



# Cannibalism: A Perfectly Natural History

*Bill Schutt*

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## **Cannibalism: A Perfectly Natural History** Bill Schutt

For centuries scientists have written off cannibalism as a bizarre phenomenon with little biological significance. Its presence in nature was dismissed as a desperate response to starvation or other life-threatening circumstances, and few spent time studying it. A taboo subject in our culture, the behavior was portrayed mostly through horror movies or tabloids sensationalizing the crimes of real-life flesh-eaters. But the true nature of cannibalism--the role it plays in evolution as well as human history--is even more intriguing (and more normal) than the misconceptions we've come to accept as fact.

In *Cannibalism: A Perfectly Natural History*, zoologist Bill Schutt sets the record straight, debunking common myths and investigating our new understanding of cannibalism's role in biology, anthropology, and history in the most fascinating account yet written on this complex topic. Schutt takes readers from Arizona's Chiricahua Mountains, where he wades through ponds full of tadpoles devouring their siblings, to the Sierra Nevadas, where he joins researchers who are shedding new light on what happened to the Donner Party--the most infamous episode of cannibalism in American history. He even meets with an expert on the preparation and consumption of human placenta (and, yes, it goes well with Chianti).

Bringing together the latest cutting-edge science, Schutt answers questions such as why some amphibians consume their mother's skin; why certain insects bite the heads off their partners after sex; why, up until the end of the twentieth century, Europeans regularly ate human body parts as medical curatives; and how cannibalism might be linked to the extinction of the Neanderthals. He takes us into the future as well, investigating whether, as climate change causes famine, disease, and overcrowding, we may see more outbreaks of cannibalism in many more species--including our own.

*Cannibalism* places a perfectly natural occurrence into a vital new context and invites us to explore why it both entralls and repels us.

## **Cannibalism: A Perfectly Natural History Details**

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## **From Reader Review Cannibalism: A Perfectly Natural History for online ebook**

### **Katie Ford says**

This has been an enormously entertaining read, with surprising laugh out loud moments from an author who is obviously passionate about the subject matter.

This isn't an account of murdering cannibals, in fact they barely warrant a mention due to the authors wish not to offend still living relatives of the victims or perpetrators. Instead the first half of the book covers instances of cannibalism the animal kingdom which is where some of the best passages appear - I draw your attention to sexy snails....

'Although snail sex can last for up to six hours in some herbivorous species this is definitely not the case in certain carnivorous gastropods, where foreplay can turn into cannibalism in the blink of a turreted eye. In these species, since even copulating individuals will bite their mates, each potential partner is also a potential predator. As a result, they often employ the wham-bam-scream approach during sexual encounters, which sometimes linger on for as long as six seconds!'

The second two thirds of the book focus on human cannibalism, specifically in terms of early colonisation rumours spread by Columbus in the Caribbean, ritual cannibalism, cannibalism in the Bible, survival cannibalism, medicinal cannibalism (the placental eating chapter is not recommended before dinner), origins of BSE and even a look ahead to a possible apocalyptic future where overpopulation and low food production is solved with dietary supplements from the funeral business.

All in all, a fascinating, entertaining and thought-provoking read.

P.S. Did you know that George H. W. Bush was the only survivor the Ogasawara Incident which saw his compatriots livers eaten by the starving Japanese officers that captured them?!

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**Nenia ? Queen of Literary Trash, Protector of Out-of-Print Gems, Khaleesi of Bodice Rippers, Mother of Smut, the Unrepentant, Breaker of Convention ? Campbell says**

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I blame Bill Nye for fostering in me a fascination with all things science (something I think he'd gladly take the credit for). Romance novels might be my one true love, but pop science nonfiction is the other woman, my secret mistress, the one I keep coming back to again and again on the sly.

I was trying to talk about why this book is so good, but my friends and family were having none of it. So instead, I'm going to talk to *you*, my delightful captive audience, and let me just warn you right now that if the thought of reading about people eating other people squicks you out in a major way, you might want to consider hitting the "pause" button and exiting stage left.

Don't say I didn't warn you!

P.S. In case it weren't obvious, seeing as how this book isn't published yet, I received a copy of this to review honestly from the publisher + Netgalley.

CANNIBALISM: A PERFECTLY NATURAL HISTORY is written in the style of Mary Roach. What I mean is that it's a mixed bag of anecdotes, ranging from the scientific to the pop-cultural, with a lot of (interesting) tangents. The author has a wry, tongue-in-cheek sense of humor that keeps rearing its head, but sometimes he'll get too caught up in the subject to be funny, and this variance in tone is a bit jarring.

The prologue opens up with some examples of cannibalism that are readily accessible to the public: Hannibal Lecter, and the inspiration behind him: Ed Gein. After a compelling introduction, Schutt launches into cannibalism in the natural world. Birds eating the eggs of other birds. Spiders and praying mantises eating their mates. Tadpoles eating other tadpoles. Sharks eating their fellow baby sharks *in utero*. Cannibalism is rarer in mammals, but there are examples of it, especially when said animals are overcrowded and over-stressed (think hamsters).

Next, he talks about cannibalism in ancient history, like in cave people and dinosaurs. It's more difficult to prove this, because there are so many variables that you can't control for, and I think these chapters were fascinating because they really show how much detective legwork archaeologists have to pull in order to give us science.

After this, there are a couple chapters about cannibalism in culture. Pop-culture and mythological cannibalism (*Hansel and Gretel*, TITUS ANDRONICUS, the Chronos myth, etc.), endo and exocannibalism (for example, eating your family to honor their bodies vs. eating your enemies to gain their strength), medicinal cannibalism (eating body parts or drinking blood for medicinal purposes), placenta eating (Buzzfeed did it), and cannibalism in history.

Two historical accounts of cannibalism really stood out to me and that was 1) Queen Isabella issued an edict saying that only New World peoples who were uncivilized and/or cannibals could be enslaved, so Columbus

and his men intentionally and wrongfully labeled many island tribes as "cannibals" so they could be enslaved and sold, and 2) George H.W. Bush was the only man in his group to survive being eaten by an isolated, starving group of Japanese men during WWII, in what came to be known as the Chichijima Incident.

The last couple chapters were about prion diseases, which I actually knew a lot about because I read this great medical mystery on the subject a few years ago. It's called **THE FAMILY THAT COULDN'T SLEEP** and it's about Creutzfeldt-Jakob's disease, scrapie, kuru, and spongiform encephalitis, and how they are all linked (spoiler alert: cannibalism). Schutt interviews some of the scientists who pioneered this research and some who are continuing to develop it, including one woman who believes that these diseases might be caused by a sneaky virus, and that the malignant proteins are just symptoms to an altogether more sinister cause.

If you are interested in science books and have a strong stomach, I heartily recommend that you read **CANNIBALISM: A PERFECTLY NATURAL HISTORY**. It's a fascinating and balanced look at a taboo subject, and I learned a lot about so many things I am now kind of wishing I hadn't.

Read it. I dare you.

3.5 stars.

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### **Ellen Gail says**

Life lesson: most of your coworkers won't want to discuss the cannibalism habits of tadpoles or the progression of prion diseases. They will look at you strangely.

Well well well. This was a fun little bit of science! Author Bill Schutt did a great job of combining scientific evidence, speculation, history, and humor. He also does a good job of touching on a broad range of cannibalism topics, such as prion diseases, placenta eating, natural (and unnatural) cannibalism in nature, filial piety, medicinal cannibalism, and historical records of cannibalism (as well as the cultural & racial bias involved.)

The writing is balanced and fun, while avoiding being sensational, choosing to steer away from criminal cannibal cases in favor of the more interesting, less discussed aspects of people eating. It does a great job of being gross, funny, and knowledgeable!

*Surprisingly, the clerk at a local liquor store had no idea what wine would go well with placenta. I went with an Italian red.*

So what will you learn from *Cannibalism: A Perfectly Natural History*?

- \*Placenta tastes like chicken gizzards
- \*Banana slugs are fucking disgusting. (view spoiler)
- \*Christopher Columbus was a top shelf dick burger - but you probably already knew that one.
- \*Most people will not be pleased when you start a sentence with "Random cannibal fact!"
- \*Spiders don't have penises
- \*If you had epilepsy way back when in the 1800s, you might have been told to drink a cup of blood or eat some powdered skull.
- \*Soylent Green is people!

Bill Schutt's *Cannibalism* makes for a fascinating read. Take a little bit of Mary Roach (not literally, you sick freaks,) a little bit of Greek myths and *The Walking Dead*, some Bill Nye (again, please not literally,) and top it off with a few man eating spiders - mix it all together and you've got yourself a hell of a book!

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### **Book Riot Community says**

I read some excellent books in February, but nothing made me as gleefully happy as this book did. Lest you think I am an aspiring cannibal, it's important to know that this is not a gruesome, sensational retelling of cannibalism among modern serial killers; Schutt respectfully stays away from that in favor of exploring the history of cannibalism from a biological and anthropological viewpoint. So no Jeffrey Dahmer, and plenty of spiders sacrificing themselves up to their young and slugs getting so tangled up in reproduction they have to chew their genitals off to escape! It's a fun, entertaining read, and Bill Schutt's insatiable curiosity for his subject is infectious (although I don't think I'll be eating placenta like he did). If you're a fan of Mary Roach, you'll definitely want to check this out.

— Gina Nicoll

from The Best Books We Read In February 2017: <http://bookriot.com/2017/02/28/riot-r...>

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### **Tudor Vlad says**

This was fun. I know, a book about cannibalism, how fun could that be? There are times when the book is dry and there were moments when I trudged through pages and pages of information. Still, for the most time the author manages to infuse this, at times, creepy subject with enough humor to make it easier to go through records of people eating their dead relatives, mothers eating their placenta and lots of other things that made me lose my appetite. Warning: do not read this before or after a meal. Just a friendly warning.

I'm probably making this seem worse than it was. Just a very very tiny portion of this book goes into the details of human cannibalism, most part of the books looks at cannibalism from a historical, social,

psychological and scientific standpoint. It's not just about human cannibalism, the first part of this book focuses on the presence of cannibalism in the animal kingdom while also presenting an interesting fact: that the most famous villains in fiction are cannibals (hmm). In the last chapters it also goes into the territory of progressive neurodegenerative conditions that are caused by cannibalism, like the mad cow disease and the infamous Kuru. I can thank Reddit for first informing me of how scary prions are, and this book for further cementing my fear of prion diseases.

Kudos to the author for presenting a thorough study of cannibalism without sensationalizing the subject. There are lots of cases of cannibals, alive or dead, that he chose not to talk about out of respect for their families and I'm glad he did that. There's a lot of that online and free for people that enjoy those sorts of things.

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## **Krista says**

Away for the weekend for my husband's work, we went out for a group dinner last night not long after I finished reading *Cannibalism: A Perfectly Natural History*, and as one does, I steered the conversation around to the topic of cannibalism – even as we nibbled our artisanal pizzas – and I held the group in thrall with a couple of the anecdotes I had gleaned from this book. We returned to the hotel and someone suggested we play the game Table Talk. The first question was, “If you were cremated, what would you want done with your ashes?” and I was the first to reply with, “I'd want to be snorted by Keith Richards”, getting a huge laugh. Thanks Bill Schutt: this may not have been the most valuable pop science book I've ever read, but I learned just enough to add to my social capital.

Bill Schutt is a zoologist (Biology Professor at LIU Post and researcher at the Museum of Natural History), so when he decided to investigate the history and prevalence of human cannibalism, he started by looking at the animal world; arguing that what's natural in the wild must be natural for us, too. He approached the topic thinking that cannibalism is rare in nature (it's not), and was surprised to find that those famous animal cannibals (from Black Widow Spiders and Praying Mantises to the Global Warming-affected Polar Bears who are seen eating their own cubs) have actually been misunderstood. What I found most interesting in the animal sections are the variety of ways in which different species have evolved to become cannibals (from spadefoot toad tadpoles, some percentage of which will have carnivorous teeth and guts to munch on their omnivorous siblings, to the African caecilian, the brooding mother of which will rapidly regrow her epidermis for its young to peel and eat “like a grape”), and while I found these stories to be fascinating, they rather undermine Schutt's initial point: since humans haven't evolved any cannibal-specific features, it's hard to compare what's “natural” (beyond making the point that just about any animals, when overcrowded and starved, will resort to eating each other).

When Schutt turns to humans, he discusses the first allusions to cannibalism in Western writing (which is there right from the start in Homer and Herodotus; which was especially interesting to me as the last book I read included the myth of Thyestes being tricked into eating his own sons), and through Shakespeare and the Brothers Grimm, right up to Cormac McCarthy and *The Walking Dead*, we in the West have always thought of cannibalism as particularly unnatural (reinforced by the Judeo-Christian belief in keeping the body whole for the Resurrection). This paved the way for Christopher Columbus to justify enslaving the Caribbean people he encountered after misinterpreting (or lying about) their funerary rites; and this set the tone for all of European colonisation. Contrasted with this is thousands of years of Chinese writings in which cannibalism has been seen as acceptable: necessary in times of war and famine; an epicurean curiosity; a matter of filial duty in which people have always been happy to cut off pieces of themselves to feed their



elders. What's ironic is the West's long history of using human body parts as medicine (from drinking the blood of a hanged man to ingesting ground up mummy dust) and *not* considering this cannibalism.

Schutt examines the famous stories of human cannibalism – Was it really that prevalent in the South Pacific? What really happened with the Donner Party or the Siege of Leningrad? Why is it becoming trendy for women to eat their placentas after giving birth? – and ends with a very long section on the similarities between *kuru* and Mad Cow Disease, and while I didn't find this part that interesting, I *was* surprised to learn that the science behind these diseases hasn't been settled (apparently, it was never about prions). Ultimately, Schutt concludes that we're heading towards a *Soylent Green* future.

So, that's the what, and as for the how: Schutt attempts a jokey-accessible tone (like Mary Roach or Sarah Vowell), and I don't know if he really pulls it off. An early example of the jokes, while discussing that spadefoot toad tadpole:

*It was evident that the jaw muscles were significantly enlarged in the cannibals, especially the jaw-closing levator mandibulae, whose bulging appearance reminded me of a kid with six pieces of Dubble Bubble jammed into each cheek (a dangerous behavior I only rarely attempt anymore).*

Is that lame joke worth the change in tone? I also didn't really like the way that Schutt mocks some interview subjects on the page. While talking with Dr. William Arens – an Anthropologist who made a stir in the 70s by declaring that all stories of “social” cannibalism in “primitive societies” are inventions of Western researchers – Schutt writes that he's listening politely to the man while thinking, “Yeah right”. Schutt does the same thing throughout the chapter about the woman who promotes placenta-eating – first underlining the hilarity of her having ten kids, and then mentally correcting her as she shares with him what she understands to be the scientific benefits of placenta-eating (can you believe she thought the main research was done on mice when they used *rats*?)

Ultimately, this is what I learned: Cannibalism is pretty common in nature, and under starvation conditions, it's something we're ~~probably~~ all capable of. Also, social cannibalism, as part of funerary rites, was likely less common than believed, but other than the risk of *kuru* or other transmissible diseases (one of which may have wiped out the Neanderthals), it is no more “unnatural” than the dozens of other ways in which humans have respectfully ushered their loved ones into the afterlife. In the end, this book was perfect preparation for a dinner party conversation, but beyond George H. W. Bush's brush with the butcher block and Keith Richards' sendoff to his father, not much will likely linger with me.

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## **Olive (abookolive) says**

See my review on my booktube channel: <https://youtu.be/zjgJWtWW0qY>

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## **Hannah Greendale says**

Click here to watch a video review of this book on my channel, *From Beginning to Bookend*.

Schutt sucks all the fun out of cannibalism, swapping morbid curiosity and sensationalism for stilted prose and heavy-handed science.

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### **Lukas (LukeLaneReads) says**

Absolutely **\*DEVoured\*** this....I'm sorry, sometimes the urge to pun is just too strong.

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### **Ana says**

So, just to deter any possible squeamish readers: Schutt eats placenta, prepared a la osso bucco, in this book. I kinda-sorta-maybe-wanna eat placenta right now, just to see how it tastes. Is that gross? Probably. But I'm just curious - and as we all know, curiosity killed the cat. This time it might kill the cat through the form of transmissible spongiform encephalopathy. If I go, I might as well go for something that has a long, cool, science-y sounding name. What you'll find in this book: fascinating etymologies of words such as "mummy", the fact that Francis Bacon and a score of other scientists used to practice medical cannibalism, an explanation for why-the-fuck are humans called "the long pigs", a terrifying look at the idea of the prion and an all around super-god-damn-interesting book about one of the behaviours that, here in the West, we have considered taboo since the beginning of time... Wait, what was that? Not since the beginning of time? Since about the 16 hundreds? Oh. Yeah, you spelled West wrong: it should have been "hypocrites".

For the record: cannibalism is not "inhumane". There is no such thing as "inhumane", unless you specifically refer to something not of the humans or you use it metaphorically. If it has been done by humans, then it exists on the human spectrum of behaviour. There's instances in which I don't consider it morally wrong: starvation (survival), and if it is included in the social practices of a certain culture (like the Fore people). The fact that I haven't been raised on human meat is based solely on chance or luck. I consider it morally wrong if: it is done in the same vein as/along with murder, torture: then you are talking about intent to destroy, and it usually stems from psychological aberrations such as violent psychopathy or other mental illnesses (for example related to hallucinations).

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### **The Behrg says**

I'm not sure if reading a non-fiction novel about Cannibalism says more about the READER than it does the AUTHOR, but I found this a disturbingly fascinating read. Running the gamut from insects to the animal world to dinosaurs and neanderthals, the book then jumps to more modern cases from the Donner party to survival cannibalism to placentophagy.

The research and science behind zoologist Bill Schutt's study is impressive, if at times overwhelming. I definitely identified more with the human aspects of this "study in history," and there were both some mind-opening ideas and criminally tragic insights into humanity. I appreciate Schutt's decision to not include any recent sensationalized media cases where family's of victims (or culprits) might be unintentionally affected.

This a novel that changes you. It's impossible to look at the world the same way after diving into the depths of such a bizarre yet potentially natural practice. For all my disturbed like-minded individuals, this is one you

should definitely check out.

\*\* Thanks to the publisher and NetGalley for providing a copy of this book for review purposes. This in no way affected my review. \*\*

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### **Carlos says**

I know this might be the wrong thing to say but I enjoyed this book, for such a hard topic the author did a very good job of keeping the theme of the narrative fun and light . This is a study about cannibalism as it happens around the world , how cannibalism has used by colonial powers to brand cultures as such and then using that as an excuse to colonize them. It also dwells into the dinner party and it reaches an agreeable conclusion , I do think that this book will enlighten whoever is interested in this topic , and I can promise that if you read this book, you'll have a good time and learn something new , maybe it's just the anthropologist in me . :)

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### **Dan Schwent says**

Cannibalism: A Perfectly Natural History is a book about cannibalism.

Laced with dark humor, Cannibalism: A Perfectly Natural History covers cannibalism in many in its many forms. Schutt starts with the animal kingdom, noting nutritional and evolutionary advantages to snacking on your own species. Tadpoles do it, insects do it, even the monkeys in the trees do it.

The bulk of the book deals with human cannibalism, from the Neanderthal to the present day. There's cannibalism for medicinal reasons, like epileptics drinking blood in Victorian times, to powdered mummies being injected, to cannibalism for religious reasons.

Religious and cultural views on cannibalism are explored, as is the grand daddy of them all, the Donner Party. Schutt deliberately sidesteps cannibal serial killers since that topic has been sensationalized to death by the media. The modern placenta-eating movement is covered in great detail, as are kuru and similar diseases.

The writing in Cannibalism is engaging, tinged with Schutt's dark brand of humor. I devoured the book in two long sittings like a tribesman not wanting his relative's corpse to go to waste as food for maggots. Apart from Bill Bryson, I'm not usually drawn to non-fiction but this book was really hard to put down.

If I had to pick out something to bitch about, it would be that kuru and other spongiform encephalopathies were given a little too much space. Apart from that not mentioning the episode of The IT Crowd that was about a cannibal, I have no complaints. I recommend to anyone even remotely interested in cannibalism. Four out of five stars.

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### **Nick Pageant says**

I know I'm not likely to convince anyone to read this but for a few special souls (I'm looking at you, Kelly).

Still, this is a fun book. The author has a very light touch, lending humor to the gruesome business. I learned lots of useless trivia (that's why we all read so much, right?) and I'll never turn my back on a tadpole again. They are ruthless little bastards.

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## **Carole (Carole's Random Life in Books) says**

This review can also be found at Carole's Random Life in Books.

I don't read a lot of non-fiction books but for some reason as soon as I saw this book I knew I wanted to read it. I love learning about anything medical or science related so it was as surprising of a choice as you might think. I have always said that I read a little bit of everything and this book is proof positive of that fact. Cannibalism is a really interesting subject and I learned a lot while listening to this book. It was really an enjoyable experience.

I have to admit that as soon as I saw this book, I started thinking about criminals who practice cannibalism. If you are looking for a book that chronicles the actions of serial killers, this probably isn't the book for you. There is a little bit of those kind of stories in this book but very few. The author actually makes a point to explain why he chose not to focus on criminals. This book instead deals with many other topics pertaining to cannibalism.

If you are interested in learning about cannibalism in nature, look no further because this book is full of that kind of information. This book covers cannibalism in fish, birds, tadpoles, insects, and spiders. It discusses why it might be advantageous for animals to cannibalize others creatures of their own species sometimes including their own offspring. I can honestly say that I learned more about cannibalism in nature than I even knew that I wanted to know.

I really enjoyed the sections of the book that involved human cannibalism. The very few sections that did discuss criminal cannibalism were very interesting. At the very beginning of the book, I learned that the book Psycho is based off a true story of a man that killed and cannibalized his victims. Survival cannibalism was another very interesting topic. I had never heard of the Donner party prior to listening to this book but I was captivated and saddened by their story. There is a section that discusses the eating of one's placenta, not something that I ever gave any thought to before this book but interesting nonetheless.

I thought that Tom Perkins was the perfect narrator for this book. It almost felt as if I were listening to a nature show on television. His voice is exactly the kind of voice I think of when imagining the voice over sections in any nature program. This book had a lot of details and was full of information but I never tired of listening to it largely because of the narrator's skill.

I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the topic. It is a heavy subject but it is delivered in a very readable manner. There are a lot of details but it is presented in an entertaining manner. I was entertained and learned a few things. This is the first book by Bill Shutt that I have read but I would consider his work in the future.

*I received a review copy of this book from HighBridge Audio via Audiobook Jukebox.*

**Initial Thoughts**

This was an interesting book. I learned quite a few things and was entertained. There were some sections that were a bit too detailed for my tastes but overall this was a good listen. I am ready for a cannibalism category in the next trivia night I attend!

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