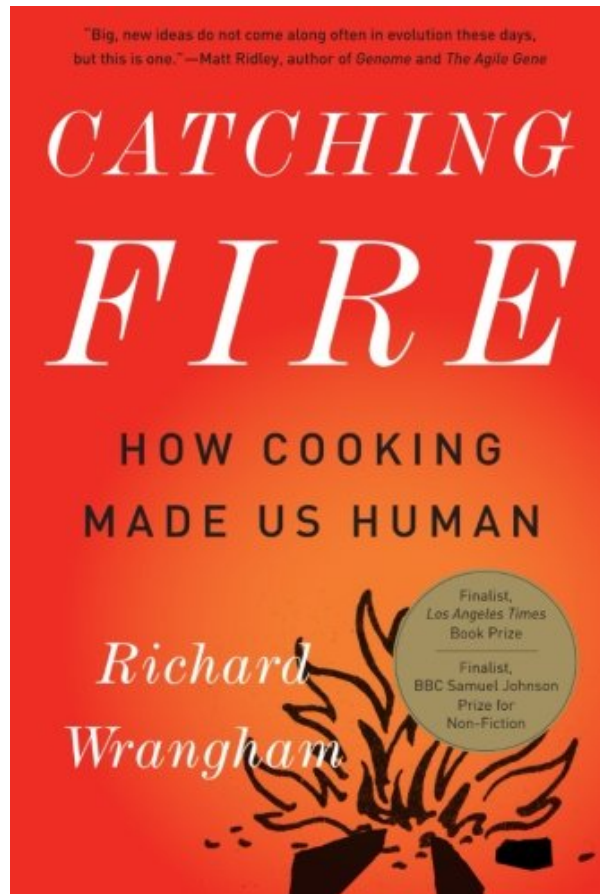


CATCHING FIRE: HOW COOKING MADE US HUMAN BY RICHARD WRANGHAM



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CATCHING FIRE

HOW COOKING
MADE US HUMAN

*Richard
Wrangham*

Finalist,
Los Angeles Times
Book Prize

Finalist,
BBC Samuel Johnson
Prize for
Non-Fiction



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Ever since Darwin and *The Descent of Man*, the existence of humans has been attributed to our intelligence and adaptability. But in *Catching Fire*, renowned primatologist Richard Wrangham presents a startling alternative: our evolutionary success is the result of cooking. In a groundbreaking theory of our origins, Wrangham shows that the shift from raw to cooked foods was the key factor in human evolution. When our ancestors adapted to using fire, humanity began. Once our hominid ancestors began cooking their food, the human digestive tract shrank and the brain grew. Time once spent chewing tough raw food could be used instead to hunt and to tend camp. Cooking became the basis for pair bonding and marriage, created the household, and even led to a sexual division of labor. Tracing the contemporary implications of our ancestors' diets, *Catching Fire* sheds new light on how we came to be the social, intelligent, and sexual species we are today. A pathbreaking new theory of human evolution, *Catching Fire* will provoke controversy and fascinate anyone interested in our ancient origins—or in our modern eating habits.

- Sales Rank: #62941 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Basic Books
- Published on: 2010-09-07
- Released on: 2010-09-07
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.25" h x .81" w x 5.50" l, 1.03 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 320 pages

Features

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A brilliant and important hypothesis

By George Sand

Around 1.8 to 1.9 million years ago, *Homo habilis* (a chimpanzee-like primate, but with a bigger brain and tool-making skills) evolved into *Homo erectus*. The changes were spectacular: *Homo erectus* had a 40% larger brain than *Homo habilis*; looked much more like a modern human than a chimpanzee; had lost its tree-climbing skills, but gained running skills; had a much smaller, and less energy-consuming digestive system (smaller mouth, teeth, jaws, jaw muscles, stomach, and colon); lost most of its coat of fur; and developed a social system based on economic cooperation: the husband hunted, the wife gathered and cooked, and they shared the food.

Wrangham argues that *Homo habilis* learned to control fire and that that fact is both a necessary and sufficient explanation for this evolutionary leap.

First, fire is used for cooking, as all primates find cooked food more delicious (even monkeys know to follow a forest fire to enjoy the cooked nuts). Cooking gelatinizes starch, denatures protein, and softens all foods, permitting more complete digestion and energy extraction. As a result, the food processing apparatus shrinks, freeing energy to support a larger brain. (After the gut shrinks, the animal can no longer process enough raw food to survive, but is dependent on cooking. Wrangham reports that humans with even a large supply of well-processed, high-quality food lose both weight and reproductive capacity on a raw diet, and that there are no known cases of a modern human surviving on raw food for more than a month.)

Second, fire provides defense against large carnivores, permitting *Homo erectus* to descend from the trees and live on the formerly predator-dangerous ground. The group would sleep around the campfire while an alert sentinel watched for predators, which would be repelled with a fiery log. Living on the ground led to the development of long legs and flat feet--ideal for running.

Third, fire permits loss of fur, as a hairless animal could warm itself by the fire. Hairless animals can dissipate heat much more quickly, giving them the ability to outrun furry animals. *Homo erectus* could simply chase a prey animal until it collapsed from heat exhaustion.

Fourth, cooking permits specialization of labor. Without cooking, both males and females must spend most of their day gathering and chewing vegetable matter. Because hunting success is unpredictable, they could devote relatively little time to it, because an unsuccessful hunter would have inadequate time to gather and chew vegetables. Cooking, however, reduces chewing time from 5 hours per day to 1 hour, freeing time to hunt. A hunter who returned empty-handed could still enjoy a cooked vegetable meal and have time to eat it.

Here Wrangham (who teaches, inter alia, a course named "Theories of Sexual Coercion") indulges in academic feminism when he says that "cooking freed women's time and fed their children, but also trapped women into a newly subservient role enforced by male-dominated culture" as if this were a diabolical choice by patriarchal males. A more neutral explanation for the emergent sex roles might be as follows: Females, with their noisy, not-very-portable suckling infants and toddlers, cannot hunt because hunting is necessarily a stealthy and mobile activity. Therefore, males do the hunting. Because both hunting and cooking are time-consuming activities, males cannot do both. Therefore, females do the cooking. (They are trapped into cooking not by males but by their mammary glands.)

The various effects of control of fire were mutually reinforcing, leading to rapid evolutionary changes, resulting ultimately in modern humans.

Interestingly, Charles Darwin, while calling fire-making "probably the greatest [discovery], excepting language, ever made by man," thought that cooking was a late addition to the human skill-set without biological or evolutionary significance, and anthropologists agreed with him until quite recently.

The main text of the book comprises just 207 widely spaced pages, yet is somewhat repetitive. It includes many entertaining, if sometimes marginally relevant, anecdotes and a gratuitous chapter on contemporary food labeling and healthy eating. Despite these nits, I award 5 stars because Wrangham's cooking-makes-the-human hypothesis is both brilliant and important and the book is a highly enjoyable read.

56 of 61 people found the following review helpful.

A New Theory On What Makes Us Human

By John D. Cofield

Anthropologists, historians, and theologians have many theories about how humans became "human". Dr. Richard Wrangham here posits that humans became "human" because we learned to cook our food over a million years ago, when *homo erectus* first tamed fire. Conventional theory holds that humans began to cook their food long after their path diverged from other primates, so its interesting to read Dr. Wrangham's belief that cooking was a cause rather than an effect.

Dr. Wrangham provides some fascinating material on how humanity began to physically separate from the apes, and how eating cooked food intensified the process and hurried it along. This has the potential to become impenetrably technical, but Dr. Wrangham writes clearly with the general reader in mind. I also enjoyed his coverage of the claims of present day raw-foodists, some of whom he interviewed. After that

chapter I was left feeling simultaneous admiration for the dedication of raw-foodists and repulsion at the thought of following a similar diet myself! Dr. Wrangham has a good ear for an entertaining anecdote, such as the story of poor Alexis St. Martin, who survived a horrifying injury that permanently opened his stomach, thus involuntarily becoming an assistant to a researcher who wished to observe the process of digestion.

The text of this book is only about 200 pages. It is exhaustively researched and documented, with over 40 pages of notes, a 30 page bibliography, and a 20 page index. It will appeal to students of early man and to followers of Michael Pollan, with whom Dr. Wrangham shares a concern that humanity return to more natural and less highly processed food.

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Important contribution to anthropology

By Sam Thayer

Anthropology is supposed to be the scientific study of humankind. Unfortunately, since its inception, it has been inundated by carefully disguised pseudoscience - attempts to use scientific data to support the preconceived biases of the investigators. Typically these biases (aka hypotheses) have been ethnocentric and agrocentric, and the arguments used to support them are often composed of flawed logic in the service of false implications. How relieving to read Wrangham's book, which actually appears to draw hypotheses from observations rather than a self-aggrandizing belief system. The author then analyzes realistic and sensible implications of these hypotheses, testing them in a simple but logical way that makes his conclusions seem obvious.

This is the kind of book that makes one wonder, "Why hasn't this been argued before?" While his book is rather small and the ideas are not deeply explored, this is largely because the hypotheses that Wrangham presents are quite new. I believe that his ideas will be supported, refined, and expanded by further investigation.

While some of his ideas appear outdated or unsupported (for example, he seems to suggest that hunter-gatherers were poorly nourished compared to later farmers, when in fact a substantial body of archeological evidence points to the contrary being true), and he makes some assumptions that are unfounded (for example, that human diets without cooking would be comparable to those of chimpanzees. This is highly unlikely, since pre-humans were bipedal, which suggests a far greater mobility geared toward different food preferences than apes that move on all fours or in trees. It is possible, if not likely, that human ancestors used their greater mobility to extract higher quality food from a larger home range more selectively than chimps.)

However, despite these shortfalls, the ideas presented in the book are extremely important to the study of human evolution and anthropology, as well as the endless and robust contemporary debates about nutrition and health. The book reflects something that I have been telling participants in my wild food foraging workshops for years: that cooking and processing food is the most significant human invention of all time. We would be wise to remain aware of that, and I am grateful that this author has increased my understanding of this issue.

Indeed, I feel that this is the single most important contribution to anthropology in decades. It is also well written, enough so to keep the interest of the casual reader.

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