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## **From the Fittest as the Friendliest to the Cruellest: How We Can Save Ourselves**

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This review article of the Hare, Brian, and Vanessa Woods. *Survival of the Friendliest: Understanding Our Origins and Rediscovering Our Common Humanity* indicates the positive side of human origin and evolution. Unlike the classical understanding of the theory of evolution, where struggle and survival are stressed, this book stresses altruism, compassion and empathy as evolutionary preferences.

**Keywords:** Fittest as friendliest, altruism, *Survival of the Friendliest*, Brian Hare, Vanessa Woods

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Hare, Brian, and Vanessa Woods. *Survival of the Friendliest: Understanding Our Origins and Rediscovering Our Common Humanity*. New York: Random House, 2020. 304 978-0-399-59066-5

Brian Hare is a Professor of Evolutionary Anthropology at Duke University, where he founded the Duke Canine Cognition Center. He is well-known for his research on ‘dognition’. With his wife Vanessa Woods, a research scientist and award-winning journalist, he founded the new dog intelligence testing and training company Canines Inc. They collaborated further to write this challenging and inspiring book.

### **Self-Domestication Theory**

In this evocative book, they ask: What is the secret to humanity’s evolutionary success? Could it be our strength, our intellect...or something much nicer? 2020. It may be remembered that for about 300,000 years that *Homo sapiens* have existed, we have shared the planet with at least four other types of humans. All of these were smart, strong, and inventive. But around 50,000 years ago, *Homo sapiens* made a cognitive leap that gave us an edge over other species. How did it happen?

Since Charles Darwin wrote about “evolutionary fitness,” the idea of fitness has been confused with physical strength, tactical brilliance, and aggression. The authors in this book argue that what made us evolutionarily fit was a remarkable kind of friendliness, a virtuosic ability to coordinate and communicate with others that allowed us to achieve all the cultural and technical marvels in human history. So they propose the “self-domestication theory.”

The human self-domestication hypothesis proposes that these early-emerging social skills evolved when natural selection favoured increased in-group prosociality over aggression in late human evolution. As a by-product of this selection, humans are predicted

to show traits of the domestication syndrome observed in other domestic animals. In reviewing comparative, developmental, neurobiological, and paleoanthropological research, compelling evidence emerges for the predicted relationship between unique human mentalizing abilities, tolerance, and domestication syndrome in humans.

They throw light on the mysterious leap in human cognition that allowed *Homo sapiens* to thrive. But this gift for friendliness, which made us fitter for survival, came at a cost. Just as a mother bear is most dangerous around her cubs, we are at our most dangerous when someone we love is threatened by an “outsider.” The threatening outsider is demoted to the sub-human, fair game for our worst instincts.

For most of the approximately 200,000 years that our species has existed, we shared the planet with at least four other types of humans. They were smart, they were strong, and they were inventive. Neanderthals even had the capacity for spoken language. But, one by one, our hominid relatives went extinct. Why did we thrive?

In an interesting and informal style and based on on years of his own original research their “self-domestication” theory (Hare, and Vanessa, 2020). suggests that we have succeeded not because we were the smartest or strongest but because we are the friendliest.

### **Cooperation and Innovation**

This explanation is counter-intuitive. Since Charles Darwin wrote about “evolutionary fitness,” scientists have confused fitness with strength, tactical brilliance, and aggression. But what helped us innovate, where other primates failed, is our knack for coordinating with and listening to others. We can find common cause and identity with both neighbours and strangers if we see them as “one of us,” not as “the other.”

This ability makes us geniuses at cooperation and innovation and is responsible for all the glories of culture and technology in human history. We have to pay a price for it. If we perceive that someone is not “one of us,” we are capable of unplugging them from our mental network. Where there would have been empathy and compassion, there is nothing, making us both the most tolerant and the most merciless species on the planet. To counteract the rise of tribalism in all aspects of modern life, Hare and Woods argue, we need to expand our empathy and friendliness to include people who aren’t obviously like ourselves.

Brian Hare’s ground-breaking research was developed in close collaboration with Richard Wrangham and Michael Tomasello, who were notables in the field of cognitive evolution. *Survival of the Friendliest* explains both our evolutionary success and our potential for cruelty in one stroke and sheds new light onto everything from genocide and structural inequality to art and innovation (Hare, and Vanessa, 2020). The authors indicate that the same traits that make us the most tolerant species on the planet also make us the cruellest.

While offering a fresh look at evolution in the animal kingdom – including ourselves –, this book could solve some of the perennial problems facing us, like competition, aggressiveness and violence.

The books identify the fittest with the friendliest. In the animal kingdom, alpha males are not necessarily the fittest because they have no peers, thus they can become lonely and develop psychological problems—and the same goes for humans. Regarding the history of animals, the authors emphasize that cooperation advances a species (Kirkus Reviews 2020). They devote many interesting pages to comparing adult chimpanzees, which are distinctively unfriendly and sometimes violent to humans and even to other chimps outside their own group, and their lookalike species bonobos, which are among the friendliest animals in the animal kingdom, even toward other bonobos they do not know.

The authors also discuss how offering friendship to humans is how wolves and jungle cats became domesticated dogs and cats. Today, dogs and cats outnumber wolves and jungle cats by astounding numbers, and they have evolved in amazing ways as well. It's human evolution, however, that comprises the bulk of the narrative. The authors engagingly show how, unlike dogs and cats, we domesticated ourselves (Kirkus Reviews 2020); learning to cooperate with one another, especially groups with other groups, made us what we are today. The authors also note that evolution continues, and the next major change could come quickly via any animal that can overcome its fear of humans and express friendliness to us. Hare and Woods fill the text with reports of experiments that bolster their case, and although some of the scientific explanations might be a little much for general readers, they're necessary to prove their reliable results (Kirkus Reviews 2020).

Michael Tomasello, author of *Origins of Human Communication* and professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University says that this book “begins in basic behavioural science, proceeds to an analysis of cooperation (or lack thereof) in contemporary society, and ends with implications for public policy.”

“*Survival of the Friendliest* is a fascinating counterpoint to the popular [mis]conception of Darwin’s ‘survival of the fittest.’ Brian Hare and Vanessa Woods offer a convincing case that it was not brute strength, raw intelligence, or ruthlessness that allowed modern humans to thrive while our hominin relatives died out. Instead, they argue that friendliness was the key to our flourishing--and that the same kind of cooperative communication is the key to freeing us from the tribalism currently threatening democratic governance around the world. Powerful, insightful, accessible--this book gives me hope,” holds Megan Phelps-Roper, author of *Unfollow*.

## Positive Appraisal

Daniel E. Lieberman, author *The Story of the Human Body: Evolution, Health, and Disease*, and *Exercised: Why Something We Never Evolved to Do Is Healthy and Rewarding* comments on this book: “You will learn the astonishing story of how and why humans evolved a deep impulse to help total strangers but also sometimes act with unspeakable cruelty. Just as important, you’ll learn how these insights can help all of us become more compassionate and more cooperative.”

Isabella Rossellini, actress and activist says that this book “explains in the clearest terms how friendliness and cooperation shaped dogs and humans. This book left me with a happy and optimistic view of nature.”

## Conclusion

This book is for anyone who wants to know more about ourselves, personally and collectively. This book, *Survival of the Friendliest* offers us a new way to look at our cultural as well as cognitive evolution and sends an unambiguous message: To survive and even to flourish, we need to expand our definition of who belongs.

The book provides us with a robust and counterintuitive message that our evolutionary success depends on our ability to be friendly and a corresponding warning to expand our understanding of the other, for our very survival.

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