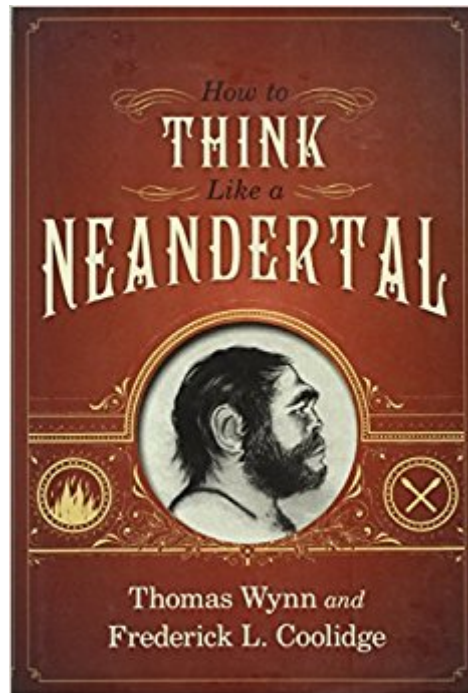


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# How To Think Like A Neandertal



## Synopsis

There have been many books, movies, and even TV commercials featuring Neandertals--some serious, some comical. But what was it really like to be a Neandertal? How were their lives similar to or different from ours? In *How to Think Like a Neandertal*, archaeologist Thomas Wynn and psychologist Frederick L. Coolidge team up to provide a brilliant account of the mental life of Neandertals, drawing on the most recent fossil and archaeological remains. Indeed, some Neandertal remains are not fossilized, allowing scientists to recover samples of their genes--one specimen had the gene for red hair and, more provocatively, all had a gene called FOXP2, which is thought to be related to speech. Given the differences between their faces and ours, their voices probably sounded a bit different, and the range of consonants and vowels they could generate might have been different. But they could talk, and they had a large (perhaps huge) vocabulary--words for places, routes, techniques, individuals, and emotions. Extensive archaeological remains of stone tools and living sites (and, yes, they did often live in caves) indicate that Neandertals relied on complex technical procedures and spent most of their lives in small family groups. The authors sift the evidence that Neandertals had a symbolic culture--looking at their treatment of corpses, the use of fire, and possible body coloring--and conclude that they probably did not have a sense of the supernatural. The book explores the brutal nature of their lives, especially in northwestern Europe, where men and women with spears hunted together for mammoths and woolly rhinoceroses. They were pain tolerant, very likely taciturn, and not easy to excite. Wynn and Coolidge offer here an eye-opening portrait of Neandertals, painting a remarkable picture of these long-vanished people and providing insight, as they go along, into our own minds and culture.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"An intriguing look at fellow beings who seem to have been 'inexact mirrors of ourselves'" - Kirkus  
In *How to Think Like a Neandertal*, archaeologist Thomas Wynn and psychologist Frederick Coolidge provide one of the most rounded portraits yet of a fossil human. The book covers familiar areas - diet, symbolism and language - but also includes innovative assessments of Neanderthals' capacity to tell jokes, and even speculations on what they might have dreamed about." - Clive Gamble, *Nature*  
"Engaging reconstruction of Neandertal life..." - *The New York Times*  
"...*How to Think Like a Neandertal* is interesting and engaging. Written for a lay audience, it should nonetheless be of great interest to professionals in anthropology, evolutionary biology, and psychology. I also highly recommend it to anyone who wonders what it would have been like to live alongside another intelligent being who shared the designation homo." - PsycCRITIQUES

Frederick Coolidge, Professor of Psychology, University of Colorado  
Thomas Wynn, Professor of Archeology, University of Colorado

It's late in the process, but I've gotta say something about this book. First, the title's too cute by half. But published by Oxford and favorably referred to by the well-known paleontologist, Mithen in a review I read on some other subject. So I took a flyer. First remark: animals vs. people. That's a mental divide, so to speak, a lot of plain folks and even - or sometimes especially - PhD's, ethologists and professors just cannot cross. I'll admit where I'm coming from. Grew up during the era of behaviorism and also surrounded by farm animals and for all my life by many pets, mainly cats and dogs. But I'm also a beekeeper. I believe almost any beekeeper will tell you bees are conscious animals that make decisions. Of course, at the final level nobody can prove it. But at the final level nobody can prove my wife is conscious either! So second remark. It's not a question of figuring out whether Neandertals or Chimps fall on one side or another of a bright dividing line. So how can you tell what their mental lives are like? I've got the dog and my wife with me all the time, so by comparing their behavior with my own and other animals, I can make a go at it. But I've never seen a Neandertal, how to approach that? This book has two great strengths. From the paleontology side it takes a very conservative stance. True, some assumptions are made which other reviewers

have (rightly) in my judgement criticised. For instance, the lack of division of labor, the inference that small hearths relates to story telling ability and at least a few more. But we do NOT get Neandertals, singing, playing instruments, well dressed, having burial rituals, (or even much in the way of burials at all) religious beliefs and so on. Much as many people - and me too- would like to imagine it was like that, the archeological evidence just doesn't support it - or we can say it's very much disputed. So the reconstruction here is really based on what we know, not on what we'd like to believe. That's a necessary place to begin. The second strength of the book is the work of the psychologist. Seldom have I been so convincingly led from the physical facts (in this case, all indirect archeological facts) to the inner life of a creature. We may dispute the sociological interpretation of some of the sites, but GIVEN the interpretations, the inferences from the external evidence (small groups, tool manufacture and so on) were masterful. I actually came away with at least some sort of notion of what life may have been like from the inside of one of these people. I think if you're of a philosophical bent, this book will give you lots to think about as you read it and give you some food for thought long after.

Neandertal men, or Neandertals have intrigued people since the discovery of the first fossil remains were discovered in the Meander Valley back in 1856. Early ideas about Neandertals were heavily influenced by preconceptions about human ancestry current at that time and so Neandertals were believed to be the missing link between human and ape and so Neandertals were depicted as bestial, sub-human primitives. More recent research has revealed that Neandertal Man or Homo neanderthalensis was very closely related to modern Homo sapiens, perhaps even a subspecies of sapiens. More recent depictions of Neanderthals have tended to be more sympathetic, including Jean M. Auel's Clan of the Cave Bear and the Geico cavemen. Paleontological research and the sequencing of Neanderthal DNA have taught us a lot about their appearance and habits, but not so much, what they were really like. How "human" were the Neanderthals? Were they as intelligent as modern humans, or more, or less? Would they fit into modern society? Thomas Wynn and Frederick L. Coolidge attempt to answer these questions in their book, How to Think Like a Neandertal. Wynn, an archaeologist and Coolidge, a psychologist, go over the available evidence to try to reconstruct how Neanderthals really thought. This exercise necessarily requires a lot of speculation since there are no living Neanderthals to examine, but most of their guesses seem to be sound, based on the evidence they present. Wynn and Coolidge believe that Neanderthals were as intelligent as modern humans were. Judging from the artifacts they left, they were certainly not stupid. Yet, their intelligence seems to be subtly different from ours.

Neanderthals did not innovate much. Their tools are much the same in design throughout their range. The tools were well made, but they lacked the sort of regional variations that are characteristic of tribes of modern humans who live far apart. The tools remain the same designs for tens of thousands of years, while the tools of even the most primitive modern humans show some development over time. Wynn and Coolidge speculate that Neanderthals were very conservative in temperament and did not like the new or unexpected. Neanderthals were very strong compared to modern humans and lived hard and dangerous lives. Wynn and Coolidge assert that emotionally, Neanderthals were stoic and used to dangers and injuries. They took care of injured members of their communities. These communities or bands were rather small, perhaps no more than a dozen or two dozen individuals. Neanderthals did not travel much and did not interact with other bands except on rare occasions. They do not seem to have engaged in any sort of trade between bands. Because of this, Neanderthals were probably suspicious of strangers and less sophisticated in social interactions than modern humans who lived in larger communities that interacted with one another. Neanderthals almost certainly had language. They had the same genes that in humans control the acquisition and use of language. There is no way now to know what their languages were like and how they compare to the languages of our time. Wynn and Coolidge believe that their language must have been different from any language used by Homo sapiens, perhaps more context specific and with more use of stock phrases as part of their conservatism. Their humor might also have been different, more physical and maybe far less use of word play. I think, though, that this subject is the one in which their speculations are less well based on available evidence. I believe that unless a Neanderthal is resurrected using "Jurassic Park" technology, we simply do not have enough evidence on which to base any speculations. How to Think Like a Neanderthal is an interesting book about an interesting people. I only wish it were possible to know more about the Neanderthals.

This was a really interesting read, providing insight into the lives of Neanderthals. Much of the book is focussed on their cognitive abilities - sounds dull, but it isn't. The authors write for a lay-audience, with good humour (maybe a few too many 'dad' jokes) and practical examples. Some stylistic issues annoyed - how useful is it to say that Neanderthals were "about the same size as president Sarkozy or Jon Stewart"? Providing an average height would be preferable. A minor quibble compared to bringing to life these "top predators" for whom the primary source of animal protein were mammoth and woolly rhinoceros. The authors make it clear that the study of Neanderthals is limited by the comparatively small number of specimen skeletons (many only partial). So drawing

conclusions on the Neandertals lack of innovation compared to homo sapiens sapiens is dangerous, particularly in view of the revelations in recent days that Neandertals did use bone technology and may well have introduced our ancestors to bone scraper tools and similar. The DNA analysis that has revealed the Neandertals had the genes for red hair and probably speech is fascinating. And the skeletons that reveal individuals lived on after suffering incredibly debilitating injuries provides a great window into a caring environment, very different to that provided in our caricatures of primitive cavemen. A less pleasant picture emerges when the evidence (again very limited) of cannibalism is brought to the surface. All up, an enjoyable window into the world of humans who were like us, but different - or as the authors describe it, Neandertals live on as inexact mirrors of ourselves.

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