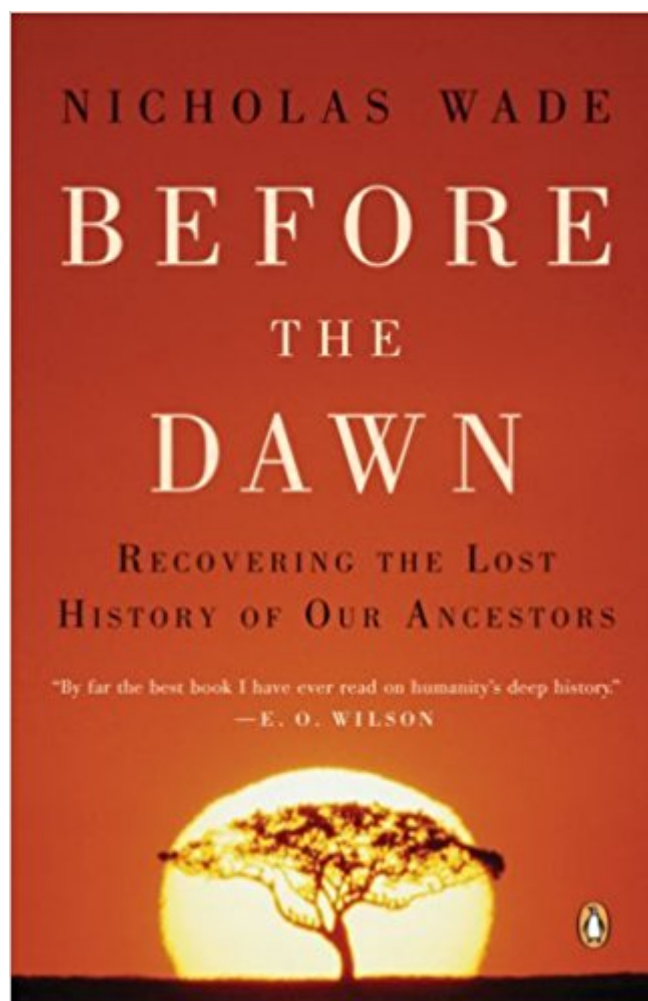


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Before The Dawn: Recovering The Lost History Of Our Ancestors



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.

Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Penguin (March 27, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 014303832X

ISBN-13: 978-0143038320

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.7 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 264 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #133,501 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #39 in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Paleontology #217 in Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Archaeology #224 in Books > Medical Books > Basic Sciences > Genetics

Customer Reviews

Scientists are using DNA analysis to understand our prehistory: the evolution of humans; their relation to the Neanderthals, who populated Europe and the Near East; and *Homo erectus*, who roamed the steppes of Asia. Most importantly, geneticists can trace the movements of a little band of human ancestors, numbering perhaps no more than 150, who crossed the Red Sea from east Africa about 50,000 years ago. Within a few thousand years, their descendents, *Homo sapiens*, became masters of all they surveyed, the other humanoid species having become extinct. According to New York Times science reporter Wade, this DNA analysis shows that evolution isn't restricted to the distant past: Iceland has been settled for only 1,000 years, but the inhabitants have already developed distinctive genetic traits. Wade expands his survey to cover the development of language and the domestication of man's best friend. And while "race" is often a dirty word in

science, one of the book's best chapters shows how racial differences can be marked genetically and why this is important, not least for the treatment of diseases. This is highly recommended for readers interested in how DNA analysis is rewriting the history of mankind. Maps. (Apr. 24)

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Genetics has been intruding on human origins research, long the domain of archaeology and paleoanthropology. Veteran science journalist Wade applies the insights of genetics to every intriguing question about the appearance and global dispersal of our species. The result is Wade's recounting of "a new narrative," which also has elements of a turf war between geneticists and their established colleagues. He efficiently explains how an evolutionary event (e.g., hairlessness) is recorded in DNA, and how rates of mutation can set boundary dates for it. For the story, Wade opens with a geneticist's estimate that modern (distinct from "archaic") *Homo sapiens* arose in northeast Africa 59,000 years ago, with a tiny population of only a few thousand, and was homogenous in appearance and language. Tracking the ensuing expansion and evolutionary pressures on humans, Wade covers the genetic evidence bearing on Neanderthals, race, language, social behaviors such as male-female pair bonding, and cultural practices such as religion. Wade presents the science skillfully, with detail and complexity and without compromising clarity. Gilbert Taylor

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This book by Nicholas Wade is a journalist's presentation of developments in palaeoanthropology up to about 2006. The first half, up to page 158, is full of intriguing insights and information. Then suddenly it goes into reverse. The second half of the book is relatively weak, culminating in a very weak Chapter 12. There are still valuable insights in the second half, but they are mixed and diluted with the author's own personal conjectures, which don't seem to be very well worked out. I'm giving this book 5/5 stars because the first half is so good! And the second half is good also, but only if you have enough prior knowledge to separate the wheat from the chaff. The unifying themes of this book are language, genetics and physical relics as the three sources of evidence of what happened on the evolutionary path between apes and humans. The critical point in time which is central to this account is 50,000 years ago, a time at which the author claims modern language (including modern syntax) appeared, human behaviour changed from early modern human to modern human, and modern humans made their first exit out of Africa to populate the world. The date of the advent of

modern syntax in anatomically modern humans is supported by the FOXP2 gene dating (pages 47-50), which is apparently between 200,000 and 50,000 years ago. This interests me very much because I have read in earlier books that language is supposed to have arrived about 250,000 years ago. However, the author explains that there seems to have been an earlier kind of language with extremely limited syntax, which made sophisticated communication very difficult. With syntax imposed on the flow of communication, a very much more sophisticated kind of social and technical organisation became possible. This sounds very convincing, almost. I guess a very rapid spread of syntax genes throughout Africa could have happened in just a couple of thousand years before the exit from Africa if the total ancestral population was in the thousands. The second major change-event identified by the author is at about 15,000 years ago, when humans learned to be friendly enough to settle down and live in the same place for a long while. (See Chapter 7, pages 123-138.) It isn't quite clear how this is related to genetics, but since for a long while it was only the Natufians who were settling (in the Levant), it wouldn't be too surprising if some gene changes were at work in this small local population. It's still not clear how the idea of settlement spread around the world. On the other hand, human beings generally do still have great difficulties with the idea of peaceful co-existence. So maybe the Natufians got some peaceful co-existence genes which haven't spread to the rest of humanity. Chapter 8 on "Sociality" starts off well with some fascinating descriptions of chimpanzee and bonobo sociality. But then it goes downhill at page 158 with the section on "the evolutionary basis of social behavior", and at page 164 with the section on "the evolution of religion". These seem to be the personal biases of the author in regard to the benefits of free markets and religion, apparently without any factual basis. Then there's Chapter 9 on "Race", which is really skating on thin ice. It seems to be well based on facts, but most readers will probably feel uncomfortable about the author's conclusions. Maybe the word "Race" was a poor choice of terminology. The term "gene pools" is probably a less emotional alternative. Chapter 11 on "History" seems to be mostly of little relevance to the book's title, which is supposedly about the time before history. However, there are some very interesting ideas here about some very sensitive emotional subjects. This, like the chapter on "Race", could also be described as "courageous". Then finally there is Chapter 12 on "Evolution". I think the book would have been better without this final chapter. In many of the early chapters, I was pencilling in many exclamation marks in the margins. But for Chapter 12, I have added only question marks because of the dubious claims. One of the small negatives of this book is the use of quotes from Darwin at the beginnings of chapters. These show Darwin at his most naive. Far from being an authority, Darwin got many important things wrong. So quoting him as an authority tends to weaken this book. On the other hand, the positives of this book

do far outweigh the negatives.

Due to the interest I have vested in Nicholas Wade's book, but more importantly, because many aspects of this work are controversial, I have given more space than usual to my review of *BEFORE THE DAWN* than I have in reviews of other books. Nicholas Wade is a science journalist who works as a writer for the New York Times. He is not a geneticist and generally depends upon more recent sources one distance removed from his journalism. Elsewhere [See my review of Elizabeth Kolbert's *THE SIXTH EXTINCTION*], I have said that we need science journalists because they provide a valuable interface between the highly technical world of science and the general public which includes our senators and house leaders who make decisions based upon their understanding of scientific issues. This is a book about the beginnings of modern humans, society and language. Wade's jumping-off point for each of his twelve chapters is a quote either from Charles Darwin's *ORIGINS OF SPECIES* or from his *DESCENT OF MAN*. Until now, linguistic science has only been able to reconstruct proto-language from the evidence of the living languages around us or from the written record of how language was in days gone by. But this takes us back, at most, to approximately 5500 years ago (unless you include Denise Schmandt-Besserat's work on clay tokens which would carry writing back much further [See her in-depth study: *BEFORE WRITING: FROM COUNTING TO CUNEIFORM* Volumes 1 and 2, (1992 and 2010) and her abridgement, *HOW WRITING CAME ABOUT*, (1997)]. In the earliest portions of the book, Wade draws on paleoanthropology for his resource material. He alludes to bipedalism on p. 17 and mentions the footprints embedded in the volcanic mud discovered at Laetoli, a location in Tanzania. [See, for instance, Richard L. Hay and Mary D. Leakey, "Fossil footprints of Laetoli." *SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN* February 1982, 50-57.] Here would have been the a perfect place for introducing the dynasty begun by the late Louis S. B. Leakey, his wife, Mary, including his son and daughter-in-law Richard and Meave Leakey and their daughter, Louise. But there is not a single mention of the ancestral passions (to borrow a phrase from Virginia Morell) of this family of palaeontologists! Why? Because this is not the field of focus of science writer Wade. On pages 13-19 Wade often makes statements drawn on studies by primatologists but often without providing the hard data to support his claims. At first sight, it seems strange that there is not a single mention of the renown primatologists Jane Goodall (chimpanzees), Dian Fossey (mountain gorillas), or Frans de Waal (chimpanzees and bonobos). Why? Because, again, this is not his field of focus. It is not until we reach his chapter entitled "Sociality" that Wade draws from studies by Jane Goodall and Frans de Waal

among other more recent students of primates. Deeply into the book (the chapter entitled "Evolution", (p. 265)) Wade mentions 1953 as the date of discovery for DNA. But there is no mention of the discoverers, Francis Crick and James Watson. He follows this with the date of the deciphering of the Human Genome as 2003 but the head of the project, Dr. Francis S. Collins, nowhere appears. It seems curious to this reviewer that the dates are important but the scientists who made the discoveries or spearheaded the work are not mentioned. Probably, it is because this book is not intended as a historical encounter with his subject matter. Wade (pp. 39-40) briefly discusses Universal Grammar (Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Noam Chomsky's contribution to language study) but notes that numerous scholars in the linguistic science field have written Universal Grammar (UG) off as too "complicated." However, for some linguists "such as Kenneth L. Pike, one of my own graduate professors of linguistics [Pike, in his classroom lectures, referred to UG as "transform grammar]" it is a matter of what source from which you derived your own linguistic training (eg. Leonard Bloomfield--descriptive linguistics) and the reason you use linguistics in the first place (etics and emics, a technology employed for transcribing and translating a previously unwritten language). But Wade's book is not about Universal Grammar or the practical applications of linguistic technology "it is about the genetic application to trace humans and their society and languages back to its roots. So, what is the real thrust of Wade's book? The reader might have suspected it in the early portions of his work. But it is not until we reach p. 168 that the pivot point becomes clear. In his discussion of that component of culture, religion, Wade says, "While religion may no longer be socially necessary, it nevertheless fills a strong need for many people, and this may reflect the presence of genetic predisposition. [Edward O.] Wilson, for one, believes that religion has a genetic basis, that its sources are in fact hereditary, urged into birth through biases in mental development encoded in the genes." (Wade quoting [Edward O.] Wilson's ON HUMAN NATURE p. 175). Now we begin to understand why he introduced Noam Chomsky's Universal Grammar already alluded to above: because Chomsky believes that language is genetically based. We actually reach the beginnings of this focal point earlier in chapters 4 "Eden" and 5 "Exodus," two Biblical metaphors. However, Wade uses these metaphors in a way very different from the Biblical Eden and Exodus. "Eden" is not the Paradise of the Bible or an explication of a "young earth" that is only about 6 thousand years old. Rather, it is a place in northeast Africa where modern human forebears evolved roughly 50,000 years ago. It is here that the author talks of the Y-chromosomal "Adam" and the

mitochondrial "Eve" to get into the genetic discussion of mankind. In this same chapter he introduces the click languages of Africa (pp. 60ff, Khoisan [!Kung San] of Central Africa and Hadadze [spoken by the hunter-gatherer Hadza] of Tanzania) and shares with his readers that both of these languages, even though they do not today bear any resemblance to each other (with the exception that both are click languages), yet, as Wade points out, their antiquity is supported by studies of the DNA of the people who speak them! And "Exodus" is Wade's discussion of the modern humans' geographic movement, better known as "Out of Africa" in other popular treatises, to the Near East, Asia and India. He makes a small error when he alludes to Israel's exodus (Exodus 15:8; Wade, pp 74f) over the Red Sea. In Hebrew the phrase is "yam suf"--that is, "Sea of Reeds" which is a marshy area in Northern Egypt and not really a "sea" as most of us would understand it. On p. 91 Wade makes the following statement: "The human mitochondrial DNA [from the mother] and Y chromosome [from the father] trees each coalesce to a single ancestor in Africa, with no sign of a Neanderthal contribution in either lineage." It is clear from endnote 62 that Wade had personally interviewed Svante Pääbo, of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany in 2002. But those purchasing this book in the hope they will gain some further genetic insight to the Neanderthals and the Denisovans of Siberia will have to obtain materials published by Christopher Stringer [LONE SURVIVORS: HOW WE CAME TO BE THE ONLY HUMANS ON EARTH (2013)] and Svante Pääbo, especially the latter's 2014 book NEANDERTHAL MAN: IN SEARCH OF LOST GENOMES. Wade's book, published in 2006, is well before this. This means that much of the earlier interpretation of Neanderthal hominids as separate and not intermixed with human genetics will have to be rewritten because Pääbo later discovered that perhaps some 4 % of the human genome is made up of Neanderthal genetics, and that a lesser percentage of Denisovan genetic material composes the human biological background. Wade allows for this possibility (see p. 93) in his discussion. That they must have intermixed genetically hints that there must have been a communicative interchange as well. With this in mind, Wade also discusses the FOXP2 gene, thought to be an important biogenetic component of speech. In the chapter entitled "Settlement" (pp. 123-138) one might have expected to find some reference to the pioneering work of Robert and Linda Braidwood, University of Chicago archaeologists who have specialized in the prehistoric type of investigations in which Wade is interested. But Wade's proclivity is to draw on more recent studies to found his work. It is in this chapter, however, where he has an interesting discussion of "The Interaction of Genes and Culture: Lactose Tolerance." (pp. 134-138). The author has another fascinating

discussion of the interconnection between genetics and culture in his chapter entitled "Sociality" (pp. 139-180) where he has a section devoted to the issue of warfare and sexuality among chimpanzees and bonobos and notes that only two species of animals make warfare part of their cultural existence: chimpanzees and humans. In this same chapter Wade also has a section entitled "The Skeleton in the Human Past" having to do with cannibalism (pp. 154-158). He discusses the topic of mad cow disease and Creutzfeldt-Jakob (CJD) which, he suggests, might have left a genetic imprint on the human genome. It is here that one might expect the appearance of the man who discovered that prions caused an infectious shaped protein leading to susceptibility toward this malady. Stanley B. Prusiner led a groundbreaking effort to pinpoint the pathogen. [See S. B. Prusiner, (1982). "Novel proteinaceous infectious particles cause scrapie". SCIENCE 216 (4542): 136-144.] Yet, Wade nowhere refers to him. This same chapter illustrates well the problems faced by any researcher who wishes to investigate a topic further. On p. 171 Wade says, "Among the !Kung, men are driven wild by a sizable protuberance of fat on a woman's buttocks." The author is referring to steatopygia but nowhere does he offer a reference. Presumably, because he is offering his book as a popularly written piece he does not need to present such references. Nevertheless, because of my training in anthropology, I was interested in this statement. On that same page he quotes Bobbi S. Low so I theorized that he might have gotten this idea from her book WHY SEX MATTERS: A DARWINIAN LOOK AT HUMAN BEHAVIOR. Princeton University Press, [mine is the 2015 edition]. Indeed, Low does discuss steatopygia on p. 75 of her book. Referring to Darwin's THE DESCENT OF MAN she says: "Among the !Kung | Darwin's informant reported, a truly sexy woman was one who was unable to rise from level ground because of the weight of fat on her buttocks." I went to my copy of THE DESCENT OF MAN (Dover Publications, 2010) and found a reference to the "Hottentots" [as the !Kung were called in Darwin's time] on p. 411: "Sir Andrew Smith is certain that this peculiarity is greatly admired by the men. He once saw a woman who was considered a beauty, and she was so immensely developed behind, that when seated on level ground she could not rise, and had to push herself along until she came to a slope." Wade's phrase "driven wild" may imply that steatopygia gives a man an erection "whereas Darwin's more genteel phrase uses the word "beauty". While there may be a connection, Wade's "driven wild" is not necessarily drawn from Darwin's account, or even perforce, from Bobbi S. Low. It may only be Wade's interpretation of what he has read in Darwin and Low. At various places in his book he discusses domestication of dogs, horses,

sheep, plants and people. For some reason the camel, that great "ship of the desert," is not mentioned. The great impetus of Wade's book is to interweave genetic studies and the details of DNA into discussions of culture and language. There is a pattern to Nicholas Wade's writing here: I have mentioned that the author does not refer to the Leakeys, only briefly refers to Jane Goodall and Frans de Waal (chimpanzees and bonobos), never to Dian Fossey (mountain gorillas), nor to Robert and Linda Braidwood's archaeological work in the Middle East. That is because Wade's book is not an in-depth probe. Rather, it is a broad synthesis of more recent work. Chances are, though other topics in his book may be seen as controversial, perhaps the most controversial will be the chapter entitled "Race." On p. 182 Wade remarks: "Many social scientists even assert that race is a social concept without biological basis. My training in the humanities (sociology, anthropology, psychology and linguistic science) will also put me in that same category for I have long believed that the definition of "race" is a social construct depending upon one's own cultural background and defined by one's specific context. Wade notes, "Understandably enough, any suggestion of a genetic basis for racial differences can engender strong passions. Disputes have long swirled around intelligence tests, which at present show differences between the various races of the United States. There is a broad overlap between all populations but in terms of average score, Asian Americans come out somewhat higher than people of European ancestry, while African Americans score lower. While this fact is generally accepted, there is little agreement as to the reason. Some psychologists claim that IQ tests measure general intelligence, which they believe is in substantial degree inherited, and that the tests predict performance in later life. Others see the tests as evidence only of differences in education and other cultural advantages, and deny that any genetic explanation is applicable. This dispute, whose merits lie beyond the scope of this book, has long made the study of race controversial." (p. 195). The reader is invited to engage with Wade by studying his various reasons for his genetic foundation in this chapter. (pp. 181-201). In Wade's chapter entitled "Language" he steps into a topic called "paleontological linguistics." He dares to think that one can go all the way back to the ancestor of all languages (which he consistently dates back to 50,000 years ago whereas McWhorter prefers 150,000 years). He has drawn on Joseph H. Greenberg, whose sometimes maverick ideas have caught his eye. But linguist John H. McWhorter, who also points to Greenberg, says as follows: "the eminent linguist Joseph Greenberg, followed by Merritt Ruhlen in conjunction with John Bengston, proposed a list of twenty-seven words they consider likely to have been used in the ancestor to all of the world's languages. They reconstructed these

words by using the general approach we saw for arriving at the word snusos for
sister-in-law in Proto-Indo-European: deducing backward from words for these
concepts in the languages of the world. Despite their frequent and sympathetic coverage in
the media, these Proto-World reconstructions are not considered valid in the
linguistics field in general. (See McWhorters™ the POWER OF BABEL, (2001), pp.
287f). McWhorter goes on to examine the foundations for this view and generally debunks it. But
Wade has probably been influenced by his own interview with Greenberg. Wade, not a
linguist, does not have the tools available to critically evaluate Greenberg or, for that matter,
Greenberg's colleague, Merritt Ruhlen, when he espouses their reconstructions to found a
basis to support his use of genetics to get back to the ancestor language 50,000 years before.
Since we can only go back, at the most, to very roughly 5,500 years ago, this is a very tall order!!
The final pages of this chapter, in a section entitled "Echoes of the First Language," absolutely strains credulity!! Some scholars will react with vehemence to Wade's
genetic predisposition in this book. Regarding language, see also, for one example,
John H. McWorter's hotly worded anti-whorfian reaction in his review of Guy
Deutscher's book, THROUGH THE LANGUAGE GLASS: WHY THE WORLD LOOKS
DIFFERENT IN OTHER LANGUAGES (McWorter, THE LANGUAGE HOAX: WHY THE WORLD
LOOKS THE SAME IN ANY LANGUAGE). What Benjamin Lee Whorf did for language, Wade
appears to want to do for all of human evolution including all of the components of culture that
mankind has. But it is the raising of the old nature versus nurture debate. Is it
genetics or is it one's upbringing? In my view it doesn't have to be an
either/or approach. It can be a both/and explanation. Long ago
Theodosius Dobzhansky addressed this issue with a much more nuanced approach (See his
MANKIND EVOLVING: THE EVOLUTION OF THE HUMAN SPECIES, 1970). But Wade does not
draw from any of Dobzhansky's works. Regarding Jewish mitochondrial lineage [from the
mother] on p. 247 Wade says: "This practice [maternal descent] goes back only to
Talmudic times, the period from around 200 BC to AD 500. I find this remark puzzling unless
200 BC is an error for [AD 200] when Rabbi Yehudah ha-nasi (Judah
the Prince) compiled the Mishnah (ca. AD 189) providing the Oral law in written form as the
foundation for what later became the Talmudic collections (Talmud Yerushalmi and Talmud
Bavli). There is a fascinating discussion of Aaronide descent of cohanim (priests) in modern Judaism
on pp. 248ff. Wade draws from Michael Hammer's DNA studies of the Y-chromosome (male
lineage) and finds that the cohen modal haplotype is discovered in 45 % of

Ashkenazic cohanim and in 70 % of Sephardic cohanim. But he then adds that some scholars believe the great patriarchs of Israel may have been more a part of legend than of history. He is referring to Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *THE BIBLE UNEARTHED* (2002) (in endnote 330). It would be interesting to research this DNA connection further as it would be one more point that would undermine the minimalists (so-called), which, notes Wade, that the finding substantially confirmed the oral tradition that cohanim are descended from a single individual. (pp. 248f) In the chapter entitled "Evolution" Wade tackles such topics as "Evolution in the Recent Human Past." He does provide some endnote information on his sources but so much additional discussion could be provided. Humans are major contributors to changing the environment despite some who insist climate is not changing or even that we are not to blame. Because we are now at 7 billion people on this earth we must be participants in reality that we are leaving some footprint of our activities. A good book to consult for further information on recent evolution is Stephen R. Palumbi's *THE EVOLUTION EXPLOSION*, W. W. Norton & Company (2001). Throughout this review I have noted that some important investigators are missing from the lineup of persons that ought to have been given a hearing. I have explained this through the suggestion that these were not his focal points. And, while that is still true, there is a very real concern that he is cherry picking through all that is available on the subject to create the slanted image that genetics is the only explanation. Wade may not have intended this. His book is useful because it presents a collection of modern works that explore our genetic background especially interesting are his probes into DNA; this was not available to earlier investigators. In John McWhorter's book *THE POWER OF BABEL* (to which I have earlier referred, and for which see my review), the last chapter, that author refers to articles variously referring to the original language of humans in, among other places, the *New York Times*. Although McWhorter does not identify a specific author for these articles, it seems likely to this reviewer that he is referring to Nicholas Wade's presentations. This is because McWhorter's last chapter of his book, *THE POWER OF BABEL*, critiques the entire case made by Joseph Greenberg and Merritt Ruhlen regarding the reconstruction of the first human language along with the earliest words they spoke. Anyone reading Wade's *BEFORE THE DAWN*, should also read McWhorter's evaluation of the case. It is unfortunate that endnotes are not identified by page nor that there is even a select bibliography. This would have made it easier for the reader who wants to pursue the subject in greater depth to use the book. Also, the index is quite selective for example, although he talks of the Fore people of New Guinea, they do not

appear in the index. (pp. 155f“reference to them is located under “New Guinea, cannibalism”). My conclusion is that, while the book is interesting from a popular vantage point, it will not do for dedicated researchers to try and use it for serious investigation. To my mind Wade could maintain the popular presentation and still add the above noted items for those who wish to seriously pursue the topic. Despite my comments in this review, I believe this is an interesting book and should pique the curiosity of those interested in the impact of DNA and later genetic studies.

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