



### A NOVEL APPROACH TO PREHISTORY

In their search to illuminate human origins, anthropologists have been joined by poets and novelists. The past provides them with inspiration and subject matter: Homer's *Iliad* tells of events centuries before the poet's lifetime; Shakespeare dramatizes life among the ancient Romans. In the 20th century, as scientists have applied increasingly sophisticated techniques to the study of ancient bones and stones, novelists, from Jack London in 1906 to Jean Auel whose novels are best-sellers today, have imaginatively explored the beginnings of human consciousness and culture.

Auel's first novel, *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, tells of a five-year-old Cro-Magnon girl, orphaned in an earthquake and wounded by a cave lion, who is adopted by a Neanderthal "Clan". The child Ayla struggles to adapt to her new society under the tutelage of her foster mother, the clan's medicine woman. As a young teenager, Ayla is expelled from the group, and Auel's second novel, *The Valley of Horses*, takes up the story at this point. Ayla draws on the survival skills she learned in her hard years with the Nean-

dertals, and puts to good use her imaginative and inquiring mind. Settled into a cave, Ayla hunts and gathers, stock-piles equipment and medicinal herbs, invents an astounding array of devices from fire-starter to travois, and longs to find some of her own people.

Meanwhile, Jondalar, a young *Homo sapiens sapiens*, travels east with his brother Thonolan. As they journey, they encounter and make friends with several groups of other *Homo sapiens sapiens* from whom they learn new languages and customs. They arrive in the valley of horses where Ayla has been surviving, bereft of human companionship but now accompanied by a horse and a cave lion which she has raised from infancy. Ayla's skills in medicine enable her to save Jondalar's life and at last she begins to learn what a fellow Cro-Magnon is like.

In her two books, Jean Auel deals with the confrontation of *Homo sapiens neandertalensis* with *Homo sapiens sapiens*, as did Björn Kurtén in his *Dance of the Tiger* (1978) and



William Golding in The Inheritors (1955). All raise the question of who is truly civilized -- what, indeed, is civilization? Unlike Kurtén and Golding, Auel does not romanticize the Neandertals as possessors of the greater share of loving kindness, nor does she load all the evils of modern society on the shoulders of its earliest members. She does endow her Cro-Magnons with the advantage of greater adaptability and a much greater willingness to experiment, thus suggesting that rigidity helped account for the disappearance of the Neandertals.

### Visions of Neandertals

Auel's Neandertals rely on what she calls "racial memory" which allows them to recall inherited knowledge rather than learn it anew in each generation. The term "racial memory" was used previously by Jack London in Before Adam to describe why a "falling-through-space dream" would plague a modern human: the dream was a recollection of an ancient tree-dwelling ancestor for whom such a fall was an ever-present danger. The "racial memory" concept seems to appeal to novelists as it often accompanies the image of Neandertals as people with extremely limited spoken language. Such Neandertals appear in Auel's novels and in William Golding's The Inheritors in which the Neandertals sometimes communicate by transmitting mental images to one another. Auel's Neandertals, while storing and recalling knowledge through their racial memories, use a highly developed sign language to supplement their limited range of spoken words. In Dance of the Tiger, Kurtén's Neandertals have an elaborate formal speech but are limited in the range of sounds they can make.

There has been considerable debate about the possible fluency of Neandertal speech, and work in that field remains controversial. As for general motor coordination, however, studies indicate that the Neandertals, while more heavily muscled than modern humans, had the same range of movement. Unfortunately, Jean Auel perpetuates the concept of an awkward moving creature in her insistence

that restricted shoulder movement prevented Neandertals from skillfully throwing spears or using slingshots.

Clearly there is a limitation to studying prehistory through fiction. Novelists are entitled to imaginative license and cannot be held to strict accountability for fact, even when they are, as in the case of Kurtén, scientists first and novelists second. A good writer, after all, can bring to life the richness of the Pleistocene landscape as can no computer-tabulated catalog of bone fragments and fossil pollen. Moreover, much of the value of these novels lies in their authors' freedom to speculate, to people the past with characters conceived in the present.

### Past Times, Present Views

These books should be read not just for their re-creation of a possible distant past, but for what they reveal about the authors' own era. London's Before Adam, which appeared a half-dozen years after Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams, reflects Freud's impact on the first decade of the 20th century. Golding's The Inheritors, published the year after he dealt with the clash of savagery and civilization among modern boys in Lord of the Flies, takes up the same problem, in a prehistoric setting. Kurtén's Dance of the Tiger demonstrates the power of totalitarian military regimes as well as the divisiveness of racial prejudice. Auel's characters embody the values of the women's movement. Her protagonist Ayla is resourceful, self-reliant, and physically powerful: a heroine for today.

All these works ask us what is human? What is civilization? In challenging teachers and students to consider such questions, writers of fiction make a valuable contribution to the study of human origins.

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