



The Most Dangerous Animal: Human Nature and the Origins of War

By David Livingstone Smith

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The Most Dangerous Animal: Human Nature and the Origins of War By David Livingstone Smith

Almost 200 million human beings, mostly civilians, have died in wars over the last century, and there is no end of slaughter in sight.

The Most Dangerous Animal asks what it is about human nature that makes it possible for human beings to regularly slaughter their own kind. It tells the story of why *all* human beings have the potential to be hideously cruel and destructive to one another. Why are we our own worst enemy? The book shows us that war has been with us---in one form or another---since prehistoric times, and looking at the behavior of our close relatives, the chimpanzees, it argues that a penchant for group violence has been bred into us over millions of years of biological evolution. *The Most Dangerous Animal* takes the reader on a journey through evolution, history, anthropology, and psychology, showing how and why the human mind has a dual nature: on the one hand, we are ferocious, dangerous animals who regularly commit terrible atrocities against our own kind, on the other, we have a deep aversion to killing, a horror of taking human life. Meticulously researched and far-reaching in scope and with examples taken from ancient and modern history, *The Most Dangerous Animal* delivers a sobering lesson for an increasingly dangerous world.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Right now, as you read this, somebody, somewhere, is planning a war": from its opening sentence, Smith's book demands the reader's attention. A professor of philosophy and the cofounder and director of the Institute for Cognitive Science and Evolutionary Psychology at the University of New England, Smith has written a stark study of human nature, examining how we are biologically wired to fight. The human need for war is based on two powerful evolutionary factors: an innate aggressiveness born of a need to fight for food, shelter and the right to breed, and the human craving to belong to a group. Dispelling illusions of the peaceful, noble savage, Smith discusses anthropological and archeological evidence of war, raids, terrorism and genocide between hunter-gatherer societies: mass graves of people executed by blows to the head; human bones scarred by butchering or with arrow and spear points lodged in them. Human settlement brought wars of conquest and industry devoted to making weapons. Now we attempt to disguise the facts of war with euphemisms like "target" (instead of person), "friendly fire" and "collateral damage." Smith's writing, reinforced by one grim example after another, is crisp and sobering, never blunting the fact that we are "our own worst enemy." (*Aug.*)

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Review

"Right now, as you read this, somebody, somewhere, is planning a war': from its opening sentence, Smith's book demands the reader's attention....a stark study of human nature, examining how we are biologically wired to fight. Smith's writing, reinforced by one grim example after another, is crisp and sobering, never blunting the fact that we are 'our own worst enemy'." ?*Publishers Weekly*

"...erudite, informed, and persuasive...highly readable...a thoughtful, provocative and clear-sighted argument..." ?*Metapsychology*

"Highly original and tightly woven...meticulously researched..." ?*Portland Press Herald*

"If you have the intestinal fortitude to confront the horrors of war, as well as the intellectual fortitude to confront its basis in human nature, then you are ready for *THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL*. David Livingstone Smith knows evolutionary biology, and history, and psychology, and philosophy, and anthropology, and has put them together to produce a riveting, unflinching and disturbingly accurate account of human warfare, from the "commanded wars" of the Old Testament to Bush's Blunder in Iraq." ?David P. Barash, professor of psychology, University of Washington and author of *THE CAVEMAN AND THE BOMB*

"Here is the unvarnished tale of human gangs, driven by built-in survival mechanisms and an uncanny ability for self-deception, romping through history--raiding, pillaging, terrorizing, waging wars, and committing large-scale atrocities in the name of abstract gods, holy lands, master races, and political systems. David Smith's rapid-fire account of our uniquely lethal nature makes a mockery of our dreams for peace. We could always try, though, but seeing ourselves as we truly are is a necessary first step. This book shows us how." ?*Anouar Majid, author of FREEDOM AND ORTHODOXY: Postcolonial Islam in a Polycentric World*

"This is the most important post-9/11 analysis of war and it comes none too soon, as hundreds are daily dying and commentators continue to ask why. David Livingstone Smith has provided a cogent answer to the deeper why question of war; not why Iraq? or why Afghanistan? or why Darfur?, but why war at all? Smith's

answer--that war is buried deep in our evolutionary past--will be controversial, but his case is irrefutable. We have seen the enemy in the mirror, and until we gather the courage to accept our true nature, men will fight and people will die. Every politician should read this book before deciding on war.” ?*Michael Shermer, Publisher of Skeptic magazine and author of THE SCIENCE OF GOOD AND EVIL*

“In *The Most Dangerous Animal*, David Livingstone Smith illuminates an exceedingly dark subject: humankind's deep-seated penchant for war. The result is a discerning, insightful, highly original, and very disturbing book.” ?*Andrew J. Bacevich, author of The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*

“Deftly combining concepts and analytical skills from traditional philosophy with an impressive grasp of contemporary science in several disciplines, Smith has produced a unique work that is at once chilling, invigorating, enlightening, and ultimately hopeful. Believing that truth is the best medicine, I recommend for every thinking person a full dose of this fiercely argued and deeply insightful book.” ?*Dale Peterson, author of Jane Goodall, The Deluge and the Ark, and co-author of Demonic Males*

“A remarkable and accessible book that provides original and compelling insights into the human capacity for war. Professor Smith's keen psychological analysis reveals how we unconsciously deploy self-deceptive strategies to override our horror at human bloodshed in order to indulge our universal penchant for inter-group violence. A must read for anyone interested in the psychological depths of human nature.” ?*Barbara S. Held, Barry N. Wish Professor of Psychology and Social Studies, Bowdoin College, author of Psychology's Interpretive Turn: The Search for Truth and Agency in Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*

“This is a brilliant book. It weaves together a wealth of insights from science, history, literature, philosophy and contemporary affairs into an accessible, lucid, and cogently argued defense of the role of human nature in war.” ?*Robert L. Holmes, Professor of Philosophy, University of Rochester, and author of On War and Morality*

About the Author

Dr. David Livingstone Smith is the author of *Why We Lie* as well as a professor of philosophy and cofounder and director of the Institute for Cognitive Science and Evolutionary Psychology at the University of New England. He and his wife live in Portland, Maine.

Users Review

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