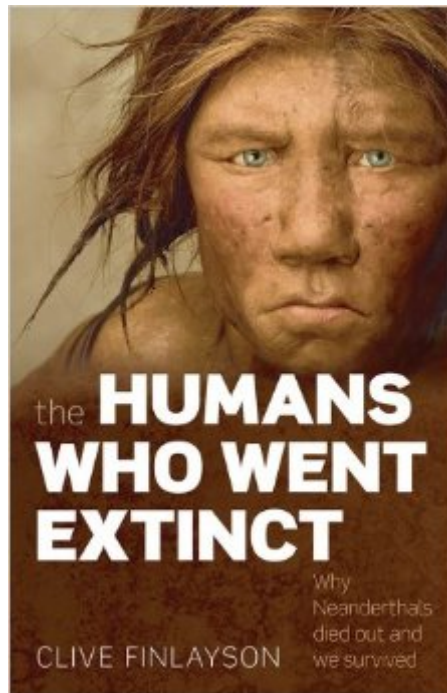


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The Humans Who Went Extinct: Why Neanderthals Died Out And We Survived



Synopsis

Just 28,000 years ago, the blink of an eye in geological time, the last of Neanderthals died out in their last outpost, in caves near Gibraltar. Thanks to cartoons and folk accounts we have a distorted view of these other humans - for that is what they were. We think of them as crude and clumsy and not very bright, easily driven to extinction by the lithe, smart modern humans that came out of Africa some 100,000 years ago. But was it really as simple as that? Clive Finlayson reminds us that the Neanderthals were another kind of human, and their culture was not so very different from that of our own ancestors. In this book, he presents a wider view of the events that led to the migration of the moderns into Europe, what might have happened during the contact of the two populations, and what finally drove the Neanderthals to extinction. It is a view that considers climate, ecology, and migrations of populations, as well as culture and interaction. His conclusion is that the destiny of the Neanderthals and the Moderns was sealed by ecological factors and contingencies. It was a matter of luck that we survived and spread while the Neanderthals dwindled and perished. Had the climate not changed in our favour some 50 million years ago, things would have been very different. There is much current research interest in Neanderthals, much of it driven by attempts to map some of their DNA. But it's not just a question of studying the DNA. The rise and fall of populations is profoundly moulded by the larger scale forces of climate and ecology. And it is only by taking this wider view that we can fully understand the course of events that led to our survival and their demise. The fact that Neanderthals survived until virtually yesterday makes our relationship with them and their tragedy even more poignant. They almost made it, after all.

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Customer Reviews

I have been interested in paleo stuff for about 20 years. Read about botany, geography, linguistics, genomics, archeology, evolutionary biology etc etc all in the paleo world. Not being a science-y person (I read literary fiction 70%) it's a lot of information to sift through but after reading maybe 20-25 books I have a sense of the core. Finlayson just debunks and knocks around a lot of the conventional wisdom not really evidence-based and ego-defined debates in the field. My one criticism is that there were not good maps. When he is describing ancient ice ages and interglacials, a few maps with some arrows to show the encroaching glaciers and the receding ones would have been handy and dandy. I prefer footnotes to end notes but that's a quibble. The fact that my library got this book at all is simply amazing. And trying to get other books that were in the endnotes has proven to be impossible for me. The book is dense and only 220 pages. There is not one wasted word. Finlayson does say in which chapter something is mentioned first when referring to it again which was helpful. This is not really a science book for the layperson and it is hard for me to imagine coming to it without any background at all. Chapter by chapter I never wanted it to end and I stretched out a 2-day read into 4 days. Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs & Steel* exhilarated me just as this book has. Aside: I just recently read *Finding Our Tongues* by Dean Falk which was wonderful, and *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made us Human*, which was good. Finlayson gives the origin of language short shrift--just a quick mention of the gene for language acquisition, and he writes a bit more about how eating meat allowed for larger brains. So a little from this one, a little from that one, and over time there is the over-arching story.

Although I'm not sure I go along with the Multi-regional Theory of human evolution, I do think that Clive Finleyson's book "The Human's Who Went Extinct" touches on some very cogent points that often get overlooked or glossed over by those with their eyes on the Out of Africa Hypothesis. I certainly found them enlightening and have tried to incorporate them into my own way of thinking about the human species. More than anything, while authors often give lip service to the fact that people are animals too, they often neglect what that actually entails especially for early humans.

Many of the patterns of behavior among early people, regardless of their genus and species, were dictated by necessity and what was possible--even by sheer luck. These writers also seem to ignore the fact that most genera have more than one species in it and that those few that don't are usually under some degree of distress. I think this is something we should pay more attention to than we do when we look at our Neanderthal cousins as "failures," since it has ramifications for our own kind. In this context the author points out that this means that, far from one species "succeeding" another and winning the sweepstakes, there may have been many types of humans alive at any one time, each occupying their own little niche, much as other species in other genera do. That our co-genera species are no longer with us may have something important to tell us about our own contract with Mother Nature. One does not usually blame most extinct species for being "too dumb to live," as we are prone to do with our own ancient ancestors and their peers. All species are suited to the environment in which they evolved; it's only when nature changes the game plan that they may find themselves in trouble.

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