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Nature

Evolved: Chronicles of a Pleistocene Mind
Maximilian Werner
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Essays try to uncover the hidden, evolutionary nature of human behavior.

In *Evolved: Chronicles of a Pleistocene Mind*, author and amateur naturalist Maximilian Werner creates a memoir from a series of essays about his relationship with nature at various points in his life. The memoir's central concept concerns the author's ruminations on how one's daily existence is influenced by evolutionary human instinct, what he dubs the "Pleistocene mind." In the early going, the book is overly focused on applying this central concept, making it feel like the text is being forced into a preexisting frame that doesn't always fit.

Werner writes well and creates his visuals capably. Claiming to be "not unlike a detective who works his way backward using the evidence" and often presenting his everyday observations as research rather than casual musings, the author consistently sets up expectations for a more scientific, meaningful approach than what the book actually entails. For example, an early section goes into great detail about the author's observations of a spider living on his property, his theories about the arachnid's behavior, and his experience getting bitten by a spider. But these observations never add up to a larger point. Werner takes detours to force comparisons between spiders and humans, which amount to surface generalizations but are treated as profound discoveries.

Throughout most of the essays, Werner questions why he responds to particular situations in particular ways, from choosing which bedroom to give his son to feeling less protective of a friend than of his wife during hikes, and he tries to connect those subconscious decisions to evolutionary reasons. Some of these connections make more scientific sense than others, but the exercise still reads too much like an overly self-aware narrator making sure the story goes in a given direction.

The book improves significantly in the final few chapters, when Werner reflects on his

childhood experiences. When he describes the guilt he still feels over thoughtlessly shooting birds or witnessing a fistfight between classmates, the passages are genuinely moving. More importantly, in the sections where Werner applies his thoughts on human nature retroactively, his writing doesn't feel nearly as forced. The battle between nature and nurture speaks for itself in these later stories, without the contortion needed to fit them into a larger point. The best parts of this book are those that skew toward memoir rather than journal and make Werner's points about nature far more naturally.

Jeff Fleischer