

The Frailty Myth: Women Approaching Physical Equality
Colette Dowling
New York: Random House, 2000
reviewed by Peg Tittle

"Drawing on studies in motor development, performance assessment, and sports physiology, I will show how, by *keeping themselves physically undeveloped*, girls and women have fulfilled the myth of the weaker sex" (xxvi)--though what is here is good, I wish Dowling had kept her promise just a little more, dare I say it, *strongly*.

The historical content of the first chapter was inspiring and depressing at the same time (oh what we used to could do!), and the connection with the industrial revolution interesting ("Once machines could do the work of manufacture and agriculture, physical strength became less valued" and, surprise, surprise, "to salvage men's failing sense of dominance, women were encouraged to scale back their own physical development..." [12-13]).

Much of the sexist social conditioning described in the subsequent chapters will be familiar to many, especially athletes; but since it continues, it needs saying again, and again--especially when it's said in a slightly different way: "women and girls have actually been conditioned to *avoid* movement" (160 emphasis changed). The connection between able bodies and able minds/characters (161 and elsewhere) is also worth making, again and again.

I very much enjoyed reading about Ann Trason, who won the mixed-gender twenty-four-hour run, and Zhang Shan who won the Olympic gold medal in mixed skeet shooting (before it was then, therefore, divided into male and female competitions), and would have like more visuals like the cover of baseball pitcher Ila Borders--indeed, I found myself constantly drawn to take another look, such a feast it was for my mind to see her in powerful form.

The biomechanical analysis of speed by height was also welcome news (Florence Griffith Joyner *is* actually faster than Carl Lewis, *more* things considered [205]) and though there was a bit more of that kind of analysis (206-7), there could have been a lot more. In general, I would have liked more of all the subtle stuff, from the analysis of the language used by coaches and

commentators (184-5), for example, to the stupid differences that keep comparison difficult (in archery, men shoot at 30, 50, 70, and 90 meters while women shoot at 30, 50, 60, and 70 meters [193]).

There were, however, several hidden gems (though the fact that they were indeed hidden, rather than given front-and-centre emphasis, puzzled and angered me). Consider, for example, the fact that "violence actually causes changes in the neural pathways of the brain" (239)--even verbal violence. And consider this well-put passing observation: "Men in the streets will not move out of the way to prevent a collision; they *expect* women to" xxiv).

I question Dowling's logic at times. For instance, she takes her observation that she "felt safer coming face-to-face with a 600-pound male bear on a desolate stretch of road than [she] would a 150-pound man" (251) as evidence that she'd been conditioned to fear men more than bears. As someone who lives close to bears (and wolves and other such animals) *and* occasionally meets men (hunters and other such animals), I attribute my greater fear of the latter to their insecure male egos which make who-knows-what a threat (bears are much simpler to figure out, and simply giving right-of-way suffices).

And sometimes, actually oftentimes, Dowling seems to wander off-topic into a free-flowing discussion of sexism, sexist discrimination, and even sexual harassment. At these times, I started feeling that perhaps the book should have been written by someone else; the topic deserves more hard-core psychology and biology. Nevertheless I do applaud and fully support (from personal experience) her underlying purpose: "As the different beliefs supporting the frailty myth shatter, one after the other, the change will not be trifling. *It will alter the way women walk on the earth.*" (xxvii, my emphasis). Indeed it will.