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CHILDREN'S
BOOKS
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A Woman's Place

KELLY BLAIR

By Jennifer Homans

THE END OF MEN And the Rise of Women. By Hanna Rosin.
310 pp. Riverhead Books. \$27.95.

"The End of Men"? This is not a title; it is a sound bite. But Hanna Rosin means it. The revolution feminists have been waiting for, she says, is happening now, before our very eyes. Men are losing their grip, patriarchy is crumbling and we are reaching "the end of 200,000 years of human history and the beginning of a new era" in which women — and womanly skills and traits — are on the rise. Women around the world, she reports, are increasingly dominant in work, education, households; even in love and marriage. The stubborn fact that in most countries women remain underrepresented in the higher precincts of power and still don't get equal pay for equal work seems to her a quaint

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By Toni Bentley

VAGINA A New Biography. By Naomi Wolf.
Illustrated. 381 pp. Ecco/HarperCollins Publishers. \$27.99.

Sit back and relax, will you? Naomi Wolf has got her orgasm back. Yep. I know you were worried. We were all worried. I mean, to lose one's orgasm at a time like this, what with Syria undergoing mass civilian murder and Romney closing in on Obama, it is really enough to put a liberated gal's thong in a knot.

But Wolf didn't just get back one of those little clitoral thingamajigs that Masters and Johnson so laboriously put back on the map after Freud had brushed them aside. Or rather inside, where he felt they belonged. She has reclaimed the Great Big Cosmic I-Am-a-Gorgeous-Goddess (Feminist-Goddess, that is) kind. Phew!

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'Vagina'

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"Vagina: A New Biography" should have been an important book. A very important book. The 5,000-year-old continuing epidemic of unhappy, disrespected female sexuality, as Wolf rightly maintains, not only influences our world, our wars, our cultures, our economies and even our love affairs, but also produces, literally, the lifeblood of humankind: talk about biting the vulva that births you.

We're mad as hell, but we're going to take it some more. Our rage, and Wolf's, is beyond justified: it is imperative. And it's not going away anytime soon. In fact, it will never, ever go away, so deeply does it cut, so great the wound, and we will just keep on chipping away at multiple injustices in our little female ways, punctuated by the occasional big scream.

Wolf's scattered new tome wants to be that scream, but instead it provides a blueprint, a valuable negative example, for the important book that will be written one day. But that treatise, unlike Wolf's, will finally stop spanking men and telling them to be nice to us. That book will, somehow, show women that the world is indeed ours, that the emperor has no clothes while we are gowned in gold.

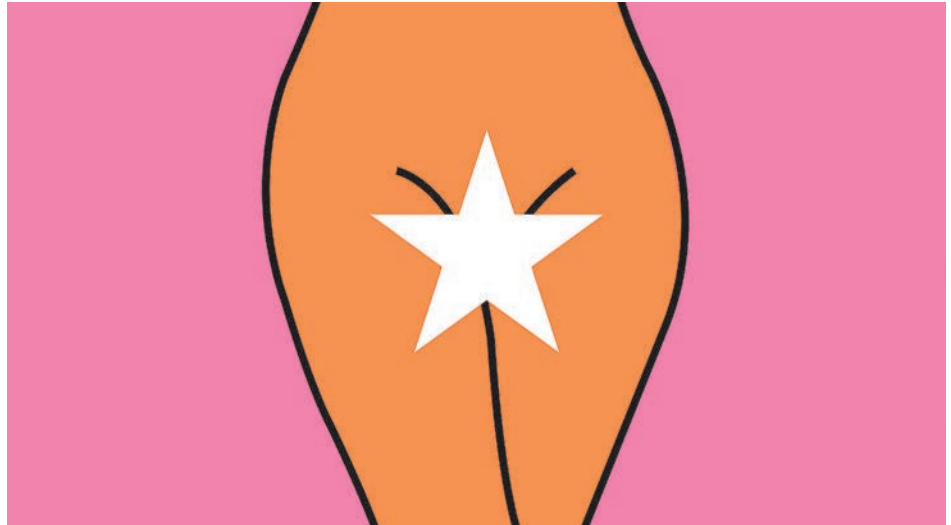
Wolf details the personal trouble that led to this study. After extensive diagnoses it was revealed that she had lost her kamikaze orgasm owing to a pinched pelvic nerve. She submitted to the implantation of a 14-inch (!) metal plate in her lower back, and now she loves the world again. Who says size doesn't count?

She finds "delight" with herself once more, colors are "heightened," "connections" reverberate, and her postcoital chattiness is back — and I know how much you chaps love a real Chatty Cathy after you've had your own little lowbrow, gutter-dwelling, four-second shot at immortality.

So begins Wolf's "journey" (so many women are taking journeys these days that I am surprised anyone is ever at home), a kind of "In Search of My Lost Hoo Ha." And, of course, yours: Wolf is incapable of not going global, pitching, as it were, from her own front yard. If we must play the euphemism game for the great female down-there-ness of it all, I would vote for the little-used, but rather evocative, Lawrence of a Labia: makes me think of Peter O'Toole and his camel traversing my Sahara.

Wolf's ideas and suggestions in "Vagina" are valuable ones, and she repeats much truth, particularly in the territory of Helen Fisher and Louann Brizendine, about the full-body, chemical grenade that is lust. Her premise is that "the vagina is the delivery system for the states of mind that we call confidence, liberation, self-realization and even mysticism in women."

Toni Bentley danced with the New York City Ballet for 10 years and is the author of five books. Her memoir "The Surrender" is now available as an e-book.



Wolf's book, however, is undermined by the fact that she has rendered herself less than unreliable over the past couple of decades, with one rant more hysterical than another — Fascist America!, great sex behind the burqa!, the "Stalinist" plot against Occupy Wall Street!, and a particularly loathsome, self-victimizing and vindictive piece about the Shakespeare scholar Harold Bloom.

The large bully pulpit Wolf garnered after her impressive 1991 debut with "The Beauty Myth" has shrunk with each new outburst. Here, in her eighth book, she presents a "vagina" inevitably, sadly defanged from its real raging, sweet power. And with her graceless writing, Wolf opens herself to ridicule on virtually every page: "an overtakeness with disinhibition." Huh?

The trouble begins on the dust jacket with her title, "Vagina: A New Biography." (It remains unclear if this biography was authorized.) A quick geography lesson is in order: the word "vagina" refers uniquely, and *only*, to the cylindrical passage that leads from the external world to the internal world of a woman's sexual arena, and why it has now come to mean, erroneously, the entire shebang is beyond me. Not that praising any of the other equipment in the female arsenal — labia, clitoris, urethra — is exactly what a girl wants to hear in the back of your pickup truck either.

Continuing our tour, heading in and up, we find the cervix, uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries, with those pesky little eggs, and then, making a u-ey, down and back out again to the perineum and anus and

let's not forget all the hair that used to be there. You still with me? These many parts are controlled by numerous pelvic muscles and so many firing nerve pathways that they make the German autobahn look like a pedestrian promenade.

All these lower-body components are being micromanaged by the brain, which is saturated in hormones and an über-powerful neurotransmitter cocktail that includes norepinephrine, oxytocin and dopamine, which Wolf calls "the ultimate feminist chemical . . . involved in leadership and confidence building." So now you see not only that the poor little "vagina" is just a small cog in Operation Sexual Woman but,

'The vagina is the delivery system for the states of mind that we call confidence, liberation, self-realization.'

one might point out, that it is the one part of the whole that men are most interested in for their own pleasure. Suspicious, no?

The female counterpart to your penis is *not* (spoiler alert) our vagina, and calling a book about the female sex "Vagina" is like calling a book about the male sex "Scrotum." Talk about a near miss. The clitoris is the diva at our party, and she sports the most sensitive millimeters of flesh — male or female — in human existence. Her 8,000 nerve endings — let me repeat that: 8,000 — outnumber those on your circumcised penis by a mere 100 percent. No wonder the clitoris keeps getting lost, depending

on the century, the religion and the man, though mine — and I am willing to go on the record about this — has always been in the same place.

This leads to the inevitable question: Is the ubiquitous use of the word "vagina" by women yet another insidious male plot unconsciously abetted by masochistic women in their own subjugation? Hey, this is a job for Naomi Wolf, fearless feminist whistle-blower! Yet here she is not only absent from her own cause, but simply climbs up on the old Eve Ensler vagina bandwagon. She knows she is wrong but goes right ahead anyway.

"When I use the term 'vagina' in this book," she explains, "I am using it somewhat differently from its technical definition. . . . I am using it . . . for the entire female sex organ, from labia to clitoris to introitus to mouth of cervix." Now pseudoscience is just fine with me, but Wolf's inconsistencies — she then cites many studies by actual scientists — muddy the vaginal waters, and we can't tell if this is a serious book or a girly-girl, vajajjay book.

In typical contradictory fashion, Wolf proceeds to accentuate the importance of words. "Words about the vagina can either help or hurt actual vaginal response," she writes, reporting how "ill and weak" she felt after reading Henry Miller but how "the world glowed" after she read Anaïs Nin, even though "the same bougainvillea" was "waving over my head." At least Wolf is not claiming to be a good judge of literature, waving bougainvillea aside.

Alas, Wolf has neither the soul of a sexual Simone Weil nor a serious researcher's discipline, referring frequently to some

obscure catchall called “the new science.” She is a dilettante assuming a mantle of authority, and time and again she presents her notion du jour and then reports the information that agrees with her, shoe-horning her evidence to fit her “vagina.”

Witness the following inane exchange between her and Nancy Fish, vulvodynia counselor and patient:

Wolf: “Your brain is connected to your vagina.”

Fish: “It definitely is.”

This is “the new science”? Is the earth round?

On another occasion she tells an actress about her search for “a possible link between female orgasm and creativity,” and — eureka! — the actress confesses that when she goes “deeply into the character, my orgasms change. They start to become more, more. . . .” “Transcendental?” Wolf offers. “Exactly,” the actress confirms. This kind of vague verification of something equally vague is typical of Wolf’s shoddy research methodology.

She likes to coin phrases, as with the “vagina-brain connection” that populates her book. Call it what you like, but the fact that a woman’s genitals are connected to her brain is not news. It never even was news. It is a ridiculous redundancy so basic that even bonobos know it — and act accordingly.

Wolf’s sexual journey lands her, and us, in Goddess Land (dust off those Donovan cassettes!), but not before she preps us with a haphazard history lesson: the shame of “the Judeo-Christian vagina,” the chastity belt of the Middle Ages, the whore prisons of the Victorians and sys-

tematized rape during war. She then revisits pornography’s propagation of “vaginal illiteracy.” (Frankly, I didn’t even know you could read in there — but can you download?)

ONE amusing report in Wolf’s otherwise humorless book involves the measuring of the “vaginal pulse” using a “vaginal photometer” (now girls, do *not* post those shots on Facebook), which records the “V.P.A.” (“vaginal pulse amplitude”). From her “online survey” (that ever-reliable source) she reports occasions when a woman felt that special “thump”: when her man remembered to buy cat food, cooked breakfast and, in one extraordinary act of valor, when one husband “gave me his pillow, so he didn’t have one.” Ah, romance. One excited woman confesses to having felt a thump “at the dump!” Her man had “lifted up an old couch” and tossed it “off the back of the truck.” I bet he did.

So where does Wolf take us before she rests in her final pages in the labial folds of Greece? (“The path I followed wove parallel to the Aegean, which was on my right; the great soft hills were to my left. My path led over a small bridge.” Get it?) Searching for “a working ‘Goddess’ model,” she lands us back in the ‘60s with little update but sans the free love part. This time it’s going to cost you. In Mistress Wolf’s Tantra 101 class she teaches “the Goddess Array”: candles, flowers, soft music, cuddling, eye contact and “tell her she’s beautiful,” and thus “the female heterosexual journey” begins. (Lesbians don’t like flowers?)

You guys know the drill, you simply

must try, yet again, and try harder this time — more slowly — to worship at the “Goddess-shaped” “hole,” so that your woman will have a “showers of stars” orgasm. Are any of you men still reading this, or are you already surfing the Web for some good, speedy, get-to-it, disgusting hot porn? Some nasty girl-girl might be soothing right now. Hold on.

Wolf gives you a choice: do you “want to be married to a Goddess — or a bitch?” O.K., don’t answer that. In truth, you have no say, since all the problems of the world are pretty much your fault and, God knows, your equipment is very mismatched to ours: your five minutes to takeoff does not suit our 20-minute minimum. Reading Wolf’s book can really make a woman foot-stomping mad about all those lovers who want to have sex the way men like to have sex. Who do you think you are: men? Don’t you know that only the girly-man can really ring our bell? But stay plenty manly while running our bubble baths because “a happy heterosexual vagina requires, to state the obvious, a virile man.” That’s right, you can’t win. Surrender, Dorotheus!

Herein lies the problem of Wolf’s admirable attempt to straddle two worlds. She wants to connect the science of female sexuality to tantric sexual knowledge to prove that this knowledge is indeed true and effective. Now, any man or woman who has experienced sexual tantric practice knows it is irrefutably powerful (guilty and charged) — but it’s a tough sell to everyone else, because even the best literary attempts to teach it appear silly or simply absurd.

Here, during her book’s climax, Wolf suddenly loses her nerve and fails us. And perhaps herself. She signs up for both a private session and a workshop with several highly respected tantric masters, “convinced that tantra had some answers to the question of how female sexuality was best understood.” But then she refuses on both occasions to experience the core practice they all teach, “sacred spot massage” — a loving, healing ritual that requires only fingers just inside the vagina, stroking the front wall (the G spot, “the South Pole of the clitoris”), that can bring on endless waves of emotional release as well as orgasmic energy and pleasure.

Wolf confesses that while negotiating a session with Mike Lousada, the tantra guru of London, “the nice monogamous Jewish girl in me once again drew a line,” and she persuades him to “work with me nonsexually.” Hey, are we getting healed here or not?

After attending a workshop given by Charles Muir and Caroline Muir, leaders of the American tantra movement for more than 30 years, where sacred spot massage is taught and offered, Wolf tells us, “I couldn’t imagine doing it myself!” Seriously? Is Naomi Wolf, *enfin*, a prude?

Wolf’s cowardice here in no way detracts, however, from the fact that she is correct that women are, despite feminism, vibrators, monologues and metrosexual men — these might actually be the culprits — still not having good, much less transformative, sex. Witness the rising sales of “arousal gels,” the new diagnosis of “Female Sexual Interest/Arousal Disorder” that will appear in next year’s revised DSM-5 and the pharmaceutical companies’ desperate race to develop a female Viagra. I wish them luck. But one really need look no further than the orgasmic sales of the “Fifty Shades” trilogy — more than 40 million worldwide — which stands alone as the largest, and most accurate, poll ever taken that women are choosing impossible erotic fantasy over that other impossible: an erotic reality.

What Wolf lacks in her quest to put the “vagina” front and center is the poetry that might actually convey the real depth and magnitude of her heartfelt *cri de coeur*. The V.P.A.’s, the hormones, even yummy, pheromone male armpits are, in the end, only left-brain facts alluding to the very real, paradoxical, right-brain event that is a woman ceding her power so as to attain it.

If you really want to know what it takes to make a woman orgasm, to watch her soul explode and her identity ignite, then take a look at Harold Brodkey’s 1973 short story “Innocence.” I know it’s by a dead, white, bisexual, Jewish man, but try to pity his fivefold handicap, for it is the best female orgasm ever described by any writer — male or female.

There is crazy Wiley Silenowicz at the front lines of the very real war that is love — the one between a woman and herself, that is — where the innocent Orra Perkins, “a ludicrous beauty,” lies fighting to the death against the pleasure the noble Wiley perpetrates upon her:

“Then all at once, it happened. . . . She was the center and the source and the victim of a storm of wing beats; we were at the top of the world; the huge bird of God’s body in us hovered; the great miracle pounded on her back, pounded around us; she was straining and agonized and distraught, estranged within this corporeal-incorporeal thing, this angelic other avatar, this other substance of herself. . . and she screamed.”

Amen. Woman.

I think, ultimately, this is what Wolf is looking for, what all us gals are looking for: the explosion that signals the birth of a woman’s deepest, truest self. But it’s no easy game to play, wading through those 5,000 years of our sisters’ suppression, that great abyss of loss, every time. So you guys, fix that roof, do the dishes, buy her roses, take her dancing and hold her really tight. And don’t forget that date at the dump. Whatever it takes. What price the world? □

