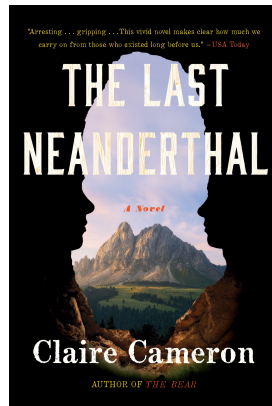


READING GROUP GUIDE



Author's Note

I've always been fascinated by Neanderthals, but when I was young they felt as distant as dinosaurs. In school I was taught they were an evolutionary step between the apes and us—hairy, grunting knuckle-draggers who died out because they were inferior, a casualty in our species's journey from primitive to perfection.

In 2010, a team sequenced the Neanderthal genome and made an extraordinary discovery. Many modern humans of Asian and European descent have inherited between 1 and 4 percent of their DNA from Neanderthals. Most scientists agree that this is evidence of relatively recent interbreeding between the two groups. Rather than a more evolved version of Neanderthals, we are their close cousins.

But we think of ourselves as the ones who killed off the Neanderthals, not as having sex with them. So how did humans and Neanderthals make contact? We don't know the answer, but a novelist should take on the risk of imagining one.

In my search for a plausible answer, I researched the new scientific interpretations of Neanderthals. I used my findings as a set of rules to work around, like creative constraints. I also drew on my experience in the outdoors for insight into how survival in the wilderness might have felt more than forty thousand years ago.

But even with the recent findings, there are still many unanswered questions about Neanderthals. As Rose says, a relationship, a feeling, or a glance—it's the things that don't fossilize that matter most.

—Claire Cameron

Questions for Discussion

- 1) What did you know about Neanderthals before reading the novel? Did the novel change your perception of Neanderthals?
- 2) Big Mother upholds certain taboos about sex. Why do you think she chooses to expel Girl? How clearly does she see this decision and its consequences?
- 3) The Neanderthals in the novel lived in a tight family group, whereas Rose lives far away from her family and friends. Do you choose to live close by, or farther away from, your social network? How does this affect your life decisions?
- 4) Girl and Runt form a special bond. How does their relationship alter over the course of the novel? What changes it the most?
- 5) Where do you think Runt came from when the family found him? What is different about him?
- 6) Runt sees marks on a tree that meant something different to him than they do to Girl. Why does he run when the storm is coming? Where do you think he goes?
- 7) Rose, the archaeologist, and Simon get into a big fight in Ikea. Why does a big box store provoke them? Is this kind of tension in a relationship common or unusual? Could you relate to their predicament?
- 8) Motherhood connects the stories of Girl and Rose, but because they live 40,000 years apart they have considerably different experiences. Still, there are some similarities. What are they and what did you think about them?
- 9) Whose story did you relate to more, Girl's or Rose's? Which one is closer to you in real life?
- 10) The novel ends with a photo of the artifact Rose found, the skeleton of a Neanderthal and a modern human lying together. Who do you think these two skeletons belong to?

Further Reading

If you are feeling ambitious, I've visited a few book clubs who paired *The Last Neanderthal* with a book of nonfiction that puts Neanderthals into the larger context of human history:

Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper, 2014).

For those who are interested in reading more about Neanderthals and the current thinking about the evolution of our species, here a few of my favorite books:

Dimitra Papagianni and Michael A. Morse, *The Neanderthals Rediscovered: How Modern Science Is Rewriting Their Story* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2015)

Thomas Wynn and Frederick L. Coolidge, *How to Think Like a Neanderthal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)

Svante Pääbo, *Neanderthal Man: In Search of Lost Genomes* (New York: Basic Books, 2014)

Lydia Pyne, *Seven Skeletons: The Evolution of the World's Most Famous Human Fossils* (New York: Viking, 2016)

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mother Nature: Maternal Instincts and How They Shape the Human Species* (New York: Ballantine, 1999)