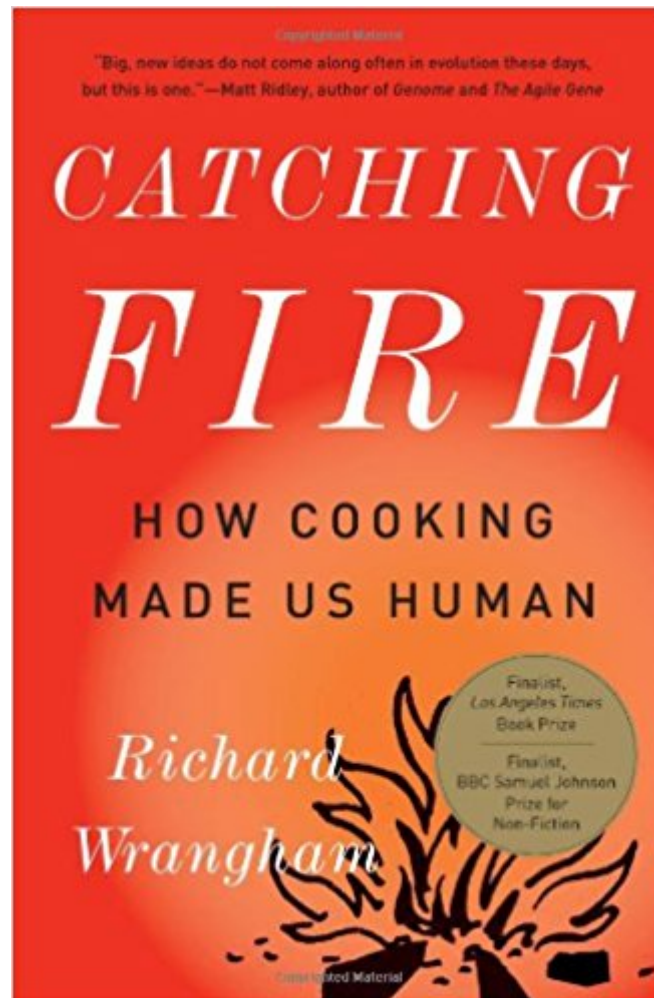




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# Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human



## Synopsis

Ever since Darwin and *The Descent of Man*, the existence of humans has been attributed to our intelligence and adaptability. But in *Catching Fire*, renowned primatologist Richard Wrangham presents a startling alternative: our evolutionary success is the result of cooking. In a groundbreaking theory of our origins, Wrangham shows that the shift from raw to cooked foods was the key factor in human evolution. When our ancestors adapted to using fire, humanity began. Once our hominid ancestors began cooking their food, the human digestive tract shrank and the brain grew. Time once spent chewing tough raw food could be used instead to hunt and to tend camp. Cooking became the basis for pair bonding and marriage, created the household, and even led to a sexual division of labor. Tracing the contemporary implications of our ancestors' diets, *Catching Fire* sheds new light on how we came to be the social, intelligent, and sexual species we are today. A pathbreaking new theory of human evolution, *Catching Fire* will provoke controversy and fascinate anyone interested in our ancient origins or in our modern eating habits.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Contrary to the dogmas of raw-foods enthusiasts, cooked cuisine was central to the biological and social evolution of humanity, argues this fascinating study. Harvard biological anthropologist Wrangham (*Demonic Males*) dates the breakthrough in human evolution to a moment 1.8 million years ago, when, he conjectures, our forebears tamed fire and began cooking. Starting with *Homo erectus* "who should perhaps be renamed *Homo gastronomicus*" these

innovations drove anatomical and physiological changes that make us adapted to eating cooked food the way cows are adapted to eating grass. By making food more digestible and easier to extract energy from, Wrangham reasons, cooking enabled hominids' jaws, teeth and guts to shrink, freeing up calories to fuel their expanding brains. It also gave rise to pair bonding and table manners, and liberated mankind from the drudgery of chewing (while chaining womankind to the stove). Wrangham's lucid, accessible treatise ranges across nutritional science, paleontology and studies of ape behavior and hunter-gatherer societies; the result is a tour de force of natural history and a profound analysis of cooking's role in daily life. More than that, Wrangham offers a provocative take on evolutionâ" suggesting that, rather than humans creating civilized technology, civilized technology created us. (June) Copyright Â© Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Publishers Weekly &#147;[A] fascinating study.... Wrangham's lucid, accessible treatise ranges across nutritional science, Paleontology and studies of ape behavior and hunter-gatherer societies; the result is a tour de force of natural history and a profound analysis of cooking's role in daily life.â" Kirkus Reviews &#147;An innovative argument that cooked food led to the rise of modern Homo sapiens.... Experts will debate Wrangham&#39;s thesis, but most readers will be convinced by this lucid, simulating foray into popular anthropology.â" The Harvard Brain &#147;With clear and engaging prose, *Catching Fire* addresses a key and enduring scientific issue central to the quest to understand our species. It offers new insights for anyone interested in human evolution, history, anthropology, nutrition, and for everyone interested in food."Edward O. Wilson, Harvard University &#147;In this thoroughly researched and marvelously well written book, Richard Wrangham has convincingly supplied a missing piece in the evolutionary origin of humanity.â" Seed Magazine &#147;&#133;makes a convincing case for the importance of cooking in the human diet, finding a connection between our need to eat cooked food in order to survive and our preference for soft foods. The popularity of Wonderbread, the digestion of actual lumps of meat, and the dangers of indulging our taste buds all feature in this expository romp through our gustatory evolution.â" Discover Magazine &#147;&#133;fascinating&#133;â" The New York Times &#147;&#145;Catching Fire&#39; is a plain-spoken and thoroughly gripping scientific essay that presents nothing less than a new theory of human evolution...one that Darwin (among others) simply missed.â" Slate.com &#147;Brilliant&#133; a fantastically weird way of looking at evolutionary change.â" The San Francisco Chronicle &#147;As new angles go, it's pretty much unbeatable.â" The Washington Post &#147;Wrangham draws together previous studies and

theories from disciplines as diverse as anthropology, biology, chemistry, sociology and literature into a cogent and compelling argument. •Texas Observer •Wrangham's attention to the most subtle of behaviors keeps the reader enrapt;a compelling picture, and one that I now contemplate every time I turn on my stove."Matt Ridley, author of *Genome* and *The Agile Gene* •Cooking completely transformed the human race, allowing us to live on the ground, develop bigger brains and smaller mouths, and invent specialized sex roles. This notion is surprising, fresh and, in the hands of Richard Wrangham, utterly persuasive. He brings to bear evidence from chimpanzees, fossils, food labs, and dieticians. Big, new ideas do not come along often in evolution these days, but this is one. •Steven Raichlen, author of *The Barbecue Bible* and *How to Grill*; host of *Primal Grill* •A book of startling originality and breathtaking erudition. Drawing on disciplines as diverse as anthropology, sociology, biology, chemistry, physics, literature, nutrition, and cooking, Richard Wrangham addresses two simple but very profound questions: How did we evolve from *Australopithecus* to *Homo sapiens*, and what makes us human? The answer can be found at your barbecue grill and I dare say it will surprise you. •Michael Pollan, author of *In Defense of Food* and *The Omnivore's Dilemma* •Catching Fire is convincing in argument and impressive in its explanatory power. A rich and important book. •

This is really a good book on an important topic that just does not get much coverage: the anthropology of food. Now, there are quite a few people who express theories on what made us human and what our distant ancestors ate. Wrangham is one of the few who combines the two topics. Put briefly that major points of his argument are as follows. The emergence of humans in their modern form (still an imperfect work in progress. in my humble opinion) requires that we explain a couple of tricky things. One is the physiological changes that separate us from earlier species of hominid and from other primates. Another thing to be explained is the set of cultural changes. The thread Wrangham traces has to do with cooking as a central nexus. Unfortunately, campfires do not fossilize well, so it is kind of hard to get comprehensive evidence. On the other hand, Wrangham cites good circumstantial evidence that the human mastery of fire (and with it cooking) started during the time of *homo erectus*, about 1.9 million years ago. One of the things that cooking does as increase the availability of nutrients in food. (It also makes it taste better). The connection Wrangham draws is enabled a process where are guts got smaller and our brains got bigger. The two are connected because the energy to power a bigger brain had to come from somewhere and most of the other organs in the body just could not be cut back by much. Cooking also has an inherent social component (or at least it did until we decided to outsource it to

corporations), That provides a hook for the argument of cultural changes. While anthropology is a science, it is a social science. I doubt it will ever be a science in the same sense as physics. Any argument like Wrangham's will always be vulnerable to the Gouldian argument of providing a "just so story." That said Wrangham provides us with a well researched argument and an extremely well written and interesting book. Strongly recommended.

This book was suggested to us by our daughter after our recent review of *The Genetics of Health*. She thought, if we liked that book, we would like *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* by Richard Wrangham. This book is very well-researched. It is packed with information that the average person will find very interesting and eye opening. We give it all five stars. Many college students will be assigned *Catching Fire* and will probably relegate it to the "Read it Later" pile. They may even put it in the "Too long, didn't read" pile. They will be missing out on a lot of interesting reading. We suggest that anyone who wants to know more about how diet evolved, how nutritionists determine how many calories are in food, or how we got certain gender roles when it comes to household duties, read this book. You will be glad you did. Our daughter had this book in her personal library. It had been required reading at her university. We are disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.

This guy Wrangham is a serious scholar. He musters a good deal of evidence for his thesis and presents it well. At one point in the early part of the book he casually mentions how a number of different African fruits taste. These are fruits not eaten by people but by chimpanzees. Apparently chimps relish fruits that humans detest. It's always nice to read a book by someone with real expertise. Who else can comment intelligently on chimp fruit? Wrangham does not specifically state this but he implies it strongly. The Atwater system of calorie counting is wrong. That's the system that tells us that protein and carbohydrates yield 4 kilocalories per gram and fat 9. It also leads to the conclusion that raw food and cooked food are equal in their nutrition. This is a central point in the book. Atwater in the nineteenth century devised the procedure by which we measure the caloric value of a food article by burning it in a bomb calorimeter. This procedure is cheap and easy whereas Wrangham has to use evidence to the contrary based on measurements taken from the contents of person's colostomy bags who have eaten supervised diets. This procedure is more adequate scientifically but expensive and difficult. If you follow the simple, cheap Atwater conventions as almost everyone does then cooking hardly seems important at all. Food is food - no matter if raw or cooked. That's why Wrangham's insights will probably strike you as new. As a

primatologist Wrangham has a number of chimp anecdotes that stick with you. He points out that chimpanzees spend at least four or five hours each day just chewing. No wonder they never got around to building a civilization. Wrangham believes that *Homo erectus* emerged when they developed cooking as a way to externalize digestion thus freeing up their time and energy. Anthropology changes all the time, his specific theory may prove to have been wrong. Cooking may have arisen earlier or later than he thinks. But whatever else is subsequently learned, this is an important book.

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