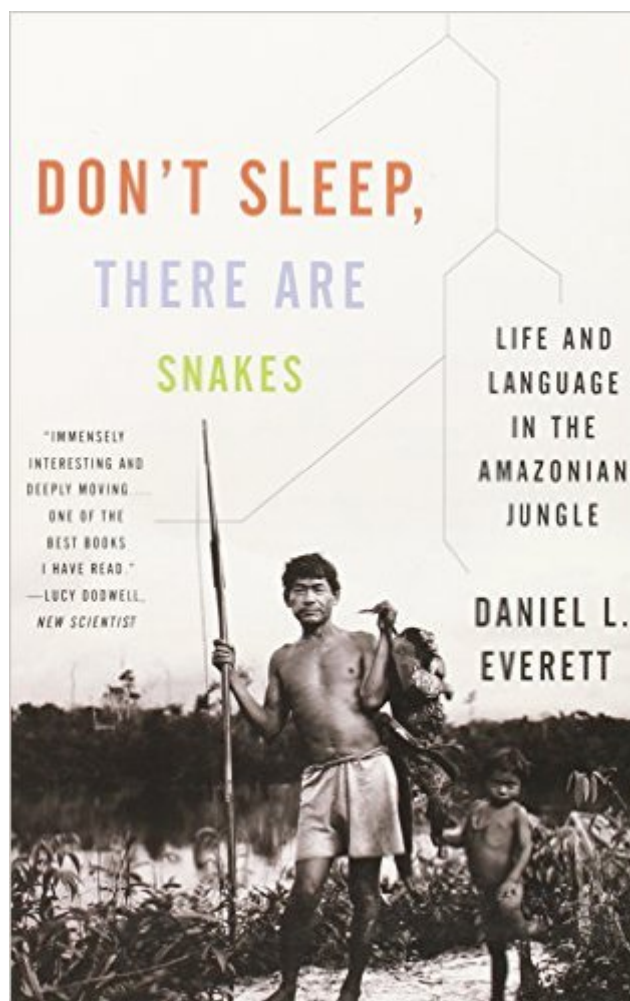


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Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes: Life And Language In The Iau Jungle (Vintage Departures)



Synopsis

A riveting account of the astonishing experiences and discoveries made by linguist Daniel Everett while he lived with the Pirahã, a small tribe of Indian Indians in central Brazil. Daniel Everett arrived among the Pirahã with his wife and three young children hoping to convert the tribe to Christianity. Everett quickly became obsessed with their language and its cultural and linguistic implications. The Pirahã have no counting system, no fixed terms for color, no concept of war, and no personal property. Everett was so impressed with their peaceful way of life that he eventually lost faith in the God he'd hoped to introduce to them, and instead devoted his life to the science of linguistics. Part passionate memoir, part scientific exploration, Everett's life-changing tale is a riveting look into the nature of language, thought, and life itself.

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Customer Reviews

If you like strange languages and exotic jungle adventures, you'll love this book. It has plenty of both! The author, Daniel L. Everett, is Chair of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at Illinois State University. He spent many of his younger years living with and studying the aboriginal Piraha people of Brazil. Their language "defies all existing linguistic theories" and "reflects a way of life that evades contemporary understanding." Unrelated to any other known language, the Piraha dialect is so confusing that most outsiders have given up on it. The Pirahas whistle and hum as they talk, and a given verb can potentially have as many as 65,000 forms. Everett, however, has been able to puzzle out the strange grammatical quirks of Piraha expressions. This book tells in fascinating detail

about Everett's struggles with the language, the land, and the culture of the Pirahas. This struggle ultimately cost the author his faith and broke up his family. The language theories which he developed as a result of his acquaintance with the Piraha tongue have also put him in conflict with the ideas of distinguished linguist Noam Chomsky. However, it is obvious that Everett feels the Piraha experience has been the defining mission of his life and is well worth what it has cost him personally. I recommend this book both for its page-turning excitement and its insights on the nature of human language.

Daniel L. Everett is a linguist who first visited the Pirahã tribe as a family man and missionary. His experiences over the next 30 years broke up his family, put him at odds with the linguistic establishment, turned him into an atheist --- and have provided us with a fascinating book, which is part Boy Scout adventure, part reality TV, part crisis of faith, part anthropological study, and part linguistic treatise. The Pirahã (pronounced Pee-da-HAN) are a little known tribe of Indian Indians who live on the banks of two rivers in territory that, before Everett encountered them, had never been assigned officially to the tribe but that they defended, occasionally to the death. Largely peaceful, they have intermarried and retained a very primitive lifestyle that they consider to be in every way superior to that of outsiders, including Americans, for thousands of years. They are far less colorful than many Indian groups, with no decorative arts or inventions. They purchase some pots and axes and make their own bows and arrows. If a plane comes, boys will make models of the planes but will throw them away days later. They live in the crudest of rudimentary stick and leaf shelters and survive by eating manioc, which simply grows nearby without being cultivated, and by hunting and fishing. They have no special rituals, and apart from the occasional visit from a spirit to frighten or inform them, they have no religion. When Everett took his family and went to live for shorter and longer periods of time with this strange tribe, he was expected to learn their language, make a translation of the Bible and then convert the natives. What he learned was that the language itself held the key to their culture. And discovering the essence of that culture, he realized that they would never be converted --- not as long as they remained as they are --- and he saw no reason to change them, just as they saw no reason to change themselves. There is an illustrative story (among many) of Everett being approached by men in the tribe who wanted him to buy them a big canoe from a neighboring tribe. With all the right instincts as a missionary and development agent, he did everything needed to transfer the skill of canoe construction to them. He invited the neighbors to come in and demonstrate, and insisted that the Pirahã men work alongside them. Not long afterwards, the same men came to him for money to buy another big boat. "I told them they

could make their own now. They said, "Pirahãns don't make canoes." Everett came to understand that the Pirahãns live entirely in the moment. They have no creation myths, no history past the living generations. Their language, which has only a few words, speaks primarily of immediacies, and is so dependent on tone that it can be hummed or whistled for clarification. All verbs have up to 65,000 combinations but only a handful of tenses. Everett is one of the few outsiders who ever learned to speak it, but he believes that after 30 years, the Pirahã people still do not regard him as a speaker any more than we consider a computer to be an English speaker. The tribe does not theorize or plan. They just exchange chit-chat. Yet the typical Pirahã is happier, Everett believes, "than any Christian or other religious person I have ever known." The Pirahãns did not accept Jesus because they had never met Him. Their simple view deeply affected Everett, who had been well trained as a missionary to confront and overcome almost any challenge --- superstition, malaria, filth, alligators. But this startling way of looking at life as entirely evidential shook his faith and eventually caused him to confess that he had lost it. Everett not only shocked his missionary peers and fractured his marriage; he sent ripples through the linguistic establishment with his claims about the construction of the Pirahã language, saying it did not build upon itself and was not recursive, which challenged the theories of the great Noam Chomsky. Chomsky's linguistic doctrine postulates a universal grammar, ever-increasing, ever able to branch out and express ever more complex concepts. Everett was saying that, perhaps unique in the world, here in the was a group of people whose language did not grow, whose experience did not expand with increased contact with the outside, and who liked it that way. As Chair of Languages, Literatures and Cultures at Illinois State University, Everett has proven his points and earned his laurels. He still visits with the Pirahã. --- Reviewed by Barbara Bamberger Scott

I first got wind of Daniel Everett's work on the Piraha from a fantastic article that appeared in the New Yorker a few years ago (see the link below if you're interested). I was immediately and deeply intrigued: the article presented a captivating glimpse into what by all accounts was groundbreaking work--work that had the potential to upend the current framework in which we think about language, culture, and the mind. After reading the article, I was hungry for more information and specifics about the Piraha people and their language, and a few years later, when I saw that Daniel Everett had published a book, I eagerly picked up a copy, excited to delve deeper into his work. The good news is that "Don't Sleep There Are Snakes" does indeed provide much more detail, both about the Piraha culture and the language. At the end of the book, the reader has a much better idea of what the Piraha are all about and what lessons they can teach us. And this is what I ultimately wanted to

get out of the book. The bad news is that Everett is not much of a writer, or even a particularly good storyteller. None of the narrative grace of the New Yorker article is present in this book, and before long, this gets irritating. Which is a shame, because Everett's story is such a fascinating one, one that could by all means make for a fantastic book. But Everett's style is clumsy and ham-handed; the individual chapters do not connect well with one another, and even within the chapters paragraphs can seem poorly pieced together. Perhaps not everyone will agree with my opinions here, but I think one should be aware going into this book that Everett is no prose master. Part of the problem with the book's style is a conflict of aims. On the one hand, the book is written for a general audience, and I think it does a very good job in this regard. It presents all its information (even the more difficult academic bits) in an easy-to-follow manner, with plenty of examples to illustrate its points. There's nothing wrong with this approach in itself, but it flounders in this case because of the book's less than stellar composition. On the other hand, the book is also trying to present years of academic research and, more importantly, to make a point, and a controversial one at that. And here its general-audience presentation works against it. Everett's discussions of conceptual issues in linguistics are just too watered down to carry any weight. His arguments against Chomsky (which I'm very sympathetic to) are mostly just knocking down straw men, and do not give a honest presentation and refutation of Chomsky's and others' views. Even Everett's arguments for his own ideas come off as superficial, lacking the rigor and precision they would need to really convince (me, at least). In addition, Everett's discussions of his actual research stop short of full detail, and still left me with further questions. All this being said, however, I still think this is a worthwhile book.

Sometimes the content of a subject matter can outshine even the worst of presentations. And Everett's work really is fascinating, in more ways than one. If you're interested in language, culture, and the connections between the two (as well as those with psychology, philosophy, and more), this book is definitely of interest. Just don't go in expecting a flawless work. (The New Yorker article about Everett and his work can be accessed here: [...])

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