

Q&A WITH NEIL BOCKOVEN



You're an award-winning geologist and journalist and have published many scientific articles.

What compelled you to write *Moctu* as a novel?
The inspiration for it came as I was doing research into why Neanderthals died off so quickly after we, Early Modern Humans, arrived in Europe about 45,000 years ago (hint: our rather bloodthirsty species is also a prime suspect in the demise of three other human groups - *Homo erectus*, Denisovans, and the Hobbit people of Flores). I hadn't planned to write a novel, but I realized that there was an incredible story to be told about these early humans - their interaction with a different human species and their struggles for survival in a violent, primitive world.

What was your writing process for this book?

After an enormous amount of research, some of which is represented in the 130 annotated references at the back of the book, I decided I should write an entertaining story that captured what I'd learned. It was an exciting time - I would often wake in the middle of the night and write down notes of thoughts I had. It took me nine months to write the book and more than two years to research it.

When you were creating your main characters, how did you get inside the head of Moctu - your young protagonist from 45,000 years ago? Was that difficult? What human traits and ambitions did you find yourself sharing with him? And Nuri - the young woman in his tribe that Moctu loves. How did you connect with her emotionally?

I developed these early human characters the same way you'd approach modern-day ones. I spent a lot of time thinking about who they were and what they wanted - their dreams, ambitions and fears. I built Moctu to be a solidly good guy with (mostly) noble intentions, although he is somewhat shy. Nuri, likewise, has a nobility of character, and she's creative, resourceful, brave, and sweet-natured - but she too is not without flaws. Both she and Moctu have characteristics most of us want to identify in ourselves.

There are some great action scenes in the novel. Did you plot those out in advance or did they just flow out of the situation your characters found themselves in? Explain your favorite action scene and how you constructed it so realistically from your research?

Starting the book, I had a basic outline in my head of the overall plot, but most of the action scenes flowed out of the situation and the characters' personalities.

My favorite action scene is the genital-piercing sacrifice and the birthing of a breech baby. The details of the sacrifice stem from research I did about primitive cultures' (especially the Aztec's) fertility practices. The birth drew from memories of the difficult birth of one of my children. I want to mention that the baby is given the name Zaila, which means 'difficult' in Basque - probably the language most similar to what our people spoke back then.

I also love the mammoth hunting scene, but the book isn't mostly about hunting. I pulled from a number of references for



the hunting scenes - how they stalked the beast and used their primitive weapons and methods to kill it. The euphoria and bonding I describe that happens after the mammoth kill came largely from my father's description of how close he and his men became after battles (and near death) in World War Two.

What literary writers in general inspire you? Are there any literary authors who have written about early man that you admire?

I love historical fiction. In the early 1980's I was enthralled with Jean Auel's *Clan of the Cave Bear* that featured Ayla, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Cro-Magnon girl who was raised by dark, brooding Neanderthals. Recent genetic discoveries have shown us these racial roles were actually reversed when we met up in Europe. We were the dark ones, and many of the Neanderthals were blonde and blue-eyed.

Another historical fiction writer I follow is Bernard Cornwell, who writes fascinating, action-packed stories of medieval Europe. I tried to make *Moctu and the Mammoth People* equally action-packed but also character-driven. I wanted readers to identify deeply with these Early Modern Humans. They are, after all, our ancestors. We are family.



What science-oriented non-fiction writers have you read? Who do you like and why?

A lot of them, but several of my favorites are David Reich and his book *Who We Are and How We Got Here*, and Chris Stringer with his *Lone Survivors* (Google Chris' interview with Stephen Colbert about that one - very funny). I also enjoyed Thomas Wynn's *Think Like a Neanderthal*, and Paul Ehrlich's *Human Natures*. Jared Diamond has *Guns, Germs and Steel*, Danny Vendramini wrote *Them + Us*, and Harari's book, *Sapiens* - they're fascinating - I could go on and on.

Why is Moctu's time period (roughly 45,000 years ago) and geographic location (Southern Europe) so important?

In 2010, when the Neanderthal genome was first fully sequenced, we discovered that all non-Africans have Neanderthal genes. Since that time it's become clear that one of the places that we met and uh, "interacted" with Neanderthals was southeast Europe, roughly where my story takes place. This was also a time when there was a dramatic increase in our usage of new technologies, and it was the beginning of an explosion in our population and geographic range.

What audiences would you like to reach with *Moctu and the Mammoth People*?

Jean Auel's *Clan of the Cave Bear* and related books have sold 50 million copies to a diverse audience, both US and international. I expect that *Moctu* will appeal to a similar group.

I've also published an illustrated children's book called *When We Met Neanderthals*. I think it's essential for young people to understand our origins as a species and how we have arrived at where we are today.

What would you most like them to learn from this story?

I hope people can leave their current world and travel back in time to feel what our ancestors experienced as they tried to survive, from having babies to hunting mammoths and dealing with interspecies conflict. I've worked hard to keep this novel as factually accurate as possible while being exciting and entertaining.