

7 Clan of the Cave Bear: A Review

Adam Cliff (mailto:ac593@york.ac.uk) , Katharine Newman (mailto:

kan501@york.ac.uk) Despite being a work of fiction, the novel of the Clan

of the Cave Bear by Jean M. Auel seems to have become something of an archaeological institution. But how many of us have actually read it, or been tempted to watch its lesser-known film adaptation? This article will review both the book and the film and perhaps refresh the memory of old faithful readers and viewers alike and rescue all those interested, but perhaps wary, parties from the throws of indecision...

The Clan of the Cave Bear – Book Review

Clan of the Cave Bear, by Jean M. Auel, is one of those books that I have heard a lot about, but never had the inclination to sit down and read. My friends – most of them females – insisted I should read it, that it was a beautiful story and that I didn't know what I was missing. I would have read it sooner had the fervour surrounding it not reminded me of their failed attempts to get me into the 'Twilight' series. I must admit it was with a certain amount of trepidation that I cracked open the pages of a borrowed copy and settled down to enter the world of the Earth's Children series. Now that I have finished, I don't quite know where to begin.

The book explores the relationship between Ayla, a five-year-old Cro Magnon orphan, and the Clan of the Cave Bear, a band of homeless Neanderthals. The two have been brought together by an earthquake that destroyed both Ayla's family and the clan's cave. There are hints of the difficulties Ayla may face when she is described as 'of the Others' and so should be left for dead. The clan's medicine woman, Iza, feels compassion for the feverish girl who is so close to death after being wounded by a cave lion, and nurses her back to health. The wound is to have implications that are far reaching for both the clan and Ayla. With the help of Iza and Creb, the crippled shaman, Ayla begins to integrate herself into clan life. One of the first things she must learn is how to communicate and this is something that Auel has obviously given a lot of thought to. It has long been argued that Neanderthals lacked the full vocal range of anatomically modern humans (Gamble 2003, 170-174), so Auel endows her Neanderthals with quite an intimate form of communication. Using a mixture of sign and body language the clan use their few spoken words imply different meanings or attract attention. The rest they read from gestures, facial expressions or body posture.

This leaves them in a bit of an evolutionary pickle. They find it difficult to describe something they saw to someone who did not see the same thing. They lack the ability to think ahead, or innovate – something that Ayla seems to do for fun. Only in Creb has this 'gift' of foresight developed even slightly. Ayla's arrival bearing the scar of a powerful totem (the wounds from the cave lion) threatens a rigid social and ritual framework that the Neanderthals have developed to deal with this shortcoming and forces them to make decisions they are incapable of making.

There are numerous messages about today's society woven into the novel and certain character traits and aspects of Neanderthal life are exaggerated in order to emphasise these. The division between male and female members of the clan is such that it often seems they could be a different species altogether. As Ayla grows, she attempts to conform to a society where male domination affects nearly every aspect of a woman's life, but finds it difficult to accept what has become instinct to the clan's women. This infuriates one male in particular, Broud, the future leader of the clan. The struggle for power between the two acts as a catalyst for many of the events in Ayla's life.

It is obviously a very well-researched book. Auel has left little to her imagination when it comes to flint knapping techniques, communication or the surroundings the protagonists find themselves in. The world she creates is so rich and vivid that the reader can't help but be drawn into it. There were many times when I found myself thinking 'just one more chapter, then I'll sleep...'. The result of this attention to detail is quite a slow-paced narrative that seems to mimic the way of life of Auel's Neanderthals. This is punctuated by swift moving events that come and go in a matter of two or three paragraphs. I enjoyed the book, though I maintain it is certainly geared towards a female target audience. There were times when I felt I was peeking through the curtains, spying on a conversation I shouldn't have been privy to. I would also warn readers that I found it so easy to become engrossed in what is ultimately a work of fiction that I began criticising it when it left the archaeological script and wandered into the realms of fantasy. A number of times I found myself scoffing at some imagined aspect of Neanderthal life such as their 'shared memories' with a wry chuckle and a shake of the head. I would then remember that it is, after all, a work of fiction and admonish myself for being so smug.

Clan of the Cave Bear – Film Review

When I first put this film into the DVD player my expectations were at an all-time low. Having read the book, albeit in the dim and distant past, I had visions of settling myself down for 94 minutes of Ayla, the blonde-haired and blue-eyed female protagonist, swanning around in the midst of hairy, club-wielding and dim-witted Neanderthals, as films and other media tend so often to portray them. Admittedly, they were rather hairy, but nonetheless, I was in for a surprise...

The film, originally made in 1986 and released on DVD in 2005, begins with a textual introduction to the chronological setting of the film, when modern humans are moving into Europe and the Neanderthals are encountering our species (referred to in this film as Cro Magnon) for the first time. The introduction, while brief, is descriptive enough and provides as suitable an introduction for this incredibly complex period as you're going to be able to fit into about a hundred words. The plot then goes on to follow the life of Ayla, a young modern human. As a child, Ayla loses her tribe due to an earthquake, and, following a run-in with a cave lion, is adopted by a passing tribe of Neanderthals, with two of whom, a male, Creb, and female, Iza, she becomes very close. Indeed, the Neanderthals themselves, though hairy, were portrayed in a surprisingly positive light. Although the book focuses largely on Neanderthal societal organisation and complexity, I was prepared for a film glorifying the beautiful modern human, Ayla, transgressing their primitive notions and outstripping them at every turn.

Thankfully, this was not the case. Certainly, Ayla is shown to be more agile, faster to learn and even better with certain forms of hunting weapon, but the overwhelming impression I took away from this film was of the Neanderthal way of life. It is, of course, based entirely on conjecture, but this film, and indeed the book upon which it is based, more than anything else I've seen or read academically, or in the public domain, made me think about Neanderthals as entities in their own right.

So often we're concerned with Neanderthals in relation to ourselves – how did our ancestors perceive them; did we kill them; did we out-compete them; are they our ancestors; did we interbreed with them; how similar are they to us today? This film posed questions that I, in all my academic readings, had never paused to ponder – how would we cope within Neanderthal society; how did they perceive the newcomers to their lands? Obviously, this film does not provide the answers, but it does perhaps serve to make us think and talk about so complex a subject of archaeological debate, even if only to outright disagree with it. Although some aspects of this film surprised me, for their portrayal of the complexity, and the subtleties of the similarities and otherness of the Neanderthals, it nonetheless fell prey to some of the most basic stereotypes. Despite recent studies proving that Neanderthals would likely not only have worn clothing but, in order to compensate for the cold temperatures, that clothing and their footwear would have needed to be carefully tailored and fitted to maximise heat retention (Srenson 2009), film producers and their ilk seem fixated on the notion that past hominins were all voyeurs at heart and insist on clothing them in ill-fitting scraps of animal hide. Neanderthal society is also portrayed as male-dominated, another typical stereotype, and though there are many scenes of hunting, and the importance accorded to it, there are no scenes of gathering behaviour, perceived as a more female occupation, though it was doubtlessly vital to the survival of past populations (e.g. Hill 2002).

The music of the film, while promoting a sense of otherness, does so mainly using guttural animalistic noises and drumbeats, emphasising the 'primitive' nature of the film's chief characters. The budget for this film also appears to have been small, based largely on the fact that the earthquake at the start is featured a series of about five polystyrene boulders falling unconvincingly down a hill, and that the costumes seem to consist of as little material as humanly possible.

Compared to the book, the film is, in my opinion, inferior. It doesn't absorb you in the same way as the book does, it has nothing like the levels of complexity and you can't form the same kinds of attachment and empathy for the characters in an hour and a half as you can in the days or weeks over which you might read the novel. But there is something to be said for the medium of visual representation. Unlike when reading a book, where the characters exist only in your mind's eye and it might be easy to forget that Creb or Iza is in fact a Neanderthal, in the film you are constantly reminded of their different appearance and this contrasts well with their strikingly familiar behaviour.

In sum, this film is far better than my pessimistic expectations predicted, but it is still far-removed from such archaeological classics as Indiana Jones. However, it does take on a difficult period of prehistory and portray the main characters on that prehistoric stage in an intriguing manner that challenges our preconceived notions. If you want an archaeologist's night-in, something to make you laugh and occasionally cringe, and something perhaps in the future

to allow you to have a little more sympathy for the Neanderthal way of life, then this film could be the one for you. Just don't start citing it in essays about Neanderthal social organisation or I will not be responsible for consequences. . .

Summary

Converting such a rich novel as *Clan of the Cave Bear* onto the silver screen would have been a mammoth undertaking. So many different factors have to be taken into account, and things are always lost in translation. There are scenes that would have perhaps been too expensive or technical to shoot, such as the mammoth hunt scene.

If you loved the novel, the film may well serve to bring back those parts you loved best, or maybe even force you back to it to check whether something really happened. Only the pivotal moments make it, and there are times where the producers have decided to exercise a little executive creativity. In market that is relatively uncrowded, the *Clan of the Cave Bear* stands up well to similar films in its genre. A personal favourite is the 'Quest for Fire', and I would highly recommend it to anyone with even a vague interest in prehistory or Neanderthals.

We hope your next archaeological movie night branches out from the *Mummy* and *Indiana Jones* and will leave you with a little piece of trivia. The young Broud, who we see strutting about in *Clan of the Cave Bear* was played by Joey Cramer, best known as David from *Flight of the Navigator*. . . If that doesn't get you down to the nearest video rental shop, I don't know what will.

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