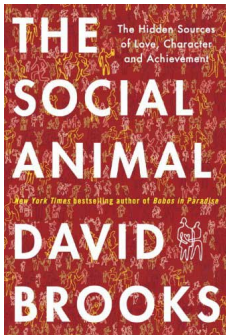


The Social Animal: Fact with fiction or fiction with fact? Does it matter?

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
Friday, 23 March 2012 09:16



When *New York Times* op-ed columnist and PBS commentator David Brooks released “The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement” in 2011, the critics and blogosphere were abuzz on how to characterize the book.

Was it really a novel, supplemented with copious amounts of research, or was it actually published research with made up characters to illustrate the author’s point?

The book follows the childhood, education and careers of two fictional characters, Harold and Erica.

Harold comes from privilege. Erica had to fight her way up the social and economic ladder.

Throughout the book, Brooks adds copious amounts of referential research to support the way Harold and Erica react to situations, employment, their relationship and to the outside world.

During the publicity for the book’s release, Brooks said this: “This is not a science book. I don’t answer how the brain does things. I try to answer what it all means. I try to explain how these findings about the deepest recesses of our minds should change the way we see ourselves, raise our kids, conduct business, teach, manage our relationships and practice politics. This story is based on scientific research, but it is really about emotion, character, virtue and love. We’re not rational animals, or laboring animals; we’re social animals. We emerge out of relationships and live to bond with each other and connect to larger ideas.”

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While the first third of the book contains enough of the fictional Harold and Erica to maintain interest, Brooks relies too heavily on dry factual references to carry the rest of the story. I was engaged through their childhoods, but gave up when they married and things got more complex.

The book has received mixed reviews, but I think it's important to at least be familiar with this work, even if you're not captivated by the format.