

Jonathan Gottschall, *Professor in the Cage: Why Men Fight and Why We Like to Watch* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2015), 288 pages. ISBN: 978-1-594205-63-7. Hardcover: \$26.95.

Patrick A. Stewart, Ph.D., *University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

“Well, that escalated quickly.”
—Ron Burgundy, *Anchorman*

When I read books popularizing science, I tend to ask three questions: Is the research being discussed in the book accurately characterized? Is the book well written and interesting? And does the book make me ask questions about the world around me as well as my own life?

Fortunately, after reading *The Professor in the Cage* by Jonathan Gottschall, I can answer yes to all three questions, as the author explores the evolutionary underpinnings of the competitive fighting world. While I did not expect the science reported in the book to be unerringly accurate, with discussions of flaws as well as strengths, as seen in research monographs, I was happily surprised not only to see key research cited but also to be introduced to new sources of insight. As a bonus, the book proved to be a prototypical “page turner,” with research findings introduced in light of the author’s arduous travel from being a “normal college English adjunct professor” to a cage fighter.

Finally, and while the author bemoans the fact that his project was upstaged by popular press books and Hollywood movies that detail the journey from bookish intellectual to cage fighter (p. 29), perhaps now more than any time in recent history has this book’s timely exploration of masculinity been more salient. While Gottschall could not have predicted the 2016 election and its pitting of the historic first female major-party presidential candidate against what almost seems to be a caricature of masculine dominance behavior, this most recent election may represent the coming shape of electoral and office politics, where male and female strategies of competition and cooperation meet and compete with each other. An important first step to understanding the conflicts that lie in front of us comes from understanding the “edges” of behavior: in this case, why males compete and how this influences all of us.

doi: 10.1017/pls.2017.3

Correspondence: Patrick A. Stewart. Email: pastewar@uark.edu

The Professor in the Cage is structured so that each of its eight chapters introduces us to a theme and then explores the topic in terms of the literature, both scientific and cultural, as well as the experiences of the author. We share the experiences of Gottschall, who, in his late thirties, deals with being a member of the academic underclass by endeavoring to enter “the cage” in a sanctioned mixed martial arts (MMA) fight. At the same time, he takes us on a voyage of discovery that compels him, and the reader, to come to grips with the forces that impel him — and males more generally — to engage in such risky endeavors that pit males against each other in often dangerous and sometimes deadly competitions.

The first chapter considers the ritual combat — that is, the duel — by which males of social species establish dominance over other males. The historical roots of the formal duel are traced back to European aristocracy as a response to failures of the state to enforce justice. Here, slights to honor — in other words, respect for a man and his willingness to pay back defections and transgressions — were dealt with in potentially fatal duels. However, as pointed out by the author, the duel was not about unrestricted violence: “[T]o the contrary, it was about fettering violence — locking it up in tight rules that were as clear and fair as the rules of tennis” (p. 25). That does not mean that duels were not violent — they were — but rather that, just like ritual combat between males of other species, the intent was about establishing dominance without a high probability of death. In addition to limiting the scope of conflict to the combatants — an important step for highly social species — it also allowed for the dampening of conflict by time and negotiation. Indeed, it is this last aspect that plays a key role in how humans respond to conflict and poses a challenge: does one have the courage to face and even escalate conflict when there is a way out? It is this question that plays a key role in the author’s narrative.

Gottschall’s second chapter, concerning the “Monkey Dance” in which male confrontations tend to follow a ritual of escalation, points as confrontation intensifies into conflict. While these in-person confrontations can occur in any context, perhaps of most interest for readers of *Politics and the Life Sciences* are those political contestations in which two candidates confront each other — namely, presidential debates. Here, the author spends substantial time analyzing the 2012 presidential debates between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in terms of the “monkey dance” and how, in his disastrous first outing, Obama lost by conceding dominance to

Romney, much like John F. Kennedy appeared ascendant over Richard M. Nixon during the 1960 presidential debate (as has been recently systematically elaborated upon by Erik Bucy¹).

The third chapter, “Tough Men,” moves from the behavioral repertoire of dominance and submission to consider the capacity cues for male violence that have been sexually selected for by females. Specifically, Gottschall considers the influence of size on competition for mates and the extremes that men will go to attain it and its deterrent qualities. The author also considers, albeit to an understandably lesser extent given the focus of his book, female aggression. He notes that while male disputes do escalate to homicide, murders by women occur 30 to 40 times less frequently. That does not exclude women from aggression; it just means that female aggression is more indirect, subtle, and likely to disrupt social relationships than the more obvious and direct violence engaged in by men.

The following chapter, “Slaying Goliath,” acts as more of a bridge between sections of the book by exploring the traditional martial arts and how they came to be, in some key aspects, religious institutions with creation myths, unwavering faith, and unquestioning acceptance (p. 111). Gottschall notes that much like science, where, in the words of Thomas Huxley, “slaying of hypothesis by ugly fact” (p. 115) is a commonplace occurrence, so, too, do the gyms and octagons of MMA, with their increased realism of practice, lead to greater humility and acceptance of what works and what does not.

In the next two chapters, “Survival of the Sportiest” and “War Games,” Gottschall takes on the roots of organized sports, which, despite their apparent waste of time and energy, are an obsession for a great majority of humans. He starts with an exploration of the playfulness of humans, which lasts well beyond the adolescent stages seen in other species, and how it makes for our unique and creative social species. Here, Gottschall notes that there are distinct differences both in how males and females play and their involvement in competitive sports, as well as the comparative lack of influence from public policy despite the resources invested. He observes that “sports establish who is stronger, fitter, and abler, and broadcasts this information” (p. 144) to not only men who might compete but also discerning females. Indeed, it is these females who “have the power, and they have set up grueling dangerous contests to eliminate fakers and reveal mates of authentic quality” (p. 145).

While these games have value in determining who would potentially be good coalition partners and mates, the essence of sports is its within-group coordination and between-group competition. In the chapter “War Games,” the author explores the tribal psychology of team sports and whether sports train men for war or allow them “to safely burn off aggression” (p. 172).

Gottschall comes to the conclusion in his penultimate substantive chapter that “aggression is part of the behavioral repertoire of virtually all animals because, in the appropriate conditions, it simply pays” (p. 206). Whether this is seen in the interpersonal and intergroup violence that humans (and other animals) engage in or in the consumption of “a rich diet of violent entertainment” (p. 193), there is no shrinking from the greater part of humanity’s taste for aggression. Indeed, while we like to think of ourselves as above violence, “we are drawn to violent entertainment simply because we like it” (p. 187), whether it is the highbrow carnage provided by Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Homer, and Hemingway or the pop cultural violence seen in the cinema with such movie series as the *Transformers* and *Saw* franchises and in the modern-day morality plays of pro wrestling.

While Gottschall’s journey ends in a bittersweet manner, both as an athletic adventure and as a journey of self-discovery with hard truths being learned, the insights earned are worth the expedition for both the author and both informed readers and those not acquainted with the pertinent evolutionary literature. Concluding that “although it is perhaps regrettable that men are so competitive, so dominance obsessed, it’s still a lucky thing that we have our monkey dances. Most of the time, they keep our contests civilized” (p. 234). Indeed, if there is one lesson that overshadows all others, it is that trying to change the behavior of nearly half of humanity would be fruitless without understanding their motivating forces. If we want to reduce mortality, whether through wars or inner city crime, perhaps understanding and enhancing the steps of escalation would provide more benefit than a “zero-tolerance” approach to violence.

Reference

1. Erik P. Bucy, “The look of losing, then and now: Nixon, Obama, and nonverbal indicators of opportunity lost,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2016, 60(14): 1772–1798.