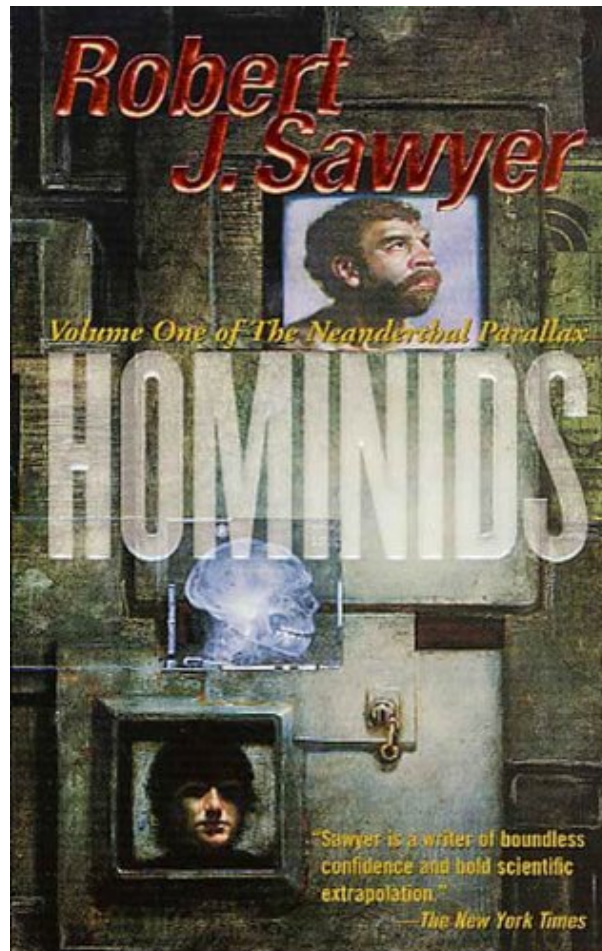
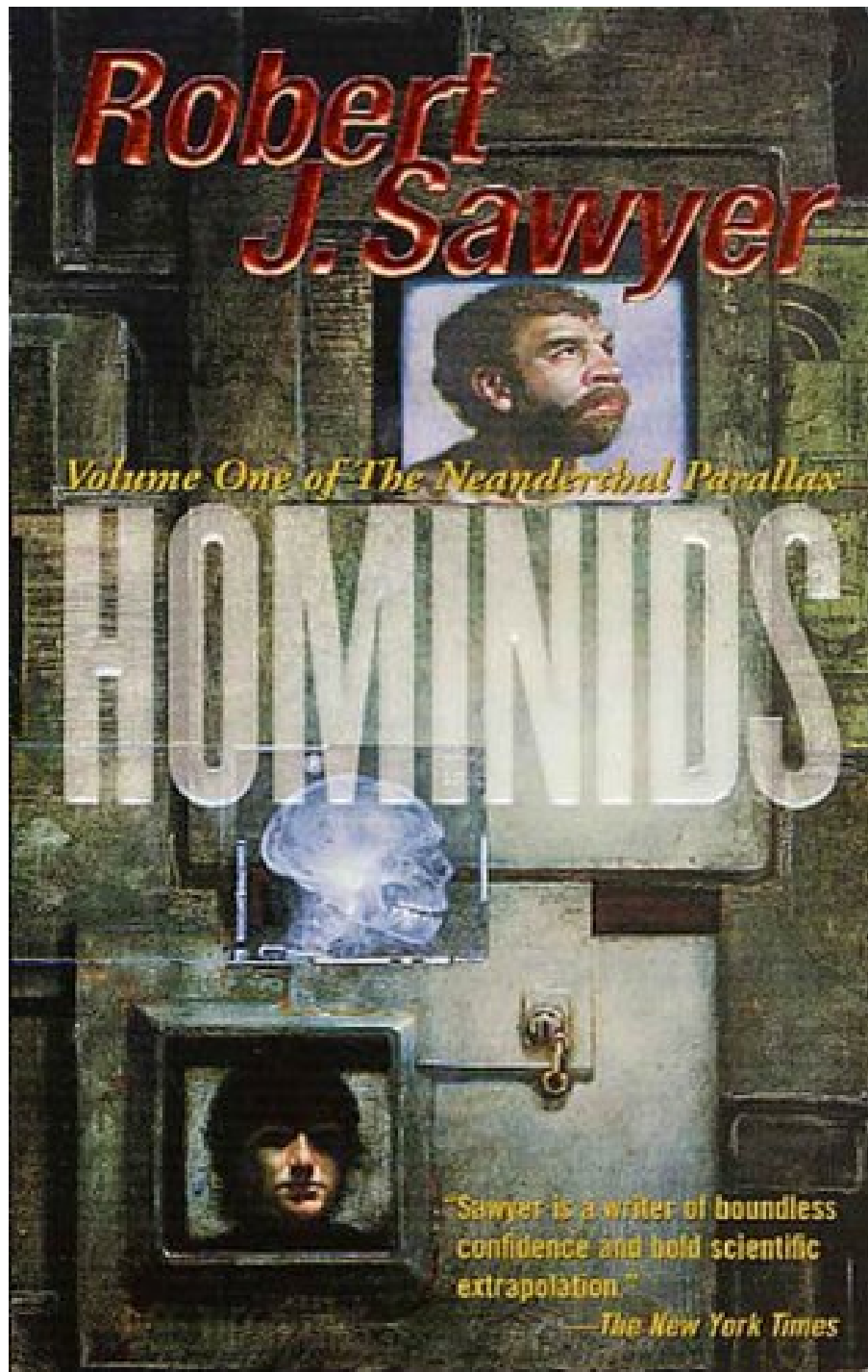


# HOMINIDS (NEANDERTHAL PARALLAX BOOK 1) BY ROBERT J. SAWYER



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From Publishers Weekly

In this polished anthropological SF yarn, the first of a trilogy from Nebula Award winner Sawyer (*The Terminal Experiment*), Neanderthals have developed a radically different civilization on a parallel Earth, as both sides discover when a Neanderthal physicist, Ponter Boddit, accidentally passes from his universe into a Canadian underground research facility. Fortunately, a team of human scientists, including expert paleoanthropologist Mary Vaughan, promptly identifies and warmly receives Ponter. Solving the language problem and much else is a mini-computer called a Companion implanted in the brain of every Neanderthal. A computerized guardian spirit, however, doesn't eliminate cross-cultural confusion permanent male-female sexuality, rape and overpopulation are all alien to Ponter nor can it help his housemate and fellow scientist back in his world, Adikor Huld, when the authorities charge Adikor with his murder. Ponter's daughter Jasmel believes in Adikor's innocence, but to prevent a horrendous miscarriage of justice (Adikor could be sterilized), she must try to reopen the portal and bring her father home. The author's usual high intelligence and occasionally daunting erudition are on prominent display, particularly in the depiction of Neanderthal society. Some plot points border on the simplistic, such as Mary's recovering from a rape thanks to Ponter's sensitivity, but these are minor flaws in a novel that appeals to both the intellect and the heart.

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Robert Sawyer's SF novels are perennial nominees for the Hugo Award, the Nebula Award, or both. Clearly, he must be doing something right since each one has been something new and different. What they do have in common is imaginative originality, great stories, and unique scientific extrapolation. His latest is no exception.

Hominids is a strong, stand-alone SF novel, but it's also the first book of The Neanderthal Parallax, a trilogy that will examine two unique species of people. They are alien to each other, yet bound together by the never-ending quest for knowledge and, beneath their differences, a common humanity. We are one of those species, the other is the Neanderthals of a parallel world where they, not Homo sapiens, became the dominant intelligence. In that world, Neanderthal civilization has reached heights of culture and science comparable to our own, but is very different in history, society, and philosophy.

During a risky experiment deep in a mine in Canada, Ponter Boddit, a Neanderthal physicist, accidentally pierces the barrier between worlds and is transferred to our universe, where in the same mine another experiment is taking place. Hurt, but alive, he is almost immediately recognized as a Neanderthal, but only much later as a scientist. He is captured and studied, alone and bewildered, a stranger in a strange land. But Ponter is also befriended-by a doctor and a physicist who share his questing intelligence and boundless enthusiasm for the world's strangeness, and especially by geneticist Mary Vaughan, a lonely woman with whom he develops a special rapport.

Meanwhile, Ponter's partner, Adikor Huld, finds himself with a messy lab, a missing body, suspicious people all around, and an explosive murder trial that he can't possibly win because he has no idea what actually happened. Talk about a scientific challenge!

Contact between humans and Neanderthals creates a relationship fraught with conflict, philosophical challenge, and threat to the existence of one species or the other-or both-but equally rich in boundless possibilities for cooperation and growth on many levels, from the practical to the esthetic to the scientific to the spiritual. In short, Robert J. Sawyer has done it again.

Hominids is the winner of the 2003 Hugo Award for Best Novel.

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182 of 212 people found the following review helpful.

Harlequin Neanderthal Parallax

By M. J. Kimball

If you're interested in what an anthropologist has to say about this book, read on.

This book asks the questions, What if there were a parallel universe in which Neanderthals, instead of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, had survived and developed civilization? What would their world be like? How would their society be different from our own? How might they interact with us?

I think these are interesting questions and worth the effort to try to answer them via the sci-fi genre. Through much of the book, Sawyer presents in an entertaining way current thinking on and debates about Neanderthal anatomy, physiology, behavior and social structure. Unfortunately, in his attempt to explain why Neanderthals eventually achieved civilization (and why, in our world, our species did the same), Sawyer reveals a fatal flaw in his thinking that demonstrates a distinct lack of careful research and, in my view, undermines his entire project. That is, unless his project is to write a romance novel.

Toward the end of his book, two of Sawyer's protagonists, Louise, a post-doc quantum physicist who happens to be a brunette bombshell "wearing tight-fitting denim cutoffs and a white T-shirt tied in a knot over her flat midriff" (p. 369 in the hardcover version), and Mary, a plain Jane geneticist who happens to be a devout Catholic, engage in a one-sided discussion about the origins of consciousness. Louise has had an epiphany that she shares with Mary after carefully testing her idea on "some guys...in the physics department" (370). It's all become crystal clear to her: the reason humans were able to develop civilization was because, forty-odd thousand years ago, they became conscious through the "quantum superposition of isolated electrons in the microtubules of brain cells" (380). Louise doesn't explain this mechanism, apparently assuming that Mary needs no further details because she's a smart cookie and because the sacred word "quantum" has been invoked.

Mary, perhaps disabled by her envy of her colleague's gorgeous body and disarmed by her romantic feelings toward their Neanderthal visitor, swallows Louise's argument hook, line and sinker. This, despite the fact that she is a specialist in Neanderthal genetics and has some sort of training in paleoanthropology. It also could be because Mary is Catholic and Sawyer would have us believe that Catholics accept that consciousness never existed on earth until humans discovered it during the Upper Paleolithic (circa 40, 000 years ago). If nothing else, it would appear that physicists believe this to be true.

This is where the entire story falls apart as far as I'm concerned. I can suspend my disbelief - after all, this is science fiction - enough to enjoy the notion that multiple parallel universes exist and that it is possible for them to intersect through the intercession of a quantum computer (never mind, read the book). And I can put up with Sawyer's host of two-dimensional characters. But you couldn't pay me to accept the idea that consciousness is something humans invented. Louise falls into the same trap that has caught less sexy but more intelligent philosophers and theologians since humans began pondering the origins of consciousness: anthropocentrism, that is, the crippling assumption that humans are the Cat's Meow of creation. For example, 500 years ago, Rene Descartes, in his "cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am) revelation, made the same mistake, which led to a widely held belief that humans were the only creatures that could think and feel. This, in turn, led to a perception of all other animals as simple machines that were incapable of feeling pain or making decisions. As a result, scientists conducted many "experiments" on animals that were little more than torture fests. I thought we'd come a long way since then, but Louise (aka Sawyer) has set me straight.

What does this have to do with anthropology? A lot, as it turns out. Louise suggests that "all other primitive forms of life...are just chemical machines" (376). We don't need to mire ourselves in a paleontological debate about whether, to quote Mary, a trilobite showed volition when it "decided to go left instead of right" (376). Sawyer pays out more than enough rope to hang his thesis when Mary, in a rare moment of critical thinking, challenges Louise's theory by alluding to evidence for sophisticated behavior by *Homo ergaster*, *Homo erectus* and other hominids that preceded the emergence of *Homo sapiens*. Amazingly, Louise successfully dismisses her point by saying, "Well, I realize this is your field...but I've been reading up on this on the Web. As far as I can tell, those earlier kinds of man didn't really have behavior any more sophisticated than a beaver building a dam" (377). As far as she can tell. Who needs a Ph.D. in anthropology when rigorous research is only a few mouse clicks away?



Louise should have tested her idea on "some guys" in the anthropology department before she talked to Mary. Mind you, they may have become just as distracted by her cutoffs as her physics guys seem to have been. ("Louise, I think you're really onto something here!") Or maybe she was using the wrong keywords in her Google search. She obviously didn't think to enter the word "Acheulean" (why would she?), which would have brought her to websites depicting the famous stone hand axes that Homo erectus and their ilk started producing over a million years ago. These Lower Paleolithic stone tools have been found in many places in the world and were made on a variety of rock types. If you're a skilled flintknapper (stone tool chipper), you can make one with relative ease, but that's because you've learned how to work with the quirks and subtleties found in each piece of stone. Every whack you take at a rock has to be calculated and the finished product has to remain in your mind as you work. Can this be accomplished without consciousness? Perhaps Sawyer should try it in his sleep. Moreover, I call on beaver biologists to rise up and refute Louise's implication that beavers lack consciousness, too. Fiddlesticks!

In my opinion, quality works of science fiction build on what we already know or think we know and, based on this knowledge and theory, speculate about what might be possible now or in the future. Sadly, Robert Sawyer's book, *Hominids*, while making Neanderthal studies palatable for a wider audience, stumbles as a fictionalization of science and work of science fiction. Will I read the next two books (*Humans and Hybrids*) in the series? You bet. I've just got to find out how things go with Mary and her Neanderthal boyfriend!

74 of 91 people found the following review helpful.

Very much overrated

By Steven Taylor

This is the second Sawyer novel I have read and after all the rave reviews, good press and a Hugo award to boot, I was excited to get my hands on a copy. But I have to say when I was reading the book, I became quite angry.

Briefly the plot: There is a parallel universe where neandethals survived and we became extinct. During a failed scientific experiment using quantum computers, one of the neanderthals is transported into our world.

This book is a light, quick read despite being over 400 pages. There are two parallel stories, one of the neanderthal in our world, the other of the neanderthal world where on man is being trialled for the murder of the missing neanderthal. Of the two plots, the story set in the neanderthal world is the far more compelling.

So let's get to the meat of it, why did this book make me angry?

Firstly, the author uses incredibly cheap plot devices that really stretch the realms of plausability. For example, four characters (including the neanderthal) are quarantined in a house. To push the romance element of the story, the author decided that Mary and the neanderthal needed to be alone. So how does he get them alone in the house? The other two character lock themselves in their own room to have sex, that's how. Think about it, there is a man from another dimension who could quite possibly be the most amazing experience in your life, but instead you lock yourself away from him to have sex? Yeah right.

The second thing that made me angry was the so called "social commentary". This term can hardly be used to describe what is a sneering, down the nose look at man's history. Sawyer seems content to oversimplify complex issues (he sums up the cold war in one sentence) and call them bad without ever exploring the issues or making any attempt to understand. No, he'd just prefer to point the finger and call it wrong.

Leading on from this, we have Sawyer's attempt to create utopia in the form of the neanderthal world. It is interesting that Sawyer has taken a point completely opposite to Orwell's great novel 1984. Amazingly,

Sawyer argues that being monitored 24/7 and having every move you make recorded is a good thing!. Yes, according to Sawyer we would all be better off having no privacy. Hmpf!

The next thing that made me angry - the ending. I won't dwell on it too much here lest I ruin it for anyone, but let me just say this - Sawyer took the easy way out and made a very simple ending. Also, given the understanding of what was discussed in the book, the conclusion Ponter makes at the end is simply stupefying.

To top it all off, this book won a Hugo award. So that makes me angry too. This is an embarrassment to the award.

So there you have it. Intelligent readers looking to read something meaningful and challenging, steer clear of this. For people who like light entertainment which pretends to be clever but isn't, you may enjoy this book.

69 of 85 people found the following review helpful.

Amazing

By Steven R. McEvoy

Hominids is an intriguing speculative fiction book. The main premise is based on Quantum theory. Parallel to our world are many other worlds. Some very close to ours and some not. In our story, Ponter Boddit, often referred to as Scholar Boddit, is one of our main characters. He is a Quantum Physicist from a parallel world. While working on a Quantum computer, he is translated into the same location in our Universe; unfortunately it is the center of the Sudbury Neutrino Observatory. Then the true adventure begins.

Ponter is given Canadian Citizenship, which is unusual because he is a Neanderthal. One could argue however, that a Neanderthal emerging from an INCO mine in Sudbury might not be that far out of the question. Many around the world believe it is a hoax - some believe it is true and a Ponter cult begins. Some want to control him and his knowledge.

In our sister earth, they have not ever had a global war, not developed nuclear weapons, or destroyed the environment the way we have. There is much we could learn from our cousins in this world.

Follow Ponter as he develops friendships, experiences religion and learns that we don't have to be homo sapiens to be human.

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