

Blank student



Blank Student AN 101, Winter 2009 Exam 4 04/14/09 Jean Auel attempts to paint a picture of what the world might have been like during the ice aged period some forty millennia ago. Using information gathered by the science of her time and filling in gaps with a bit of creative writing, she tells the story of a clan of Neanderthals who worship bear spirits. Unfortunately and probably unknowingly to her, most of her story would have had to be written differently in order to be more anthropologically accurate. To start the nitpicking on accuracy, the idea that Neanderthals by and large worshiped Bears, or had Rituals of animal sacrifice was almost certainly untrue. When Jean Auel wrote "Clan of the Cave Bear" it was widely accepted that Bear Cults and animal rituals were common among Neanderthal culture (HE,, P. 376). Over the thirty years since the books writing, these myths of Neanderthal culture were uncovered as nothing more than wishful thinking by early excavators. The neatness and convenience of the theories made for good writing in this book, but does not stand up to the scientific accuracy test of today's research. In the novel, Ayla has a deformed child which the clan was reluctant to allow living. After much drama, the child, Durc, is allowed to live and is cared for. Creb is an older man who held great status in the clan. He too was an injured and deformed individual, and like Durc is allowed to survive with the clan. This is an entirely plausible, if not completely accurate description of Neanderthal culture. It has been accepted as common practice amongst Neanderthal social units to care for injured and deformed members and allow them to live their life with the clan (HE,, pp. 379, 380). However probable the caring for injured members of the clan was, the idea that Durc could have been born at all is a definite falsehood. Homo neanderthalensis and Homo sapiens were of two distinct species. These

species could not have produced offspring of a fertile nature by the very definition of separate species. It has also been concluded through mitochondrial DNA studies performed on both Humans and Neanderthal fossils that we share no common mitochondrial genetics as far back as either species had existed (<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2008/08/080812-neandertal-dna.html>). A large part of the story in "Clan of the Cave Bear" is the struggle with Ayla against the rigid social and status hierarchy within the clan. There has been a decided lack of discovery of social markers, personal ornamentation or differentiation materials found at Neanderthal sites. From this it has been concluded that no social stratification occurred in Neanderthal culture (HE,, P. 382). The entire premise of the struggle throughout the story is therefore concluded to be false. The social groups that did exist would have been in small numbers due to lack of efficient food exploitation, and the idea presented in the book that the storing of food could occur is also false. Neanderthals lacked knowledge of fore-planning through technology or strategy to store food (HE,, P. 382). Jean Auel does not give enough credit to our Neanderthal cousins when portraying their communications abilities. Although it has not been definitively discovered, the hypoglossal canal and cognitive group areas of Neanderthal anatomy were advanced enough to suggest speech wielding capabilities (HE,, P. 382). They however would not have had a viable enhanced working memory to establish sentences of modern structure. Neanderthals were probably limited to declarative and exclamatory statements and their communication was probably devoid of complex cultural discussions (HE,, P. 383). On one hand we have Jean Auel making the Neanderthals appear all but mute, which is improbable and the other she

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has them using sign language to communicate vastly enhanced and complex communications, both great improbabilities with recent science. It has also been discovered that a fully grown Neanderthal reached maturation around the age of fifteen, as opposed to eighteen in Humans (HE,, P. 374). The idea that Ayla would have been taller than the other children in the clan is fairly farfetched as the Neanderthals would have matured at a much faster rate, even if Ayla would eventually grow beyond their size, at least height wise. Jean Auel did have some plausible ideas in her book. The setting for the story, the Crimean Peninsula would have been a well populated area for both Neanderthals and subsequently Cro-Magnon species. The timing of the story would have put the characters at a time during a cooling of the earth, thus the idea of climate change affecting the clan is plausible. The lack of interaction between Humans and Neanderthals is a very likely explanation for the clan's hesitance to bring Ayla into their society, although there is some doubt that Humans and Neanderthals occupied the same areas at the same time (HE,, P. 364). The biggest problem the book faces in accurate portrayal of this Neanderthal world is the insistence of a complex ruling structure in the clan and the ritualistic cave bear worshipping. The entire book's foundation is based on the Idea that the cave bear spirit determines the character's fate and destiny. The book's antagonist and protagonist are locked in a struggle of breaking traditions and overcoming a complex social stratosphere. Neither of these things was very clear or well researched during the time Jean Auel was writing her book, but neither of these things has been found to have any validity in the definition of Neanderthal Culture. My opinion of "Clan of the Cave Bear" is likely to be a very unpopular one. I believe it plays to the culture of the late 1970's and a struggle for woman's

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independence and social justice. This book over sensationalizes a story about an oppressed and out casted female who eventually rose above all the "traditionalists" and males to do everything they could do even better. Jean Auel took as much science as she could muster, and filled the blanks with a rather cliché social agenda, thus diminishing the value of the story. On the contrast, it was a well written book, easy to read and enjoyable to follow. The content may have been disturbing to me but armed with the correct knowledge of modern discovery I found it an easy read with glaring errors in accuracy. It would be very interesting to see what Jean Auel would change if she re-wrote her novel today.