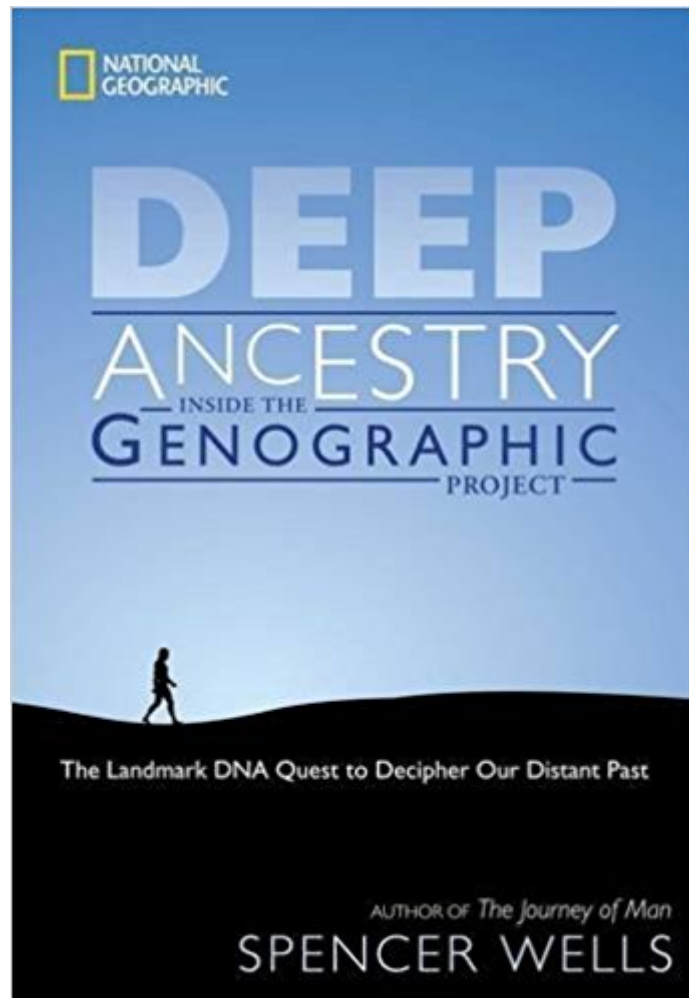




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Deep Ancestry: Inside The Genographic Project



Synopsis

Travel backward through time from today's scattered billions to the handful of early humans who lived in Africa 60,000 years ago and are ancestors to us all. In *Deep Ancestry*, scientist and National Geographic explorer Spencer Wells shows how tiny genetic changes add up over time into a fascinating story. Using scores of real-life examples, helpful analogies, and detailed diagrams and illustrations, he explains exactly how each and every individual's DNA contributes another piece to the jigsaw puzzle of human history. The book takes readers inside the Genographic Project; the landmark study now assembling the world's largest collection of DNA samples and employing the latest in testing technology and computer analysis to examine hundreds of thousand of genetic profiles from all over the globe; and invites us all to take part.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

What a marvellous little book! I was taken by surprise so many times during my reading, whenever I thought I knew what the author is about at the beginning of many of his stories. In a way, this is like a crime fiction book written by a clever writer that catches you off guard and it reveals the killer only at the last page. The writing style is deceptively simple; Spencer gets over the scientific details of genetics in a few paragraphs where he tells you in plain English everything you need to know to understand this book. The book then flows smoothly and he managed to make it so easy for you to follow the main ideas and try to decipher what is probably the greatest puzzle of all: the origins of human race. You will have a few surprises. You might have seen the National Geographic documentary "The Journey of Man". Its author is none other than same Spence Wells. He is only 37

years old, and very, very bright. I have to emphasize again the writing style: very simple, yet it explains clearly complex concepts. He talks science, yet he is humorous and light. He uses sometimes numbers and probabilities, but the book is in general built around stories of five people chosen to represent the main haplogroups (families or a clans of people that share the same genetic properties transmitted over many generations) in the history of mankind. Spencer Wells is currently a National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence and the director of Genographic Project. It is a great and fascinating role he is playing. The goal of this project is to collect about 100,000 genetic samples from people around the world that live in still pristine conditions: that is they live in the same area their families lived for a long time.

The human diaspora from Africa that populated the world has been the subject of several recent studies. At first, these books were bulwarks against the tide of "Multi-regionalism" - the idea that an early version of our ancestral species evolved into Homo sapiens at different times and places. Genetic research, including that of the author, has shown that we're all descended from a small African population. Placing our origins on one continent simplifies the task of analysis of tracking our movements. In this book, Wells explains how the examination works and what it reveals of our ancestry. The tool is "markers" on the genome. For females it was the DNA in mitochondria, the cell's "powerhouse". For males, it is changes on the Y chromosome, that molecular structure triggering a shift from the default embryo condition. The author demonstrates how these indicators are detected and how they allow us to track our ancestry back in time. The markers designate genetic "borders" between groups of people who share a common ancestor in the deep past. The groups are called "haplotypes" - for which Wells, at least in the case of Europe, uses the term "clan". There are seven of these clans - designated by letter labels such as "R", "J" or "N" - descended from male originators. The approach is reminiscent of Bryan Sykes "Seven Daughters of Eve" [2001], except Wells follows the male lineage where Sykes used mitochondrial DNA to source female origins. Both authors focus on the European records as being more complete and readily available. Wells also finds but five female lines as opposed to Sykes' seven. Wells discusses how genetic "clocks" can postulate a rate of mutation over a long span of time to roughly determine the age of the haplogroup.

Compared to Wells' earlier "Journey of Man" and Bryan Sykes' "Seven Daughters of Eve" and "Saxons, Vikings & Celts," (all three also reviewed by me on), this is considerably briefer, compressing the genetic information of both mDNA (female-transmitted) and Y-chromosome (male

markers) lineages into 250 pp. including a long appendix listing all of the major profiles. Contrasted to the colorfully organized information on the National Geographic Society's "Genographic Project" online site, these appendices largely duplicate the same material in somber typeface. But, having it in book form combined with the previous 175 pp. of text, this makes a concise primer for public and home libraries that, even in our web-dependent age (as you and I know as we read this post!), still need print backup and expansion of material that on the web, as on the NGS site, must be too diffused and remains a bit unwieldy for easy cross-referencing and browsing. The maps here tend to comment silently upon the material Wells discusses. Unfortunately, Wells more often than not fails to tie his sober, but not altogether dry, text tightly enough to the graphics. You look at the charts and can figure them out, sure, but if the author had taken greater effort in being more explicit, e.g. "see figure 6, where the so-and-so can be seen ranging across the this-and-that at such-and-such a rate," the integration of print and visuals would have enhanced the combined presentation of what can be challenging material for the layperson. Wells, identified in the author's endnote as a "child prodigy," is ideally placed to write such an introduction to our "encapsulated history," but this efficiently summarized book does feel (as another reviewer commented) as a work in progress.

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