

Sapiens

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind by Yuval Noah Harari

This book is easy to read and yet deep in its reach. The story is the biggest story ever told, far bigger than the bible and far less speculative than the brief history of time of recent fame. Dr Harari, a graduate of Jerusalem and Oxford, has developed a course that for clarity and insight beats all previous historical overviews of the human condition in the history of our species, or at least all I have come across.

Science may seem to boast the biggest stories, from the Big Bang to the evolution of life on Earth, but these tell only part of the tale that leads to us. They leave unexplained those aspects of our human predicament that play a decisive role in shaping our powers and our priorities, both of which gaps leave scientists hanging, unable to round off the key final chapters of their sagas to form a satisfying narrative of how we became who we are. We need to understand the roles of agriculture and cities, of money and writing, of religion, imagination, ignorance and greed, before we can feel the grip of the great narrative in which we play our bit parts. When the story races up to genetic engineering, global connectivity and posthuman cyborgs, we need that firm anchor in the familiar facts of life. Dr Harari throws out all the lifelines a cautious reader needs, without ever blinding us with science or bogging us down in the trivia of conventional histories, with their kings and generals and dubious heroes.

My take on this book is conditioned by the fact that the last book I wrote was a big history with much the same ambition as we see in *Sapiens*. My book, *Coral*, was framed by a color-coded schematics that owed something to Hegelian dialectics and was freighted with some ambitious scientific claims from biology and the neurosciences, so quite apart from the fact that it plowed relentlessly through a lot of traditional historical detail it surely fails the easy-read test. But I did go from the Big Bang to global brains and cyborgs, so the scope was very much the same. My ambitious theorizing aside, Dr Harari has done the basic job much better.

There are hundreds of interesting and pregnant questions thrown up by *Sapiens*. None of them can be discussed with any finality in a brief review, but any reader of *Sapiens* will find them popping up with delightful frequency. Dr Harari is not afraid to make big and simple claims, and many of them have a ring of plausible truth, so much so that any future lexicon of quotable quotes will include a few of the gems in *Sapiens*. I shall not spoil the fun by quoting them here, for part of the joy of reading *Sapiens* is finding them and smiling with unexpected delight. The chapter on capitalism features big chunks of good stuff, so much so that even economics, that dismal pseudo-science, comes alive in the telling. For instant gratification, this is better than Adam Smith or Karl Marx.

A history of everything as brief as this leaves a lot out. I would like to have seen much more on science and war, as movers and shakers of the settled lives of contented flocks of humans, but others may prefer other biases. In the end, the balance in this volume is as good as any reader has a right to expect. It will likely be a long time before another short introduction to big history as good as this comes along. And as Dr Harari suggests, *Homo sapiens* might be obsolete before long. So this might become the best human story ever told.

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