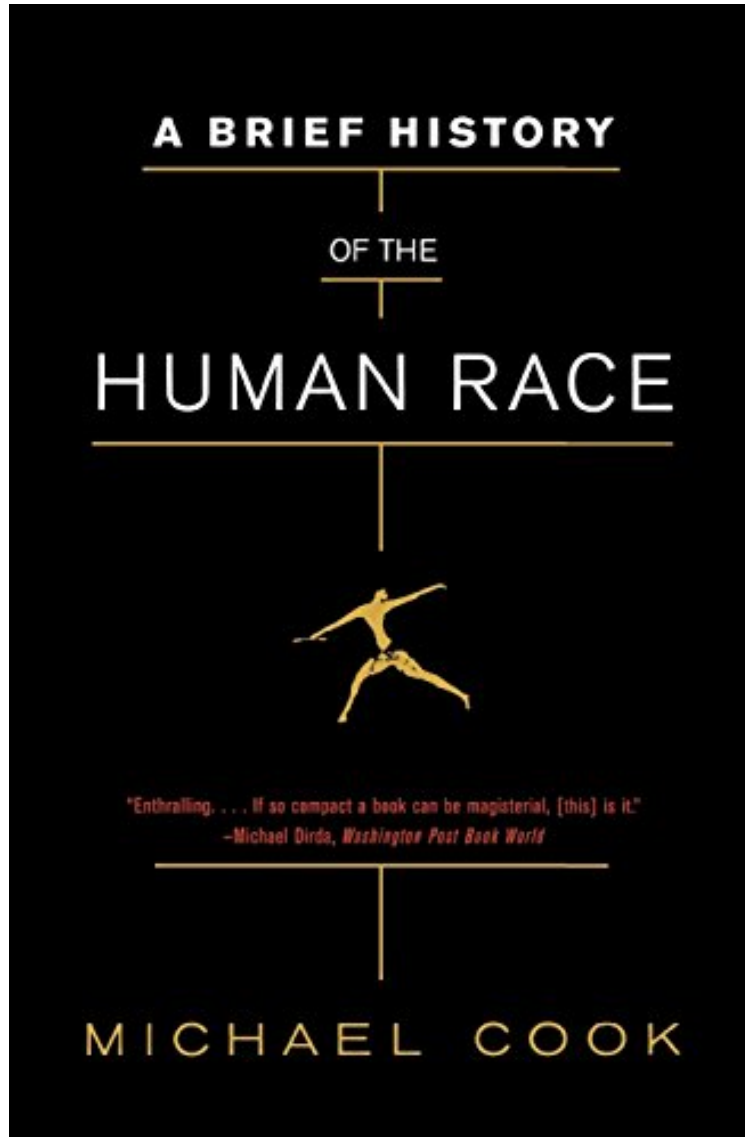


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## A Brief History of the Human Race

*Michael Cook Ph.D.*

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"Enthralling....If so compact a book can be magisterial, [this] is it.Michael Dirda, Washington Post Book World... "A smart, literate survey of human life from paleolithic times until 9/11."Edward Rothstein, The New York Times Why has human history been crowded into the last few thousand years? Why has it happened at all? Could it have happened in a radically different way? What should we make of the disproportionate role of the West in shaping the world we currently live in? This witty, intelligent hopscotch through human history addresses these questions and more. Michael Cook sifts the human career on earth for the most telling nuggets and then uses them to elucidate the whole. From the calendars of Mesoamerica and the temple courtesans of medieval India to the intricacies of marriage among an aboriginal Australian tribe, Cook explains the sometimes eccentric variety in human cultural expression. He guides us from the prehistoric origins of human history across the globe through the increasing unification of the world, first by Muslims and then by European Christians in the modern period, illuminating the contingencies that have governed broad historical change. "A smart, literate survey of human life from paleolithic times until 9/11."Edward Rothstein, The New York Times 11 maps, 28 illustrations

From Publishers WeeklyPrinceton University professor Cook, a specialist in Islamic history, ambitiously attempts to convey the general shape of human history over the last 10,000 years. As Cook makes clear from the outset, we're in the midst of a lucky spell regarding global climate, which has been mild over the last several millennia. Taking advantage of this "window of opportunity," humans began to do something revolutionary: farm. Cook emphasizes that farming was the beginning of civilization, and it all started in the Middle East. Cook's focus on the impact of environment and geography is clear in his chapter on Africa, "in which we can expect the history of the continent to be marked by a steep cultural gradient, with the advantage going to the north," where close contact with Eurasia and more suitable climate led to farming and the domestication of animals earlier than in the south. Cook's method is to first sketch an overview of a particular region's history, and then to analyze in depth a couple of its cultural developments. Thus, he offers us interesting explorations of Greek pottery, Chinese ancestor cults and marriage rites among Australian aborigines. Toward the end of his survey, Cook examines the rise of industrialism in Britain and how it posed a challenge to the rest of the world. One highly relevant challenge to Western modernity that Cook emphasizes is Islamic fundamentalism. While Cook does an excellent job covering the main themes of world history, his narrative at times reads like a college survey course: lots of enticing information, but too sweeping. 15 maps, 30 illus. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.From BooklistCook is more a provocative questioner of human history than a narrator of it. Intending to point out "to an alert reader" the salient contours of human society today and how they came to be that way, Cook brings commanding erudition to all corners of the world, extending from his expertise in Islamic history to explore China, India, Australia, the Americas, and Europe. As did Geoffrey Blainey in *A Short History of the World* (2002), Cook identifies the melting of the ice sheets as the key environmental event for humanity. But whereas Blainey proceeds in a political direction, Cook emphasizes the material and cultural side of the story, probing why, for example, agriculture, writing, or a social or religious practice arose in one locale rather than another. In this approach, Cook echoes *Guns, Germs, and Steel* by Jared Diamond (1997), a surprisingly popular explanation of how the West outdistanced the rest. Cook ought to capitalize on that same interest. Gilbert TaylorCopyright American Library Association. All rights reserved "A smart, literate survey of human life from paleolithic times until 9/11."