



Almost Human: The Astonishing Tale of Homo Naledi and the Discovery That Changed Our Human Story

Lee Berger , John Hawks

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This first-person narrative about an archaeological discovery is rewriting the story of human evolution. A story of defiance and determination by a controversial scientist, this is Lee Berger's own take on finding *Homo naledi*, an all-new species on the human family tree and one of the greatest discoveries of the 21st century.

In 2013, Berger, a National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence, caught wind of a cache of bones in a hard-to-reach underground cave in South Africa. He put out a call around the world for petite collaborators—men and women small and adventurous enough to be able to squeeze through 8-inch tunnels to reach a sunless cave 40 feet underground. With this team of "underground astronauts," Berger made the discovery of a lifetime: hundreds of prehistoric bones, including entire skeletons of at least 15 individuals, all perhaps two million years old. Their features combined those of known prehomínids like Lucy, the famous *Australopithecus*, with those more human than anything ever before seen in prehistoric remains. Berger's team had discovered an all new species, and they called it *Homo naledi*.

The cave quickly proved to be the richest prehomínid site ever discovered, full of implications that shake the very foundation of how we define what makes us human. Did this species come before, during, or after the emergence of *Homo sapiens* on our evolutionary tree? How did the cave come to contain nothing but the remains of these individuals? Did they bury their dead? If so, they must have had a level of self-knowledge, including an awareness of death. And yet those are the very characteristics used to define what makes us human. Did an equally advanced species inhabit Earth with us, or before us? Berger does not hesitate to address all these questions.

Berger is a charming and controversial figure, and some colleagues question his interpretation of this and other finds. But in these pages, this charismatic and visionary paleontologist counters their arguments and tells his personal story: a rich and readable narrative about science, exploration, and what it means to be human.

Almost Human: The Astonishing Tale of Homo Naledi and the Discovery That Changed Our HumanStory Details

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From Reader Review Almost Human: The Astonishing Tale of Homo Naledi and the Discovery That Changed Our HumanStory for online ebook

Taylor Ramirez says

Next big relativity TV show idea: Paleoanthropology. The cut throat science.

I was worried I'd be bored by this book because science is not my thing but this guy knows how to write a captivating scene.

“My classes were a different matter. I found I hated economics and political science.”—Page 23

Bitch!

I like how Berge goes into the history of paleoanthropology while also tying it in, to his own life experience.

“But looming on the horizon was a nasty fight that would leave me scarred and paleoanthropology in South Africa in tatters. They next few years would almost end my hope of ever building a strong exploration program or making a major discovery.”—Page 50

Dramatic.

Paleoanthropologists are petty as fuck. This gives us an interesting view to a time before the internet where information, for better or worse, can be crowd sourced.

This guy is kind of a dick to Peter.

“Taking a break from looking at the fossils, I played around with the Sesotho dictionary on my laptop,”—Page 99

Much like how writers name characters.

“He was also barefoot. For the many years I had known him, Pedro had always hated shoes.”—Page 108

Paleoanthropologists are weird.

““What are you doing?” she asked, her voice a bit tense.

“Why, what’s the problem?” I queried, wondering what had got her upset.

“I have a bunch of messages from women giving me their body dimensions!”—Page 125

Whoops.

“Because most of the people in camp were young and highly attuned to social media, I started naming each day with a hashtag at the top of the briefing board.”—Page 143

And that’s when I would leave.

Michael Brady says

Well-written, nicely paced, examination of the discoveries of Australopithecus Sediba and Homo Naledi by teams led by Lee Berger. Of special interest is the Berger's commitment to open source research and providing opportunities to young scientists.

Carolkuzler says

Berger's recall of his career as an anthropologist and his findings are fascinating and inviting. Berger provides insight for those considering the field of anthropology and those who are currently in the field. The book is a great book for anyone interested in the anthropological field. The book is a good read for the undergraduate, graduate and adult reader audience.

Kirsten says

This is pretty interesting, though it does get bogged down occasionally. And there are definitely sections where there is a lot of bragging ("And then I transformed the entire field of archaeology, me me ME"), which.... I dunno, whatever. But the fossil stuff, and the excavation stuff was pretty cool - especially in light of the fact that in today's news they were talking about still other hominid fossils from still other parts of Africa (specifically, Morocco), which fact muddies the waters even further than this book does..... Just another fascinating puzzle piece.

Jennifer says

It was bad

I did not like he only talked about the discovering not the science and I read it for the science

Ietrio says

Far from astonishing, it is the story of a bureaucrat feeling self important. The bio wastes time on unimportant details - the cap some guy was wearing or how someone does not wear shoes. And the paper pusher does not waste any opportunity to inflate minor facts, a life long skill that probably lead him to quite a few grants.

Carlos says

Ok if you guys don't know I am an anthropology major so books like this really speak to me , a couple of years ago the paleo anthropology world was rocked when the discovery of Homo naledi was made public , here was a whole different kind of Homo who up to now had not been discovered, you can imagine the controversy this find brought forward, we might need to add another branch to the human tree in its evolution towards Homo sapiens . This is the book about that find from the guy who discovered it , the book had some structural issues as talking about a whole completely different find other than the one the book was supposed to be about , but looking back it was just to give it some background, anyway the book picks up from there and I highly recommend this book to anyone with an interest on anthropology.

Beth says

The fascinating story of how a new hominid was discovered in an unexpected place. Well if not brilliantly told, starting with the author's odd road to paleontology and enlightening digressions about the daily work and internal politics of the field.

Liam says

This was a book I looked forward to reading. The subject is a fascinating development in the study of human origins. Homo naledi is an important discovery and one that deserved a book to be written about it. It's unfortunate that this is the one it got. Lee Berger is nauseating as a writer. His ego is almost unbearable as he makes no attempt to contain it page after page. That said, I do admire the collaborative approach that his team decided to use to describe the discovery. I feel there was much more to say about the actual science than this book gives. Lee turns this into a personal interest story on a topic that pretty much nobody is interested in: Lee Berger.

As wonderful as Australopithecus sediba and Homo naledi are, they have not somehow changed the entire field of paleoanthropology. It's still the same old story: "The fossil I found is the most important and most revealing fossil ever found." That quote pretty much paraphrases them all back to Eugene Dubois. Expanding the fossil record is always good, but the paradigm doesn't shift every time.

On the plus side, at least it didn't take the team 16 years to publish a paper and we aren't still waiting for them to reveal their material.

Gail Wanner says

Lee Berger's recounting of his recent discovery of two new hominin species in South African is enthralling and seems well-balanced from a scientific perspective. The first few chapters give an overview of older finds in Africa and he updates the classic "human family tree" based on newer discoveries. He is a strong advocate for the new open approach to the handling of fossils and data and has shown the value of involving people from many disciplines in evaluating finds. John Hawks from the University of Wisconsin in Madison was also part of this effort.

Stan Prager says

Review of: Almost Human: The Astonishing Tale of Homo naledi and the Discovery that Changed Our Human Story, by Lee Berger and John Hawks
by Stan Prager (9-12-17)

Back in 2014, I took a challenging but rewarding MOOC (Massive Open Online Course), “Human Evolution: Past and Future,” a free online course taught by University of Wisconsin-Madison professor of anthropology Dr. John Hawks. Hawks, who might be described as both genial and genius, seems equally devoted to both advancing studies in paleoanthropology, and sharing data cross-discipline for the greater good of scientists, students, and the wider public audience—a heresy that cuts against the grain in scientific as well as academic circles among those who jealously guard their discoveries in order to be the first in line for credit and publication. The course introduced via video clips a leading paleontologist in the field, Lee Berger, whose two remarkable and vastly dissimilar hominin finds in South Africa have each literally shifted the landscape in studies of human evolution.

Berger, who frequently partners with National Geographic, has in common with Hawks an absolute devotion to open access, which has made him unpopular among some of his more traditional peers. Berger and Hawks passionately believe that—especially given today’s technology and speeds of communication, as well as tendencies towards ever increasing specialization—that such free and open access is essential to fostering advances in all of the related fields. This passion also extends to the general audience, as evidenced in *Almost Human: The Astonishing Tale of Homo naledi and the Discovery that Changed Our Human Story*, by Lee Berger and John Hawks, a well-written, fast-paced narrative that puts a focus to the latest finds and the cutting-edge technology and techniques of paleoanthropology.

My training is as a historian rather than a paleontologist, but I have been fascinated by fossil finds ever since I was a boy, when I followed the adventures of the Leakey’s in National Geographic, and later bought books by Richard Leakey and Donald Johanson that sit on my shelves to this day. The discovery of the magnificent 3.2-million-year-old *Australopithecus afarensis* nicknamed “Lucy” was a big deal for this teenager! So, I have to confess to some delight when Berger reveals in the opening chapters that as a youth, on his somewhat circuitous route to paleoanthropology, he thrilled to these very same volumes. Back in those days, it was once remarked that our entire collection of hominin fossils could be displayed on a single large table. As Berger and Hawks remind us in *Almost Human*, those days are long past!

This is a very exciting time for studies in human evolution, both because of a plethora of new fossil discoveries, as well as stunning advances in technology that permit a far more detailed knowledge of the lifeways of our early hominin antecedents. For instance, we can now determine with some certainty, based upon carbon isotopes retrieved from fossil teeth, what the owners of those teeth once dined upon. And rather than the familiar “tree of evolution” found in early textbooks, we now know that the model is far “bushier,” with many descendants of a distant common ancestor that turned into dead ends. Modern humans, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, are the only surviving species of the genus *Homo*, but paleoanthropology has revealed that we have many extinct relatives, and we will likely stumble upon many more. In addition to Lucy, there were several other australopithecines, which are not in our direct line of descent, as well as a number of *Homo* varieties, including the recent surprising and controversial discovery of *Homo floresiensis*, nicknamed the “Hobbit,” a kind of dwarf hominin that inhabited the Indonesian island of Flores. Far less ancient Denisovans have been found in Asia that are, like Neanderthals, archaic humans. Clearly there is no straight line from our ancestors to us.

Perhaps nothing underscores that more than the two astonishing discoveries directed by Lee Berger. The first, the nearly two-million-year-old fossils of *Australopithecus sediba*, was actually found not by Berger but by his nine-year-old son in 2008. What is remarkable about *sediba* is that despite its antiquity, it sports surprisingly modern hands and quite humanlike ankles, yet also—significantly—retains the more ape-like attributes often characteristic to an australopithecine. Such a weird amalgam of features both ancient and more recent are termed “mosaics” by paleontologists, and there was probably no greater example of this than *sediba*.

At least, that is, until Berger had a look at the fossils of what was later to be called *Homo naledi*, first discovered in 2013 by recreational cavers exploring the Rising Star cave system, in the vicinity of Johannesburg. *Homo naledi*, a mere 300,000 years old, nevertheless demonstrated mosaic features far more archaic than would be expected from a hominin significantly younger than other specimens of *Homo* known for larger brains and more modern characteristics. At the same time, there were also distinct anatomical features that clearly identified it as part of the *Homo* lineage. What those cavers had stumbled upon, at the end of a narrow chute, was the long-isolated Dinaledi Chamber, littered with fossils that turned out to represent more than a dozen *naledi* individuals. This extraordinary discovery was the foundation of Berger's Rising Star Cave Expedition that is the central focus of *Almost Human*.

The Rising Star Cave Expedition, which included Hawks and a truly remarkable team, was presented with a unique set of excavation challenges. The 650 foot (200 meter) labyrinthine route to the Dinaledi Chamber included a particularly claustrophobic segment tagged as "Superman's Crawl," a short tunnel less than 10 inches (25 centimeters) wide, so-called because traversing it requires a bodily contortion with one arm stretched above your head and the other held tight against your body, like Superman flying. This was followed by a vertical climb of some 65 feet (20 meters) up an underground ridge called Dragon's Back, and then a perilous descent through a 39 foot (12 meter) vertical chute that narrows at one point to only some 7 inches (18 centimeters) wide! Berger brilliantly overcame this daunting hurdle by recruiting the most qualified paleoanthropologists, with climbing and caving experience, who were also physically of the smallest stature, and therefore best suited to probing the narrowest passages. The six who were selected, all women as it turned out, were nicknamed the "Underground Astronauts."

The story of these intrepid explorers makes for an exciting tale that is sometimes related breathlessly, yet never sinks to pulp. While it is eminently clear that this expedition is underway in the first part of the twenty-first century—replete with state-of-the-art technology and communication—there remains an ever-present palpable element of old-fashioned danger as flesh-and-blood scientists slowly and painstakingly navigate Superman's Crawl, and then later descend that very narrow chute, to retrieve those precious bones that have lain undisturbed for several hundred thousand years. The narrative is so well-written that the reader can almost hear Berger's heart thumping in his chest as he monitors the steady progress of his Underground Astronauts, ever alert that there are there indeed things that can go very wrong in this extreme environment that could mean injury or death for them.

I must admit just a hint of disappointment with *Almost Human* at first, for while it is hardly dumbed-down, I had hoped for a bit more emphasis on the fossil morphology, and perhaps a more technical examination of how *naledi* fit with the rest of the evolutionary bush. But that quickly passed. This is not that kind of book. Instead, *Almost Human* is an adventure story of discovery in a field that these days is all about breaking news, told by two men with the talent to articulate it. And Berger's commitment to open access means that the news of such discoveries is actually getting out, at least in his arena, rather than remaining squirreled away for years as had long been standard practice. *Homo naledi* and the progress of the Rising Star Expedition has been the stuff of social media for several years now; I learned of the publication of *Almost Human* on Twitter.

Race, we now know, is a meaningless construct: all living humans today are more closely related to each other genetically than the two chimpanzee populations of west and east Africa are to one another. But it was not always that way. The search for human origins is a complex one, and new discoveries and interpretations ever alter the contours of the twigs on that bush. It is a fascinating story, but much of it is often given to the secrecy and arcane jargon of science and academia, and thus lost to a wider audience. *Almost Human* is a welcome respite from that, and I highly recommend joining Berger and Hawks and their Underground Astronauts on this fascinating journey to resurrect a piece of our past and proudly show it off to the world.

My review of "Almost Human: The Astonishing Tale of *Homo naledi* and the Discovery that Changed Our Human Story," by Lee Berger & John Hawks, is live on the book blog at <https://regarp.com/2017/09/12/almost-...>

Hawley Harrigan says

Insightful, light, and fun read. I was surprised by how accessible it was. If you want a quick read about fossils and where we are at in understanding human ancestry, I highly recommend.

Colleen says

Highly recommend- Great stories on finds, but what makes this book exceptional is the discussion, illustration, and impact of "open science" on the field of paleoanthropology. The author deftly handles the discussion of technical subjects in a clear, straightforward manner. I learned a lot and it was a fun read.

Erin Michele says

Loved this account of the past 20 years of our fossil discovery and understanding of human evolution, culminating with Rising Star, an archeological dig that captured my attention as a PBS/Nova TV presentation when it debuted. I watched in awe, at the time, as a team of women scientists documented and uncovered the bones of Homo Naledi. This book gives greater detail to this exciting time, and the forefront it heralded -- in fossil finds, personal evolution, and the way that the Internet, social media, and a collaborative mindset changed how archeology is done.

Leon Kock says

Finished, fantastic read!

Takes the reader behind the scenes and brings anthropology to life for those of us who do not know the big words.

Easy to read and to follow, but very difficult to put down!
