University


“Do unto others; First do no harm; Ask questions.”

And in this ambitious volume, Grazyna Jasienska poses a host of thoughtful questions, enough to keep a stable of researchers going for many lifetimes. The central query is whether an evolutionary perspective can help us understand the relationship between reproductive function and health. While she is circumspect about drawing inferences that might be prescriptive, the ultimate goal is to inquire
whether we can see our way to identifying prescriptive behaviors for improving health. No small potatoes here!... The book is provocative, raises good questions, and could direct a generation of researchers in new directions.”
- Maxine Weinstein, Center for Population and Health, Georgetown University
Entire review in Evolution, Medicine, and Public Health (http://emph.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2013/04/10/emph.eot006.full.pdf?papetoc)

Jasienska's writing is vivid, especially for so technical a subject... Jasienska’s findings should certainly be cautionary notes for public policy… In calling for understanding, she teaches the need to recognize complexity… Jasienska’s thoughtful book should be far more widely read than it is likely to be.
- Max J. Skidmore, University of Missouri, Kansas City
Entire review in World Medical & Health Policy, Vol. 5, No. 4, 2013