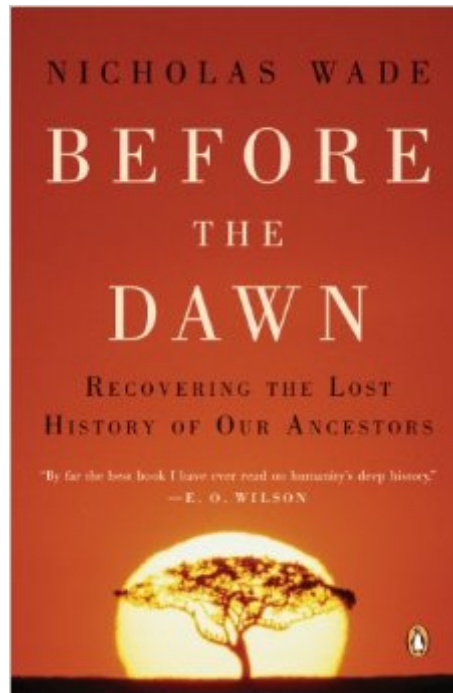


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Before The Dawn: Recovering The Lost History Of Our Ancestors



Synopsis

Nicholas Wade's articles are a major reason why the science section has become the most popular, nationwide, in the New York Times. In his groundbreaking *Before the Dawn*, Wade reveals humanity's origins as never before—a journey made possible only recently by genetic science, whose incredible findings have answered such questions as: What was the first human language like? How large were the first societies, and how warlike were they? When did our ancestors first leave Africa, and by what route did they leave? By eloquently solving these and numerous other mysteries, Wade offers nothing less than a uniquely complete retelling of a story that began 500 centuries ago.

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Customer Reviews

"Before the Dawn" is a very well written survey of what genetics can teach us about the origin and evolution of the human species. Starting with the common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees 5 million years ago, Wade explores the latest theories about the development of the "hominid" line and explains why homo sapiens evolved differently from our cousins, the chimpanzees and the bonobos. Most of the books about human origins tend to focus on paleoanthropology and related

disciplines. "Before the Dawn" does a great job of synthesizing the discoveries of paleoanthropologists with the findings of geneticists--in some cases, examination of human DNA has confirmed what paleoanthropologists have long believed, in others it has raised new and sometimes disturbing questions. Without becoming overly technical, Wade explains how scientists use the study of DNA to determine when significant events occurred in human evolution--for example, when humans began to use fully modern language (about 50,000 years ago), the size of the ancestral population of modern humans (as small as 150 people), or when the ancestral population left the African continent (also around 50,000 years ago). Some of Wade's observations may surprise and trouble many people. Creationists will not be pleased with the book's basic view that Darwin's theory of natural selection is absolutely correct and that it applies to people as well as animals.

The science of DNA analysis has progressed with amazing rapidity over the last decade, confirming, correcting and filling in the details outlined by pioneers in human migration such as Stanford's Luigi Cavalli-Sforza. The most powerful tools at the moment are analysis of the Y-chromosome, which is heritable only from the father, and mitochondrial DNA, heritable from the mother. Both are subject to small mutations from generation to generation. The time at which populations quit interbreeding can be fairly accurately determined by which mutations they share and which they don't. Scientist Spenser Wells' "The Journey of Man" does an excellent job of describing the science. Wade does so with fewer words and less depth, and brings Wells' work up to date. Wells thought Europeans and East Asians parted company in the heart of the Russian steppes; Wade has Europe being populated by a more southerly route. Wade's human timeline has us becoming "anatomically modern" 100,000 years ago, acquiring language sometime thereafter, with a pioneer group of 150 or so individuals emigrating out of Africa to displace Neanderthals and other archaic humans around 50,000 years ago. These timelines are later than other writers have posited. It raises the question, what is language? Wade sees it as the essential tool for communicating culture: the acquired knowledge, toolmaking skills, religion and social skills that made it possible for humankind to transcend the hunter-gatherer style of life. His discussion of linguistic paleontology, and its ties with paleoanthropology, the ways in which people and languages moved and morphed, shows the benefit of coming at a problem from several angles. Languages evolve rapidly.

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