

Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Smitten by Giraffe: My Life as a Citizen Scientist

By Anne Innis Dagg

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Anne Innis Dagg has had a wonderful life. Despite the academic sexism present in her professional career as a scientist, she has been able to pursue her passions and push for a difference in the treatment of women in universities, publishing, and employment. *Smitten By Giraffe* (2016) chronicles Dagg's love of animals, of pursuing accurate information through rigorous data collection, and the desire for equal rights for women in academia. Dagg is, by her own admission, "the sort of person who needs to be busy." Her work ethic and drive has led her to publish over one hundred articles and books, and to found her own publishing company. She offers her own unique insider perspective, stories, and occasional humorous anecdotes on everything from zoology to teaching and researching.

Dagg details the academic sexism that outsiders may find particularly shocking. Dagg tells stories of being refused positions, jobs, and research funds, simply because of her sex, something that most would find appalling today. She notes that in her day, only

15.5% of university faculty in Canada were women (p. 172). As a professor at the college level for seven years, and as a male, many of my professors were male - and still are.

It is heartening to read Dagg's tales of the efforts she made to combat the sexism she saw, fighting for equality of professors seeking tenure to female students seeking to play sports. It is equally heartening to read of the number of people who were working with her, both women and men. The work of Dagg and others like her may finally be making gains: Statistics Canada reports that preliminary data for the 2016–17 University and College Academic Staff System (UCASS) suggests that 40% of full-time academic staff are now women, with full professorships for women increasing from 23% to 30% (Statistics Canada, 2017; Ferguson, 2016).

Dagg's desire for objective and accurate data has led her to be on the edge of many political debates – surprisingly, while writing about animals. In one notable anecdote, Dagg finds herself defending her work on her observations of homosexuality in mammals in the wild (from those worried that she was politicizing her work, or trying to “justify homosexuality in humans”). Ahead of her time, Dagg notes many scientists at the time had observed homosexuality in their studies of animal species but either refused to document the phenomena or called it something different, for fear of reprisals. Unlike them, Dagg reported accurately what she observed: integrity to emulate.

While a wonderful book filled with many like anecdotes, some funny and others frightening, Dagg's life is so full that the earlier chapters can sometimes feel like an itemized list of her accomplishments. However, in the later chapters Dagg weaves in specific themes and tells of how these different areas of her life affected her. Denied the academic career she sought, Dagg looks back at herself as being blessed at having been able to pursue her dreams regardless, and we can count humanity equally blessed for her work ethic and efforts, scientific rigor, and observations and discoveries about the animals she loves.

References

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