



Cannibalism: A Perfectly Natural History

Bill Schutt

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Eating one's own kind is completely natural behavior in thousands of species, including humans. Throughout history we have engaged in cannibalism for reasons of famine, burial rites, and medicinal remedies; it's been used as a way to terrorize and even a way to show filial piety. With unexpected wit and a wealth of knowledge, American Museum of Natural History zoologist Bill Schutt takes us on a tour of the field, dissecting exciting new research and investigating questions such as why so many fish eat their offspring and some amphibians consume their mother's skin; why sexual cannibalism is an evolutionary advantage for certain spiders; why, until the end of the eighteenth century, British royalty ate human body parts; how cannibalism may be linked to the extinction of Neanderthals; why microbes on sacramental bread may have led to execution of Jews by Catholics in the Middle Ages.

Today, the subject of humans consuming one another has been relegated to the realm of horror movies, fiction, and the occasional psychopath, but be forewarned: As climate change progresses and humans see more famine, disease, and overcrowding, biological and cultural constraints may well disappear. These are the very factors that lead to outbreaks of cannibalism. As he examines these close encounters of the cannibal kind, Bill Schutt makes the ick-factor fascinating.

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