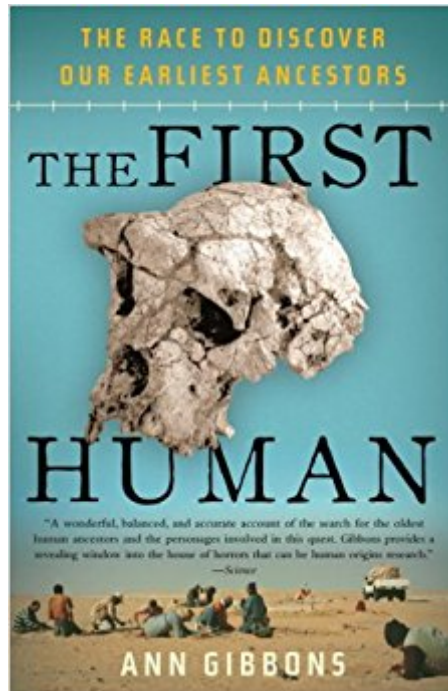




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# **The First Human: The Race To Discover Our Earliest Ancestors**



## Synopsis

In this dynamic account, award-winning science writer Ann Gibbons chronicles an extraordinary quest to answer the most primal of questions: When and where was the dawn of humankind? Following four intensely competitive international teams of scientists in a heated race to find the “missing link”—the fossil of the earliest human ancestor—Gibbons ventures to Africa, where she encounters a fascinating array of fossil hunters: Tim White, the irreverent Californian who discovered the partial skeleton of a primate that lived 4.4 million years ago in Ethiopia; French paleontologist Michel Brunet, who uncovers a skull in Chad that could date the beginnings of humankind to seven million years ago; and two other groups—one led by zoologist Meave Leakey, the other by British geologist Martin Pickford and his French paleontologist partner, Brigitte Senut—who enter the race with landmark discoveries of their own. Through scrupulous research and vivid first-person reporting, *The First Human* reveals the perils and the promises of fossil hunting on a grand competitive scale.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In *The First Human*, Gibbons provides the first popular account of these intriguing discoveries and of rivalry and collaboration among the discoverers. An engrossing, fast-paced read, her story unfolds in many remote and rugged locales, from the Middle Awash of Ethiopia to the Tugen Hills of Kenya and the Djurab Desert of Chad. Gibbons tells of hard-driven, dedicated teams contending with extreme heat, blowing sand, illness and other hazards of fieldwork in Africa, where success demands years, or decades, of persistence. After all, hominids may not have been common

creatures in their day, and only fortuitous circumstances of gentle, rapid burial in suitable sediments kept a carcass from being a carnivore's meal, allowing it perchance to fossilize. Gibbons seems as interested; if not more so; in personalities and politics as in the identities and significance of her protagonists' fossils. She is not the first to recognize that conflict as well as camaraderie accompanies the quest for human origins, and the scientists she portrays do possess the stuff of dramatic characters. There is the meticulous, mercurial paleontologist Tim White, co-leader of an international team with an unparalleled track record of spectacular discoveries, from the oldest modern human skull to one of the oldest human ancestors. And zoologist Meave Leakey, who has stepped out from the shadow of the most famous surname in human origins research to make singular contributions of her own. And Michel Brunet, a French expert on ancient hoofed mammals, inspired by Charles Darwin and Louis Leakey to pursue hominids. Brunet bucked the odds by not looking for fossils in the celebrated cradle of humankind, East Africa's Rift Valley. He went to Chad, which hinted at its human fossil potential as early as 1961. Another hominid would not come to light there until 1995, but Brunet's team found that australopithecine jawbone and then explored much older sites. In 2001 a Chadian student on Brunet's team unearthed the cranium nicknamed "Toumaï." Formally named *Sahelanthropus tchadensis*, it is currently the oldest known hominid skull and pushes the emergence of our evolutionary line as far back as seven million years ago; as Gibbons writes, "so ancient that Brunet said that Toumaï could 'touch with its finger' the last ancestor shared by humans and chimpanzees." Blake Edgar is a science editor and writer. He is co-author of *From Lucy to Language*, forthcoming in a revised edition from Simon & Schuster, and of *The Dawn of Human Culture* (John Wiley & Sons, 2002). --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

A writer for *Science* magazine, Gibbons explains what paleoanthropologists have been doing over the past 15 years: competing, feuding, and making dramatic discoveries. Anchoring her narrative to the anatomy that is the foundation of physical anthropology, Gibbons intentionally emphasizes the personalities involved. Leakeyesque fame is one unspoken prize in field research on human origins, and several scientists acknowledge here their youthful inspiration by Louis and Mary Leakey's careers. One was Don Johanson, celebrated for the "Lucy" fossil discovered in 1974 that reigned temporarily as the oldest human ancestor. From the state of scientific affairs at that time, Gibbons' narrative drives forward the hunt since 1990 for a hominid ancestral to Lucy. Amid the particulars of newly excavated fossils, which include a spectacular skull from Chad that provisionally is the oldest human progenitor at six or seven million years old, Gibbons pointedly dramatizes the field's

territorial attitudes toward fossils. Science in the flesh is ever popular, and Gibbons' successful debut marks her as a writer to watch. Gilbert TaylorCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

I found this to be a very interesting history of the paleoanthropological adventures of the men and women who toiled countless hours, days, months, and years digging for remains of human ancestors in the quest to find human origins. It is quite a tale. Ann Gibbons did a fantastic job of delineating the history of the search for our earliest ancestors. She also did not leave out all the conflicts that occurred between the various groups in their competitive quest to secure fossil sites. I think you will find some of the events described unexpected. If you have any interest in this subject at all, you will not find this book boring. I like what Gibbons did in the beginning of the book. First we have a map of Africa with the locations of the main fossil sites listed. Following this is a chart indicating the year, discoverer, scientific name, nickname, approximate age, location, and significance of the important fossil finds. This chart includes findings from 1891 to the present. After this, is a human family phylogenetic diagram showing the connections between the different species. Finally, there is a section called The Fossil Hunters, which lists the names of most of the people discussed in the book along with some information about them. I found this introductory information very valuable when reading the book, and I referred back to it frequently. Whenever someone new was introduced, I could just flip to the front of the book and see who they were and what their accomplishments were. Whenever a new species was discovered such as *O. tugenensis* or Millennium Man, I could simply refer to the front section of the book and learn about its place in history. Overall this is a well written book about the search for human origins. I highly recommend it.

Ann Gibbons does a wonderful job pulling back the veil on the backbreaking, contentious, and often life-threatening work of paleoanthropologists. Delving deep into the politics of both the land and the infighting of the scientists she captures the passion for our human history that those working in this field must possess, and their hopes of finding that impossible find: a new hominid species. Tim White's publication of his find, *Ardipithecus ramidus*, in 2009, really began back in 1994 with the discovery of a fossil so delicate and fragile it took over a decade to fully excavate and restore it. This book really emphasizes how difficult this field is and the hardships these scientists go through to flesh out the story of our ancestry. What this book is NOT is a direct recounting of human evolution, rather it is the story of the scientists and the refining of the scientific process itself, which is still a fascinating and wonderful read. It should give those who are not directly involved in science a better

appreciation for the sacrifices that scientists make in order to bring an ever greater understanding of ourselves and the universe in which we reside. And I have to say, as a scientist myself, I am blown away by just how dangerous and deadly the work of paleoanthropologists can be. These guys are hardcore!

Anne Gibbon's book covers the competitive, combative, political and sometimes nasty relationships as well as many other not so nice characteristics that come with being human even in the honorable pursuit of scientific discovery. She chronicles the discoveries from the original Leakey's to the Toumai skull and teeth found by Michael Brunet in 2002. There were two other finds in the previous ten years that can claim the title of earliest member of the Human Family. The lack of absolute title of "The First Human" is due to three problems : first is that a clear definition of the characteristics of belonging to the Human family is not clearly defined or agreed upon; secondly each find is a different part of the skeleton and of multiple individuals so any clear comparison is also impossible; and finally our innate human character to be open minded to our own beliefs and closed to all others. What's fascinating is that our (human) group dynamics is the same regardless of pursuit - This could be Barbarians of the Gate with the only difference that it takes place in the remote dry regions of Africa rather than the plush skyscrapers of Manhattan.

As a student of paleoanthropology, I was slightly wary of reading another popular account of fossil hunting in Africa. After finishing "The First Human," however, I can say with certainty that not only did Ann Gibbons do her homework, but that she was able to deftly weave together both the science and the politics in one of the most fascinating narratives I've read in some time. One really begins to understand both the hardship of paleoanthropological fieldwork and the thrill of discovery. But that of course is only the beginning. Her descriptions of the ensuing scientific cross-fire, often tainted by personal and political conflict, are clear and engaging. All in all, a well-written and up-to-date chronicle of the science of human origins.

The book talks more about the people that made the discoveries than the discoveries itself..

This book is an interesting addition to the many books written about the discovery of our earliest ancestors and those who roamed Africa with them. Worth reading to update your understanding of the latest theories of who and what fits where and when; plus learn about the apparently extremely fragile egos of the world's anthropologic archeologists who found them.

This is an amazing book that shows just how "dangerous" science can be. How personal it can get - and how dedicated it is. Both for the fame and fortune - but mainly just for discovery!

Ann Gibbons has given us a well-written presentation of the dubious doings of some of the big names in modern anthropology, shown in their efforts to out-do one another in the race to discover (and exploit) the fossils of man's oldest ancestors. Gibbons unhesitatingly shows the sometimes not-so-nice side of these scientists, with their claim-jumping, allegations of theft, and attempts to knock their rivals down a notch at any cost, in an all-too human game. A highly-recommended read.

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