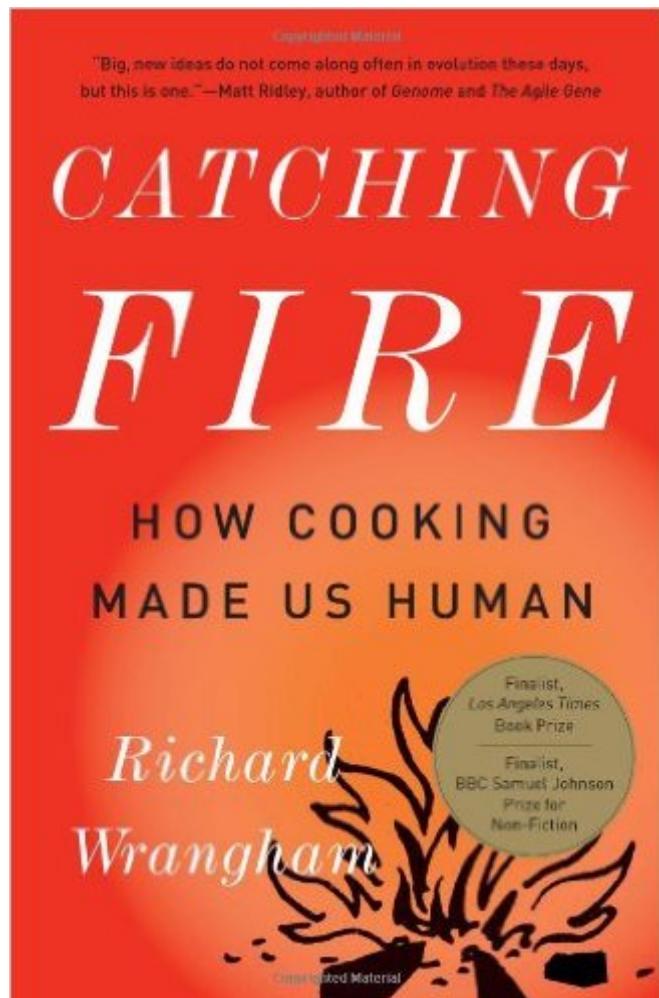


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Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

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.

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.

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