



The First Signs: Unlocking the Mysteries of the World's Oldest Symbols

Genevieve von Petzinger

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

The First Signs: Unlocking the Mysteries of the World's Oldest Symbols

Genevieve von Petzinger

The First Signs: Unlocking the Mysteries of the World's Oldest Symbols Genevieve von Petzinger

One of the most significant works on our evolutionary ancestry since Richard Leakey's paradigm-shattering *Origins*, *The First Signs* is the first-ever exploration of the little-known geometric images that accompany most cave art around the world—the first indications of symbolic meaning, intelligence, and language.

Imagine yourself as a caveman or woman. The place: Europe. The time: 25,000 years ago, the last Ice Age. In reality, you live in an open-air tent or a bone hut. But you also belong to a rich culture that creates art. In and around your cave paintings are handprints and dots, x's and triangles, parallel lines and spirals. Your people know what they mean. You also use them on tools and jewelry. And then you vanish—and with you, their meanings.

Join renowned archaeologist Genevieve von Petzinger on an Indiana Jones-worthy adventure from the open-air rock art sites of northern Portugal to the dark depths of a remote cave in Spain that can only be reached by sliding face-first through the mud. Von Petzinger looks past the beautiful horses, powerful bison, graceful ibex, and faceless humans in the ancient paintings. Instead, she's obsessed with the abstract geometric images that accompany them, the terse symbols that appear more often than any other kinds of figures—signs that have never really been studied or explained until now.

Part travel journal, part popular science, part personal narrative, von Petzinger's groundbreaking book starts to crack the code on the first form of graphic communication. It's in her blood, as this talented scientist's grandmother served as a code-breaker at Bletchley. Discernible patterns emerge that point to abstract thought and expression, and for the first time, we can begin to understand the changes that might have been happening inside the minds of our Ice Age ancestors—offering a glimpse of when *they* became *us*.

The First Signs: Unlocking the Mysteries of the World's Oldest Symbols Details

Date : Published May 31st 2016 by Atria Books (first published March 29th 2016)

ISBN : 9781476785493

Author : Genevieve von Petzinger

Format : Hardcover 307 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Archaeology, Anthropology, Art, Science, Humanities, Language

 [Download The First Signs: Unlocking the Mysteries of the World's Oldest Symbols ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The First Signs: Unlocking the Mysteries of the World's Oldest Symbols ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online The First Signs: Unlocking the Mysteries of the World's Oldest Symbols Genevieve von Petzinger

From Reader Review The First Signs: Unlocking the Mysteries of the World's Oldest Symbols for online ebook

Mary Soderstrom says

This is an extremely important book about how humans developed in our far distant past. Told in an engaging, yet authoritative way, it probably is the most thought-provoking book I've read in months.

Robyn says

FULL REVIEW WITH AMAZING, JAW-DROPPING, HEART-STOPPING GIFS HERE AT THE OLD BLOGGO

Hey hey, cupcakes. It's been a minute. Blame that chubby little muthafucka Cupid, whose golden arrow hath pierced my once-frigid heart and set it ablaze with Love's undying flames. Or whatever.

Ahem. MOVING ON.

So as I've mentioned (*cough* whined about) before, my brain has got a severe case of the Love-Struck Stupids (band name, write that down) and my Goodreads challenge is taking a hit. And, you know, my intellectual fortitude and general mental well-being.

But fear not, good comrades, for I have stumbled upon a solution – the good old NONFICTION BENEDICTION. That's right, it's back, babies.

To the review mobile! This week, it's The First Signs: Unlocking the Mysteries of the World's Oldest Symbols by Genevieve von Petzinger.

Cover Talk:

Okay, okay. Come through, nonfiction. I see you. Well done, son.

The Summary Heist:

Read the damn blurb, it's at the top of the page innit.

Robyn Says:

So I've been making a conscious effort to begin cultivating a meaningful, well-rounded, spiritually healthy life I can be proud of –

Fuck me that sounds like pretentious new-age hipster bull-shit doesn't it?

Ok so I been tryna cross off the third item on Shaun's classic to do list. I mean, I'm a grown-up now innit? Bout time. So the room's been cleaned out of its adolescent fuckery, the books have been (somewhat) weeded, I got rid of most of my band t-shirts, Twitter and Tumblr, the two greatest time-suckers ever known to man, have been banished from my phone... and I have embarked upon a nauseatingly clichéd course of self-improvement of my own design, cribbed heavily from those terrible, eye-roll-worthy lifestyle gurus you

can't avoid on instagram and youtube. I know, I'm pathetic.

So my new morning routine is about as gag-worthy as you'd imagine ("be still for 3 minutes, and embrace the quiet of your newly awakened mind" FUCK RIGHT OFF, ROBYN, YOU ABSOLUTE TURNIP) but one thing I am kinda proud of is my resolution to learn more – actively learn, I mean, rather than the passive sort of serendipitous knowledge thievery I've been doing since bolting out of Western with my MLIS and running hell for leather back to the 6ix, home of my people and more importantly, somewhere that is not London-asshole-of-the-world-Ontario.

To make a long story even fucking longer, I've been watching TED talks every morning while I scarf down breakfast. I know everyone's gaga for the TED talks, but I'm finding that they're definitely a mixed bag for me. I can't stand the self-help ones. The ones I do like are, surprise surprise, the ones in which a nerd gets to nerd out for 12 epically nerdy minutes. Watch it yourself right here (see what kind of service you get on this blog? smh i'm amazing)

(IT'S AT THE BLOG WHY NOT GO TO THERE)

WHOA. WHOA. WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOA. Amiright? Just... whoa.

Mind understandably blown, I did what any sane person would do, and went to the library. Okay, it was 6:15 in the morning and I had to work, so I actually went to the library's website – and here, my good people, we have an example of one of the classic arguments in favour of ebooks, because I was able, with only a few clicks of the mouse, to check out the digital edition of von Petzinger's book and start reading it less than 3 minutes after watching her TED talk. Fucking amazing. Yeah technology. Yeah science. Yeah nerds. Yeah books. YEAH LIBRARIES BITCH!

Oh... you wanna know about the actual book? Ok, jesus, calm down, keener.

It was fucking awesome. It's amazing to actually read about something that is probably a huge a discovery as it's in the process of being discovered. Von Petzinger basically stumbled into her field of research thanks to a fateful mixture of serendipity and curiosity, and even though she's still conducting her research and her conclusions are constantly evolving, it's clear that she's onto something big. The book basically discusses her attempt to catalogue the geometric signs of Ice Age Europe's cave art, which have been pretty much uniformly ignored by previous scholars who preferred to focus their attention on the depictions of animals that dominate most sites.

(And sidenote, if you wanna live your best life you should IMMEDIATELY watch the documentary by the one and only, the king of glorious weirdness, the great Werner Herzog himself, Cave of Forgotten Dreams... oh look I found it for you YOU'RE WELCOME)

(GO TO THE BLOG GO TO THE BLOG GO TO THE BLOG)

Back to the squiggles. Some reviewers seemed to be dissatisfied with the book because von Petzinger doesn't actually draw many conclusions from the data she's collected. For me, that wasn't a problem – if anything, I was relieved. She's still deep in the process of collecting information. Anything beyond very general hypotheses would be far too hasty. Good science is slow science. While von Petzinger does theorize that it seems likely the geometric signs found all across Ice Age Europe and Asia have a common origin and perhaps even common meanings, she doesn't touch on what those meanings might be – because it's impossible to even guess at this early stage.

I really enjoyed the exploration of early humans and language, both verbal and nonverbal. It made me want to dig out my old linguistics textbooks from undergrad. Actually, this whole book made me curious. I want

to keep learning – not just about Ice Age cave art, but about early humans in general, language development theories, the first written languages, the development of alphabetical writing systems... and so much more. And isn't that the mark of not just a good nonfiction book, but a great one?

Dude. I love nerds.

Verdict:

Read it. Amazing. Mind-blowing. Will cure you of the worst case of the Love-Struck Stupids since the Trojan War, when basically everyone was Love-Struck and Stupid.

Best lines:

God, screw y'all, what I am, your mama? Go read the damn book for yourself.

Fancasting couch:

Behold, your theoretical Ice Age cave artist.

(AGAIN, PLEASE VISIT THE BLOG TO VIEW THIS XXX-RATED, A1 QUALITY CONTENT)

Listen I googled "sexy caveman" and this was the first result? Who am I, a mere mortal, to question the awesome and all-knowing Google?

Book Boyfriend material:

Leather speedo up there. He's no broad-shouldered, ill-tempered, dragon-slayer, but he's really rocking that fur stole.

Rating:

9 out of 10 mysterious Ice Age squiggles that probably mean "the aliens put us here you twenty-first century knobs" or maybe "boobs," we'll never know.

ROBYN'S FINAL THOUGHT:

Werner Herzog voice Those abstract and chaotic signs inscribed on the walls of a man's heart are unknowable, for in the cavernous darkness of the soul, no light ever shines upon them.

Srsly tho it's writing, right? The most basic kind of pictographic communication, yeah, but still... it's writing. Awesome-sauce.

*

Oh, heyyyyy Titus. What's new, furry baby?

I, too, find myself facing literary stagnation. Get away from me, Librarian, and let me wallow in peace.

Ah, Classic T.

Until next time, pop-tarts and -tarlets!

-x0, R

Kim Miller-Davis says

This was an absolutely fascinating read about our ancient human ancestors and the mysteries they left behind on the walls of caves. After showing Petzinger's Ted Talk to my Humanities students last fall, I ordered this from Amazon, but somehow never got around to reading it until now. Yesterday, after showing the Ted Talk to my Summer students, I walked straight to my bookcase, picked it up, and became completely immersed.

Petzinger's book chronicles her trek to Paleolithic cave art sites throughout Europe. Although her quest is dedicated to examining and cataloging 32 recurring symbols that remain undeciphered and enigmatic, Petzinger does not bore us with dry, academic language. Instead, her narrative reads as if she is taking her readers on a Sherlock Holmes-style mission. When she defines terms or explains processes, she does so in such a way that it seems as if she is unwrapping a clue rather than delivering a professorial lecture--a perfect approach for the anthropological laypeople in her audience.

Interestingly, the narrative unfolds in such a way that as the suspense behind the symbols builds, the audience knowledge base deepens. This is entirely due to Petzinger's casual yet professional style. As she approaches each site, she provides a personal anecdote about the trip itself before launching into a vivid description of the surrounding environment (which always includes some type of sensory details like the feel of the air or the colors of the landscape). By interspersing the didactic with the visceral and the personal, Petzinger keeps her readers riveted.

Ultimately, Petzinger's passion is not only transmitted, it is transferred. The inexplicable existence of these symbols across Europe pervades the narrative with such an intensity that deciphering their meaning will become an immediate, unrelenting priority for anyone who opens the book and joins Petzinger on her journey.

Wied?ma says

Von Petzinger podesz?a do temat z pasj?, dzi?ki czemu nawet dla laików staje si? on niezwykle interesuj?cy. Autorka przechodzi do kolejnych zagadnie? w sposób logiczny, nie pomijaj?c nawet najbardziej oczywistych kwestii, co pozwala czytelnikom dog??bnie zrozumie? ogóln? problematyk? pierwszych symboli pozostawionych przez naszych praprzodków.

Ca?o?? na: <https://wiedzma-czyta.blogspot.com/20...>

Sarah says

I'm not sure on the rating of this one. It was a real drag for me to get through, but I think that was due to what else was going on in my life at the time. I do feel like she should have given the relevance of the signs in the first or second chapter instead of speaking about it in the last half of the book. It would have helped the book overall to understand a lot of what she was saying early on.

That being said, the ideas and theories that she presents boggle the mind. Or at least mine. As uneducated in the whole 'ancient man' time as I was I just had pop culture to go by, but what she sets out shows the ancient

man as just as good at thinking (in different ways) as we are. It's fascinating to think about. So I'm not sure on the rating. we'll sit it at 3 for now. This is a good example of why I hate star ratings so much.

Mary says

At the intersection of art history, archaeology, semiotics, and the origin of writing lies First Signs. This delightful book is scholarly yet personable, scientific but also funny. Von Petzinger is a genius at distilling complex ideas and theories into a understandable and pleasant narrative-- she literally takes you on the same journeys that she has taken through the European countryside. She describes the landscape as well as the characteristics of each cave she visits-- I really felt like a fellow explorer on the journey with this expert in paleoarchaeology. I love the photos and drawings included in this book. I especially love that Ms. Von Petzinger includes an example of bad cave art! This is something I sorely missed in art history class.

As a scientist, Von Petzinger has compiled an important database of abstract signs created by prehistoric people, mostly in Europe. These signs and symbols have been largely ignored in favor of recognizable aurochs and bison. She speculates that these dots, handprints, and other shapes could be the early origins of graphic, and perhaps written, communication. This is a field that seems to be just at the beginning of its journey. I look forward to more works by Genevieve Von Petzinger.

Emily Regier says

If you are even .5% interested in cave art, this work will hook you from the very start. She writes with such casual intellect, almost like she's telling you about her research over coffee on a Tuesday. By the end of the book, I felt this weird sense of pride for this woman I don't even know and the work she's done. She's transcending colleagues in her field and isn't daunted by the incredible challenge her work actually represents. I hope to see more work from her in the future.

Todd Stockslager says

Review title: Over promised, under delivered

A better subtitle for this book might be: "Unlocking the mysteries of how subtitles mislead and why." It's not that Von Petzinger has written poorly, but she was unable to deliver on the unrealistic and untrue promise of the subtitle. I certainly picked up the book from my library's new book shelf based on the promise of the mystery solved, and was underwhelmed by the reality of the undelivered promise.

So, context: The first signs are geometric symbols that are often part of Ice Age (10,000 + years ago) cave art wall paintings, which are better known for representations of large mammals (mammoths, bison, horses, deer) and hand prints in red and black paint. Von Petzinger was intrigued by the symbols, and wondered if they were common across the hundreds (350+ known in Europe and more still being found) of these sites and if patterns of usage emerged that might reveal meaning. So she scoured the literature and conducted her own explorations to create a database of the types of symbols and their locations, eventually identifying 32 symbols like cruciforms (crosses), dots, lines, ovals, triangles, and zigzags that appeared in multiple places.

Von Petzinger spends the larger part of her book describing her intellectual and geographic journey to this point, and it is an interesting tale--but in the back of my mind I'm waiting for mysteries to be unlocked. What do these symbols mean? Are they language? When she finally arrives at the point of that discussion over half way through the book I learned what I had already expected: the mystery would not be solved, not because Von Petzinger wasn't a good writer or for lack of knowledge or research. Far from it. What she has done is start to gather the data and ask the right questions, which in itself is an interesting journey, but a subtitle that reads "gathering the data and asking the right questions" isn't likely to make any book fly off the shelves no matter how well written.

Knowing that authors often have no control over their book titles as published, I have to wonder if Von Petzinger argued for a different subtitle. She certainly doesn't write like a sensationalist popular nonfiction writer, more like an earnest teacher eager to show her class the journey to the knowledge she is revealing so the class can really grasp the subject and want to learn more. She never oversells her findings and theories, in fact backs away from some potential inferences because the data can't prove them (unlike some science writers might do for a good subtitle!).

So I wouldn't recommend readers to stay away from The First signs, but rather to read it focused on the journey to and through the data and the theories that Von Petzinger is formulating to organize it. Read The First signs, then look for the followup, hopefully in a few short years, after she is able to gather more data, refine her theories, and have confidence that the data enables them to really unlock the mysteries.

Jacques Coulardeau says

THIS BOOK IS DANGEROUSLY LIMITED

Genevieve von Petzinger is young for sure and she has just finished her Ph.D., but she is connected to National Geographic in their Paleoanthropology department, which is supposed to be a good affiliation. You will surely be interested in many of the information she gathered about rock art and the personal research she did on collecting all geometric or iconic signs present in Homo Sapiens caves in Europe. But the book is not up to the research in the field of the last ten or fifteen years, at times even more.

First of all, her locking her personal research onto Europe is of course very dubious and definitely unacceptable in our global world. Then her coverage of Africa is only collecting information about what others have done, and yet her only one-time mention of Sally McBrearty is very strange because Sally McBrearty spoke very loudly against two myths in this field of research. First she rejected the idea of a Neolithic agricultural revolution for one main reason: it took a long time and personally I will amplify what she said and published and add that Homo Sapiens, particularly when he started migrating out of BLACK Africa, had to take care, the very first form of cultivation, of the natural garden to make sure he was able to survive and expand in his various new environments. Their food has been identified from research on their teeth and it shows an extremely varied food and what's more Neanderthals shows the same phenomenon, though maybe at a less developed level. We do not know about Denisovans.

The second thing Sally McBrearty was very critical of is the idea of a cognitive revolution somewhere around 50,000 BCE, and the connection some insist on about a possible genetic change, mutations at the time and particularly the FOXP2 gene. I have amplified this approach and I just ask a simple question: what genetic mutations were naturally selected to enable Homo Sapiens to become a bipedal long distance fast runner since his leaving the forest and his coming down into the savanna required that evolution? And I found out that all the elements these cognitive revolutionaries are putting on the table are all necessary genetic mutations for Homo Sapiens to become that bipedal long distance fast runner which was absolutely

indispensable if he wanted to survive in the savanna.

The collateral side effect of these mutations is that Homo Sapiens was able to multiply the vowels he could utter and the consonants he could articulate. He could then develop human articulated language that counts three articulations. The first one based on the rotation of vowels and consonants was not possessed by monkeys but we do not know whether Neanderthals and Denisovans had it and if the common ancestors of these two Hominins species plus Homo Sapiens had also developed this rotation of vowels and consonants, this first articulation. I believe they had because they needed a full communicational system, hence an articulated language, even with only one articulation and not the three of our languages, to be able to plan, organize, control and guide the migrations they all were engaged in. The common ancestors to the Middle East and to Central Asia-Mongolia-Siberia where Neanderthals and Denisovans were to evolve, and of course Neanderthals who migrated from the Middle East to the whole of Europe and Denisovans who also migrated from Central Asia to a vast zone in Asia, though their presence in Asia is far from being fully documented.

But Genevieve von Petzinger is short on a few other subjects. She does not study the THREE basic migrations out of BLACK Africa and thus she misses the linguistic problem of the three migrations: Semitic languages first, isolating languages second, and agglutinative and synthetic-analytical languages third. She is so ignorant on this subject that she does not know about the vast research of Theo Vennemann who proved, I repeat proved, Old Homo Sapiens in Europe, the Homo Sapiens of the Ice Age that von Petzinger is considering, spoke a set of Turkic agglutinative languages and nothing else. She neglects the fact that a great number of rivers and geographical areas are still using names that can be traced to Basque or Turkish, hence to Turkic roots. It is these people who painted the caves in Europe.

If she had opened her interest to Indonesia (Sulawesi), to Asia in general, to the Americas and to Africa, she would have found out that rock art is in no way European and it might even be older in some other continents. The author should check the site of the Bradshaw Foundation and she would be able to open up her approach to the whole world. But Sulawesi in Indonesia only would have provided her with the idea that most hands in these caves are female hands and that would have helped her to avoid her minimization of the role of women that she shifts from 75% to nothing but equal, from a 3 to 1 dominance to an equal contribution. This pushing aside of women's role in these rock art paintings helps the author NOT TO CONSIDER the basic and vital (meaning survival) division of labor of women in Ice Age societies and probably in all Homo Sapiens societies till their emergence 300,000 BCE, that made women the central group in their societies that could 1- be clear about the rejection of inbreeding (a natural characteristic common to at least all mammals); 2- be clear on the role of women in delivering and raising the necessary children who will assume the survival of the community, of the species and their expansion; 3- the spiritual role women played in these societies.

Without falling into the Babel Biblical ranting and raving of some (like Chris Hegg) about the real existence of one unique language before Babel and its tower, I must admit that Genevieve von Petzinger did waste a lot of time about transferring the San hunter-gatherer community in South Africa today and their shamanistic practice, reinforced by the entoptic universal sign theory that is at least debatable, onto the Homo Sapiens communities of Europe during the Ice Age, to come to the conclusion that we cannot conclude these Homo Sapiens had any kind of shamanistic practice. When you come to such a conclusion in your research it is good to drop the research itself and look for another approach.

The other approach is in de Saussure and his theory of the linguistic sign. For Genevieve von Petzinger, in spite of chapter 12 that is purely superficially unthought-through linguistic amateurish prose, Homo Sapiens is mainly MUTE, which he was not. He had a fully developed communicational tool called language that had three deep articulations in this particular case in Europe and it is obvious – meaning absolutely unavoidable and inescapable – that the geometric and maybe iconic signs in the caves along with the hands and all the paintings corresponded to a “word” or “discursive linguistic entity” that had an oral signifier and a semantic

signified (meaning) and that Homo Sapiens superimposed onto this linguistic sign a pictographic or geometric sign that was, in fact, a visual signifying superimposed onto the dual linguistic sign. We do not know what these signs mean because we do not know what linguistic signs are behind, and we might never know, but it is not scientifically acceptable to transfer a modern world shamanistic practice onto another practice that is at least 45,000 years older. Such retrospective transfer is a methodological mistake that disqualifies eventual conclusions.

Luckily Genevieve von Petzinger herself concludes that is worth nothing, that no shamanism can be proved. So why on earth did she write and published all these pages on something that is worth nothing? I am in the process of publishing a much longer study on this book because it is dangerously misleading for younger researchers, or a younger audience, who may let themselves be lured by such pages and chapters.

Dr. Jacques COULARDEAU

Kendra Goldberg says

This book is a nonfiction delight, and well written for the layman. Genevieve von Petzinger is extremely talented at writing about her research in a dynamic and captivating way. I have read a lot of nonfiction where the topic is fascinating but the book gets bogged down in jargon and the authors inability to write for a wider audience. I you are using an e-reader, I highly recommend reading this book in a format that allows you to view the images in color.

Confession: In High School I was mildly obsessed with the Clan of the Cave Bear books, but got annoyed in the sequels because a lot of the anthropology was replaced with bodice ripper love triangle drama. This book totally satisfies the fascination I had for Ice Age history ever since reading the CotCB books. It was an itch that I didn't even realize needed scratching until I was halfway through The First Signs and for a week I began every conversation with my husband with "DID YOU KNOW..." followed by a string of facts and knowledge I picked up from von Petzinger.

So in conclusion, if you have any interest, even a mild interest in the Ice Age definitely read this book because by the end you will be obsessed with paleoanthropology and cave art.

Iset says

I have to admit I picked this book up under the totally unfounded assumption that it would be about the Neolithic Vinca symbols. For the uninitiated, the Vinca culture is a society from the Balkans that flourished c. 5700 – 4800 BCE, which left behind mysterious symbols on their artefacts that could well be the world's first writing system; a good two thousand or so years before the earliest examples of Egyptian hieroglyphs or Sumerian cuneiform.

But in actual fact Von Petzinger goes way beyond this to the Upper Palaeolithic (c. 50,000 – 10,000 BCE), examining the mass of material from Europe's Ice Age caves, rock art, and incised portable objects; specifically, the mysterious geometric signs. This is far beyond what I would have expected, and it's fair to

say it's a challenge and then some, considering the languages are lost (even Proto-Indo-European takes us back only as far as 4500 BCE). So, the big question – is it a writing system? Well... no. After tireless cataloguing and data analysis, Von Petzinger clearly states that we are not yet at a writing system with these signs. For starters, the limited number of signs and the relative lack of complex combinations couldn't possibly render all the permutations of a spoken language. More likely, the symbols communicate limited concepts to the group that created them, but do not represent language.

That disappointment out of the way, I'm impressed with Von Petzinger's work. Not only is the book clearly and informatively written, but her quality as a researcher shows. It's considered the mark of a good and rigorous piece of academia to examine, acknowledge, and deconstruct alternative hypotheses. This allows the reader to make up their mind independently, consult other interpretations, and weigh the arguments for why this hypothesis may be more accurate than others. Personally, I think Von Petzinger makes a good case for why the symbols should not be interpreted as either entoptic, shamanic art or binary male/female symbolism. The former simply isn't supported by the forms and instances of the signs, which rarely align with known entoptic imagery, and the latter proposition seems to rely far too heavily on late 20th century interpretative bias with no evidence to confirm that the art is divided in this way at all.

Von Petzinger also gains big points, at least in my book, for siding with palaeogeneticist Stephen Oppenheimer and arguing against the 'creative explosion'. The 'creative explosion' is the idea by some academics that the wondrous cave art in Europe from c. 50,000 BCE onwards must have come about by some change in our brains, society, or other development – they use this notion to explain the impressive artwork and the apparent lack of such striking art before that date and elsewhere in the world. Personally, I've always seriously doubted the existence of a 'creative explosion' since anatomically we are the same as the Homo sapiens that evolved in Africa c. 200,000 BCE, and so little exploration and excavation has been done in other Stone Age sites compared to Europe that it seems eminently plausible to suggest that such discoveries are still forthcoming. Oppenheimer's Out of Eden notes that the 'creative explosion' hypothesis makes no sense genetically because a gene switching on is not a prerequisite to our creative expression, and the proposition would rely on such genes somehow spreading back into Africa and across the rest of the world in order for anyone else to be capable of such extraordinary artistic outpourings – which of course is absurd and not the case at all. Von Petzinger directly examines some of the sites outside Europe and dating to earlier than 50,000 BCE to demonstrate convincingly that people had a well-developed sense of symbolic thought and creative expression long before Homo sapiens ever reached Europe.

I would recommend this book to both beginners and academics alike. It's of genuine interest to me as the first collective analysis attempted of these signs, and thus brings something distinctly new and worthwhile to the field, whilst Von Petzinger's writing style is accessible and she clearly explains to beginners how the scientific techniques used work. I would therefore deem it suitable for both.

8 out of 10

Vicki Zhang says

I was under the impression that this book had more linguistic aspects and explanations, instead of the mostly archaeological and anthropological explanations it contained. Even then, the author gave a great recounting of her adventures in European caves: descriptions of caves and the surroundings are complete, pictures and notes add to the narration and background information paint an in-depth history for those with close to little knowledge of rock art (aka me). Her brief flashes of humour are fresh. I was a little disappointed that there wasn't exactly an answer to what the first signs represented - I wanted more information on this historical pictographic language and what these signs might semantically mean/represent and the general linguistic

aspects. Still, an educational read.

Also watched her TED talk, which was just a recap of her book (including repetition of several sentences from her book).

Phillias says

cloak and dagger history, approachable read, voluminous data and information, but no new or conclusive declarations. Good primer.

Wanda says

I've been fascinated with cave art since I was about 11 or 12 years old. I blame *Children's Digest*. I don't know who started my subscription to that periodical, but it started quite an assortment of interests which I still read about whenever possible. I distinctly remember a story about a young girl who fell in a hole in Spain and accidentally discovered the Altamira cave system, with its profusion of cave paintings.

So imagine my frenzied fangirl squee-ing when I discovered that one of the leading researchers into the meaning of the abstract & geometrical cave paintings & engravings is a woman and a Canadian. Colour me impressed. And she's young—there will be more to come from this researcher.

Studying the symbols in cave art seems to be a field whose time has come. This book is partially a travelogue, detailing many of the caves that the author has explored and the symbols recorded. Now that computers are up to the task of keeping track of age, place and position of each symbol, patterns can be discerned and intriguing theories can be concocted. The author is careful to tell us that she hasn't "translated" these signs yet, but progress is being made. I think it is incredible that there are only 32 basic signs used and that they show pattern and purpose.

One of her most interesting theories is that this "vocabulary" of symbols came with the first humans to Europe and wasn't invented on the spot. Researchers must turn their eyes back to Africa to see if the beginnings of this tradition can be sussed out.

Also of note (although disappointing to me personally), is that these symbols are probably not entoptic phenomena (visual effects that have their genesis in the eye with no outside stimulation). I've seen entoptic effects during visual migraines and they are frightening until you realize what they are. They are flashing arrows, zigzags, circles, Xs, etc. that (for me anyway) were produced when my neck muscles clenched so tightly that input to the optic nerve was cut off. Not only did I think I was going blind, but I was seeing neon-flashing symbols! An earlier theory had postulated that cave artists were merely transcribing their own entoptic symbols from either the sensory deprivation of long, dark cave meditations or from drug-induced trances. The statistics just don't support this interpretation, however, as the symbols aren't evenly spread. Unless these cave artists just ignored some symbols, they should all be represented.

A very enjoyable read, clearly written and accessible to those of us who haven't been keeping up with the research in the field. Now, more than ever, seeing some original cave art is on my bucket list.

Carissa says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. The cartoonish depiction of “cave” men and women is so far from reality as evident through their art and, it appears, through their use of symbols. To think about life—complex then too— at 40000 years ago!

The author presents scientific information in a way that is accessible to readers not familiar with this deep work. I even laughed out loud at times—in astonishment and amusement both.

I dropped a star because a book about cave art and, more particularly, symbols found at various sites, deserves better photos. Too many were gray and grainy. I would have happily paid a bit extra for better visuals. Happily I found much Paleolithic art to view online; but this author and her husband travelled extensively to many sites not well known or accessible by most. (The stories of spelunking through the caves are fascinating particularly when one considers that ancient people chose these difficult places to make art without high-tech tools or even something as basic as a flashlight.) Their grainy photos are understandable as accessing these sites was often quite difficult. It would have been rewarding for a sketch or other option to accompany these photos.

I look forward to reading much more on this topic as well as from this author.
