

Books interview: Daniel Everett

The anthropologist on the wonders of language and how missionary stories inspired his work in the Amazonian jungle

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What sort of books inspired you as a child?

I was raised in the 1950s and 1960s in the small agricultural town of Holtville, California, bounded by fields, desert and the Mexican border. I read everything I could. From *Reader's Digest* condensed books to *Tom Sawyer* and *Old Yeller*, and then in my preteens, *Das Kapital*, war histories and novels. I enjoyed poetry and Zane Grey's stories of the Old West. My favourite reading by far, though, was astronomy, palaeontology and mythology, beginning from the time I was about nine.

Which books spurred you to become an anthropologist and to work in the Amazonian jungle?

The books that most inspired me were all missionary stories. My favourite ones, which still inspire even though I have long since abandoned faith in the

supernatural, were *Shadow of the Almighty: The Life and Testament of Jim Elliot*, by Elisabeth Elliot (his wife); *Through Gates of Splendor* (again by Elisabeth Elliot); and *Jungle Pilot: The Life and Witness of Nate Saint*, by Russell Hitt. These three books were about the missionaries who tried to contact the Auca/Waorani people of Ecuador but were all killed in a terrible misunderstanding (which spurred me to read even more anthropology). I found it inspiring that people could be willing to give up all the advantages of civilisation to live and die in obscurity for the benefit of others – my then view of what missionary life was all about. I began this reading when I was 10 years old, after telling my mother that I wanted to be a missionary.

Your new book explores ‘how languages began’. Which books led to your desire to disentangle the mysteries of language?

I had the transformational experience of meeting Kenneth L. Pike, one of the greatest thinkers about language of the 20th century. His massive book with an unfortunate title, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, was fascinating from cover to cover. Then I discovered something even more influential in my life: the writings of Noam Chomsky. His work seemed like the most intelligent, sensible theory of how language worked that I could imagine. I now disagree strongly with just about everything that Chomsky has written about language. But there is no question that his work deeply influenced me and improved my thinking.

Which accessible accounts of human evolution and particularly language would you recommend?

I recommend E. O. Wilson, Richard Dawkins and Steven Pinker (although since Pinker primarily promotes Chomsky’s views, I disagree with most of what he writes). All of their work directed at a general audience is riveting, well-written and insightful.

What is the last book you gave as a gift, and to whom?

For my wife, I just purchased the wonderful book by Alexandra Horowitz, *Inside of a Dog: What Dogs See, Smell, and Know*.

What books do you have on your desk waiting to be read?

For pleasure, I am just beginning *The Apprentice: My Life in the Kitchen*, by Jacques Pépin. Probably because I am so involved in low-calorie consumption, I enjoy books on food.

Daniel Everett is dean of arts and sciences at [Bentley University](#) in Massachusetts and the author of *How Languages Began: The Story of Humanity’s Greatest Invention* (Profile Books).