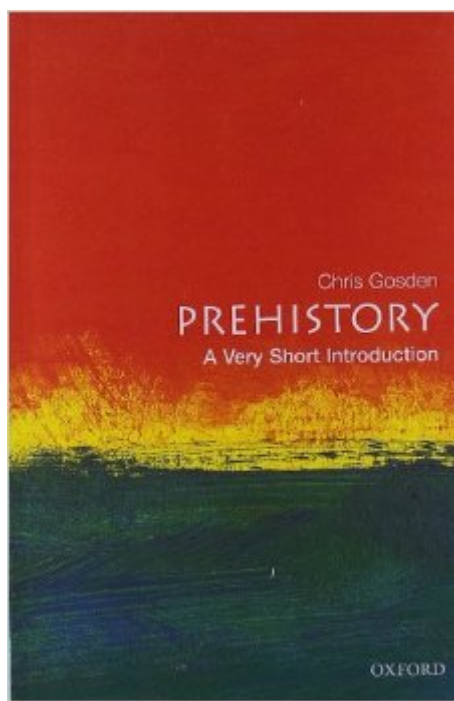


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Prehistory: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

Many of the familiar aspects of modern life are no more than a century or two old, yet our deep social structures and skills were in large measure developed by small bands of our prehistoric ancestors many millennia ago. In this book, readers are invited to think seriously about who we are by considering who we have been.

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Customer Reviews

The author being a museum curator, it is not surprising that he concentrates on physical artifacts and the ways in which early humans used them to relate to their environment and each other. His main thesis is that our relationship with objects, and the way we relate to other humans by use of objects (trading, giving, repaying, etc) is what defines us as humans and is the central dynamic of cultural evolution. He also claims that this intimate relationship with objects has been the evolutionary driving force behind human intelligence. Indeed, he attempts a new definition of intelligence which has little to do with intellectual ability as normally perceived but has to do with our interaction with the physical world around us. This is no doubt politically correct and allows us to describe the most moronic athletes as geniuses, but it leaves us with no definition of intellect, so we are back where we started. Are we to reserve judgement on Einstein's intellectual abilities until we know if he could kick a ball straight? I won't even ask about Stephen Hawking. Where many researchers would emphasize language as being central to what makes us human and what enables us to evolve sophisticated cultures, Gosden always comes back to objects. He does mention language. In describing the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis he acknowledges that it is

'controversial within linguistics', but then goes on to talk of it as if it were proven fact. I thought it had been thoroughly discredited long ago. But for the most part, language is ignored in favor of objects. Of course, this is understandable in someone who spends his time sifting through pieces of flint rather than poring over ancient manuscripts. I cannot blame him for ignoring literary evidence when prehistory, by definition, has none.

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