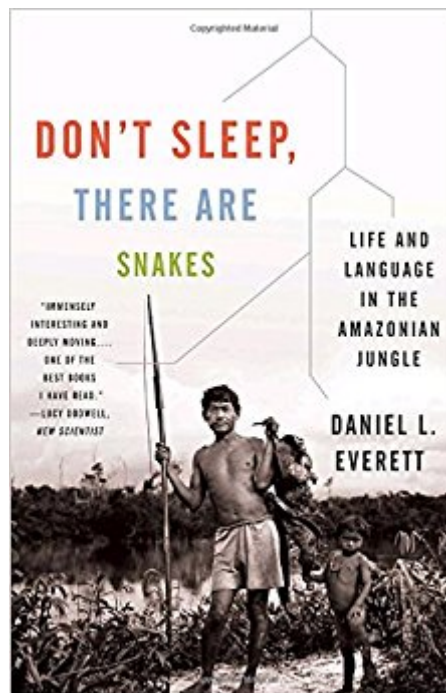




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Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes: Life And Language In The Iau Jungle (Vintage Departures)



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 indigenous 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

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Reviewed by Christine Kenneally
The ways language and thought intertwine have long intrigued scientists. Does language shape the way we see the world? Does the world influence the structure of language? Do we think in words? Such lofty questions pondered in many an ivory tower would go unanswered without the mostly anonymous work of field linguists. These scholars venture into isolated communities and wrestle with culture shock, broken tape recorders and dysentery—all to learn an unfamiliar language from the ground up. Their work is painstaking, and no matter how smart or how educated they are, their projects must begin with the most elementary communicative tactics—they point at a rock or a tree or a bird, and whether they are in Australia's Western Desert,

the remote islands of Indonesia or the jungles of Brazil, their interlocutor will respond, rock or tree or bird in the native tongue. Dan Everett's life as a field linguist began when he entered a Pirahã village in the rain jungle in December 1977. After being greeted by a happy, chattering crowd, he walked over to a man cooking on a small fire. First, he tapped his own chest and said, Daniel, then he pointed at the animal being cooked on the fire. Kãjixihã-, said the man. Everett pointed at a stick. Xiã- said the man. Everett dropped the stick and said, I drop the xii. Xiã- xi bigã- kã- obã-i, his new friend replied, meaning stick it ground falls. Thus began 30 years of dedication to the Pirahã and their native tongue, a mystifying system of sound and rules unrelated to any other language in the world. In this fascinating and candid account of life with the Pirahã, Everett describes how he learned to speak fluent Pirahã (pausing occasionally to club the snakes that harassed him in his rain office). He also explains his discoveries about the language's findings that have kicked off more than one academic brouhaha. Everett learned that Pirahã does not use what are supposed to be universal aspects of grammar, an observation that runs counter to linguistic dogma about how culture, the brain and language connect. For Everett, Pirahã is evidence that culture plays a crucial and previously unacknowledged role in the creation of language. Everett's life with the Pirahã cost him dearly. He almost lost two family members to malaria, and his first marriage broke down after years of highly productive shared field work. But life in the rain taught him a great deal about human nature, too, perhaps more about his own than that of the Pirahã. Everett began his linguistic work as a Christian missionary, but the Pirahã were marvelously impervious to his promise of a life with Jesus. They pointed out that Everett simply had no proof for the supernatural world he described, and in the end he found himself agreeing with them. He left the church, choosing a world that more honestly integrated his goals as a scholar with the world view of his Pirahã friends: "one where evidence matters. (Nov. 11) Christine Kenneally is the author of *The First Word: The Search for the Origins of Language*, a finalist for the L.A. Times Book Prize.

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"Absorbing. . . . Shares its author's best traits: perseverance, insight, humor and humility. Both the Pirahã and their interpreter make splendid company."--*The Plain Dealer* "Immensely interesting and deeply moving. . . . One of the best books I have read."â "Lucy Dodwell, *New Scientist* "A story of language and faith along the sweeping banks of the Maici River. . . . Verdict: Read."â "Time "Destined to become a classic of popular ethnography."â "The Independent, London "A genuine and engrossing book that is both sharp and intuitive; it closes around you and reaches

inside you, controlling your every thought and movement as you read it. . . . Impossible to forget."â "Sacramento Book Review" "Three stars. . . . [A] spiritual adventure story."â "People" "A fascinating look into the lives of the Piraha, an Indian community of hunter-gatherers."â "The Minneapolis Star Tribune" "Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes makes the rain forest sound like a magic mushroom."â "Harper's Magazine" "A riveting account of a Christian missionary 'converted' to the viewpoint of the Indian Indians he had intended to evangelize."â "The Huntsville Times" "Vivid. . . The book is fascinating. . . . May serve to bring the furor of linguistics and language research to readers who otherwise never catch sight of it."â "Science" "In this fascinating and candid account of life with the Pirahã, Everett describes how he learned to speak fluent Pirahã (pausing occasionally to club the snakes that harassed him in his Indian "office"). He also explains his discoveries about the language-findings that have kicked off more than one academic brouhaha."--Publishers Weekly, Signature Review "Rich account of fieldwork among a tribe of hunter-gatherers in Brazil . . . introduce[s] non-specialists to the fascinating ongoing debate about the origin of languages. . . . Everett's experiences and findings fairly explode from these pages and will reverberate in the minds of readers."--Kirkus, starred review "Dan Everett has written an excellent book. First, it is a very powerful autobiographical account of his stay with the Pirahã in the jungles of the basin. Second, it is a brilliant piece of ethnographical description of life among the Pirahã. And third, and perhaps most important in the long run, his data and his conclusions about the language of the Pirahã run dead counter to the prevailing orthodoxy in linguistics. If he is right, he will permanently change our conception of human language."â "John Searle, Slusser Professor of Philosophy, University of California, Berkeley" "Dan Everett is the most interesting man I have ever met. This story about his life among the Pirahãs is a fascinating read.â His observations and claims about the culture and language of the Pirahãs are astounding. Whether or not all of his hypotheses turn out to be correct,â Everett has forced many researchers to reevaluate basic assumptions about the relationship among culture, language and cognition. I strongly recommend the book."â "Edward Gibson, Professor of Cognitive Sciences,â Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Frankly, I don't understand some of the negative commentary here. I had to force myself to put the book down from time to time. The more I study, the more convinced I am that we humans haven't only accumulated information over the millennia, we've quite literally taught ourselves how to think. Not just what to think, but how to think. Everett's book underscores that conviction for me. Here we have a group of people who intentionally don't want contact with the rest of the world and whose

very thinking is so strange to us as to make us wonder whether they might in fact be imports from some other planet. (I, of course, don't mean the "other planets" seriously.) The Piraha don't think like most of the rest of the world thinks, often not even at very low levels. What can you make of a culture that has no numbers at all and apparently can't learn them? How about a culture with no sense of history and no projections for the future? They have no words for colors or for the simple concepts of "left" and "right." While I certainly wouldn't want to live among them, they apparently are so satisfied with their lives that centuries of attempts to evangelize them have fazed them not in the slightest. The missionary's expectation that something about the Gospel will inevitably resonate with any human heart is thus proven to be unfounded. This fact so discombobulated Everett that he eventually abandoned his own faith. No, this isn't a novel. In fact, it's not even a simple story. It shouldn't be read that way. And, yes, it can get a little technical toward the end. (Seriously, somebody here had the nerve to say that Everett, who chairs the linguistics department at Illinois State University and who holds a PhD in the subject doesn't know what he's talking about?) But if you're as fascinated as I am by, well, humanness, I think you'll have a hard time putting the book down, too.

Extremely interesting as anthropology, and not enough of that. Some of the linguistics discussion were difficult to follow but interesting. The chapter on the relationship between language and culture was very interesting: if you become truly bilingual, then you are also bicultural and switch cultures when you switch languages. I've seen that happen in other polyglots, and I've sometimes experienced it myself. I also wanted to know more about why Everett rejected his religious beliefs. It must have been difficult. I rejected all of mine when I was in my mid-teens and realized that it didn't matter what I believed in: the world still turned and nothing changed except the way I perceived it. I want to read more of Everett's work.

This is an informative book about the Piraha, one of the strangest cultures on the planet. I enjoyed the auto-biographical format of the book. The story keeps you interested while divulging anecdotes about how the Piraha live. Instead of Everett converting them to Christianity, they converted him to atheism. I love that aspect of the story. A must read for language nerds.

I could not put this story down and I read it in one long sitting. It was the first of his books I have read (I found out about him from an article in Harpers magazine by Tom Wolfe) This true story should be a Hollywood movie..I kept visualizing a young Tom Hanks. I'm now a committed fan of

Everetts work. I've learned a lot and shifted my view on quite a few aspects of culture, languages, cognition, etc. And that's an amazing anagram btw, my review title.

It amazes me that the author did not abandon the missionary aspect of the project much earlier. I'm not speaking of his abandonment of his own faith, though he did that later. But it didn't take long to realize that the Piraha have no interest in the past or hearsay about it, and that they make no plans for the future. Considering that the Christian religion is based on events of 2000 years ago, and is about promising reward or punishment in the future, the futility of attempting to "convert" them should have been obvious.

A really interesting book - with a knowledge of linguistics this is extra interesting but it's also a really good travel book. I was fascinated by how different the Piraha culture is to my own and Everett explains it so well. It really opened my eyes to not just seeing how different their culture was, but actually understanding some of those differences - I don't believe in spirits, for example, but loved the explanation and rationale as to why they do and how and why spirits are so important to their life.

Although I bought the book due to the perception that its focus was on the author's journey from Missionary to Atheist, I found that I enjoyed its actual topic- the detailed linguistic study of the Piraha people, their unique system of language, their independent and yet deeply connected culture, and their placement of value on facts that can be witness verified. When I read the chapter that gave attention to the religious transformation, it was clear that this aspect of the book was merely a byproduct, albeit a profound one, of a much more fascinating and engaging story.

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