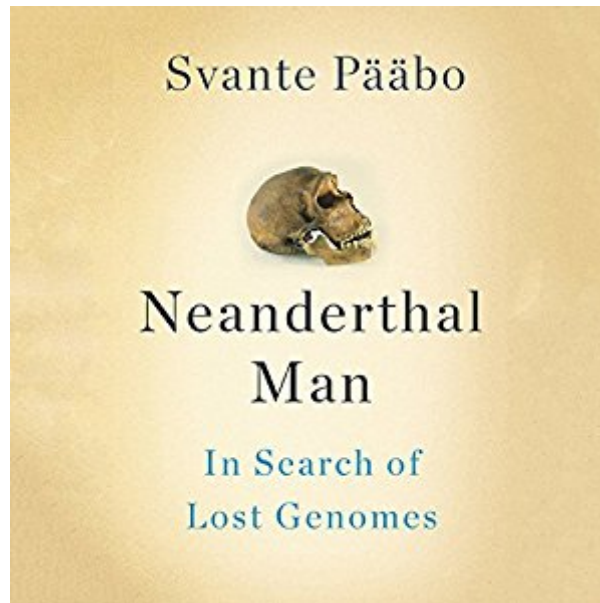


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Neanderthal Man: In Search Of Lost Genomes



Synopsis

A preeminent geneticist hunts the Neanderthal genome to answer the biggest question of them all: What does it mean to be human? What can we learn from the genes of our closest evolutionary relatives? Neanderthal Man tells the story of geneticist Svante Pbo's mission to answer that question, beginning with the study of DNA in Egyptian mummies in the early 1980s and culminating in his sequencing of the Neanderthal genome in 2009. From Pbo, we learn how Neanderthal genes offer a unique window into the lives of our hominin relatives and may hold the key to unlocking the mystery of why humans survived while Neanderthals went extinct. Drawing on genetic and fossil clues, Pbo explores what is known about the origin of modern humans and their relationship to the Neanderthals and describes the fierce debate surrounding the nature of the two species' interactions. A riveting story about a visionary researcher and the nature of scientific inquiry, Neanderthal Man offers rich insight into the fundamental question of who we are.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

With the completion of the full human genome sequence in 2003 and the rapid fall in DNA sequencing costs over the subsequent 10 years, we have been awaiting major advancements in many fields such as Healthcare, Agriculture, Drug Discovery and so on. However, the progress has been slow and the deluge of genome sequence data has been a tough problem to handle. But, Svante Paabo in this fascinating book on the 'Neanderthal Man' shows how the new technologies have enabled him to sequence the genomes of our extinct relatives - the Neanderthals and the

Denisovans. The data proves how our ancestors moved out of Africa about 50,000 years back and interbred to a small extent (2 to 7% of our genes come from them) with the Neanderthals and Denisovans and maybe drove them to extinction. Many interesting facts come out of these studies such as, (a) that gene flow seems to have been from the Neanderthals to us (and not the other way), (b) the founding population of the Neanderthals also seems to have pretty small like in the case of the humans (c) we split from the Neanderthals about 500,000 years back (d) the Denisovans split about 1 million years back (e) the Denisovans seem to be closer to the Neanderthals than to humans, and much more...The book is not only fun to read, but Paabo's detective mode of story telling will also keep the reader focused. By mixing his personal stories with scientific research, Paabo provides a refreshing frankness to the narrative. We get a direct view of the challenges in scientific research and how the role of institutional support and adequate funding can make research a success. Paabo's journey from Egyptian mummies to Mammoths, to Sloths and finally the Neanderthals and Denisovans is a great inspiration to all students of science. He shows how passion, perseverance, attention to detail, and collaboration can deliver results not only in Science but in all aspects of life. Paabo explains the Science very clearly and the narrative shows us how he has become the world's expert in 'ancient DNA'. But in order to do that he often has to go into intricate details of lab work which some readers might find difficult to follow. Still it will not affect the story and if you are interested to learn how we became what we are, this is a book that you should not miss.

The Neanderthal Man, by Svante, is a compelling recount by a principal in the discovery of genes of the Neanderthals. It starts with the interest in recovering DNA from old sources, and in this case some liver bought at the local market and then desiccated in an oven at 50C. The tale spans over some twenty years, with diversions typical of science, and ultimately ends with the publishing of some of the most interesting results in understanding man and his evolution. Svante is an exceptionally good writer and the tale flows quite smoothly. If one understands the science, then one can fill in the gaps and the tale is well presented. If one does not understand the science then one can still appreciate what is happening by taking the results presented at face value. The tale works back and forth from the fundamental science to the interrelationships between various players in the overall search. Svante shows how he managed to deal with the anthropologists and others to get samples of Neanderthals from as far away as Siberia. It also demonstrates some of the more cooperative nature of science as new techniques are shared and how Svante is assisted by many others who are but in related fields. The efforts span from California to Eastern Russia and it shows

that in today's environment the ability to communicate changed what would have been multi-lifetime efforts into a fast paced move to provide the final answers. This book is a stark contrast to Watson's Double Helix. The Helix is a strong interplay of personalities; it portrays competitiveness and at times pettiness that is common in certain scientific endeavors. Helix was a true race, a sprint to get DNA right, and a succinct set of observations which became the underpinnings of Svante's efforts. Svante is the opposite of Watson. The ego is missing; the collegiality if present, yet one still sense the pace. Yet it is not a pace with an edge, it is a steady pace to get it right. This is definitely a great book for those seeking to understand the Neanderthal developments as well as understanding perhaps how the research community has matured as it has expanded. Also, upon some reflection, I recall when I first read Watson's Double Helix just after it was published I could recognize the highly competitive world of research since I was still at MIT. In contrast Svante portrays a totally different world, one more of communications and cooperation. The worlds of Watson and Svante are separated by some half century, and the difference is startling, one is near ruthless and the other collegial, with a sense of cooperation moving forward. Great job!

"Neanderthal Man" presents a fascinating perspective on how scientists pursue their work and passions. In fact, it is all about the author's life and work, the processes he and colleagues pursue to acquire and interpret Neanderthal DNA. Readers hoping to learn a great deal about Neanderthal culture will likely be disappointed. Perhaps like all top-flight scientists, Paabo's ego is as large as his vision. For some readers, his ego may get in the way of appreciating the mundane, tedious, laborious work involved in original science, but the results make the journey worth while, both for the scientists and for the reader who stays with the endeavor.

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