



Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes: Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle (Vintage Departures)

By Daniel L. Everett

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A riveting account of the astonishing experiences and discoveries made by linguist Daniel Everett while he lived with the Pirahã, a small tribe of Amazonian Indians in central Brazil. Daniel Everett arrived among the Pirahã with his wife and three young children hoping to convert the tribe to Christianity. Everett quickly became obsessed with their language and its cultural and linguistic implications. The Pirahã have no counting system, no fixed terms for color, no concept of war, and no personal property. Everett was so impressed with their peaceful way of life that he eventually lost faith in the God he'd hoped to introduce to them, and instead devoted his life to the science of linguistics. Part passionate memoir, part scientific exploration, Everett's life-changing tale is a riveting look into the nature of language, thought, and life itself.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

SignatureReviewed by Christine KenneallyThe ways language and thought intertwine have long intrigued scientists. Does language shape the way we see the world? Does the world influence the structure of language? Do we think *in* words? Such lofty questions pondered in many an ivory tower would go unanswered without the mostly anonymous work of field linguists. These scholars venture into isolated communities and wrestle with culture shock, broken tape recorders and dysentery—all to learn an unfamiliar language from the ground up. Their work is painstaking, and no matter how smart or how educated they are, their projects must begin with the most elementary communicative tactics—they point at a rock or a tree or a bird, and whether they are in Australia's Western Desert, the remote islands of Indonesia or the jungles of Brazil, their interlocutor will respond, rock or tree or bird in the native tongue. Dan Everett's life as a field linguist began when he entered a Pirahã village in the Amazonian jungle in December 1977. After being greeted by a happy, chattering crowd, he walked over to a man cooking on a small fire. First, he tapped his own chest and said, Daniel, then he pointed at the animal being cooked on the fire. Káixihí, said the man. Everett pointed at a stick. Xíí said the man. Everett dropped the stick and said, I drop the xii. Xíí xi bigí kíobí, his new friend replied, meaning stick it ground falls. Thus began 30 years of dedication to the Pirahã and their native tongue, a mystifying system of sound and rules unrelated to any other language in the world. In this fascinating and candid account of life with the Pirahã, Everett describes how he learned to speak fluent Pirahã (pausing occasionally to club the snakes that harassed him in his Amazonian office). He also explains his discoveries about the language—findings that have kicked off more than one academic brouhaha. Everett learned that Pirahã does not use what are supposed to be universal aspects of grammar, an observation that runs counter to linguistic dogma about how culture, the brain and language connect. For Everett, Pirahã is evidence that culture plays a crucial and previously unacknowledged role in the creation of language. Everett's life with the Pirahã cost him dearly. He almost lost two family members to malaria, and his first marriage broke down after years of highly productive shared field work. But life in the Amazon taught him a great deal about human nature, too, perhaps more about his own than that of the Pirahã. Everett began his linguistic work as a Christian missionary, but the Pirahã were marvelously impervious to his promise of a life with Jesus. They pointed out that Everett simply had no proof for the supernatural world he described, and in the end he found himself agreeing with them. He left the church, choosing a world that more honestly integrated his goals as a scholar with the world view of his Pirahã friends—one where evidence matters. (Nov. 11)Christine Kenneally is the author of *The First Word: The Search for the Origins of Language*, a finalist for the L.A. Times Book Prize.

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Review

"Absorbing. . . . Shares its author's best traits: perseverance, insight, humor and humility. Both the Pirahas and their interpreter make splendid company."--*The Plain Dealer*

"Immensely interesting and deeply moving. . . . One of the best books I have read."—Lucy Dodwell, *New Scientist*

"A story of language and faith along the sweeping banks of the Maici River. . . . Verdict: Read."—*Time*
 "Destined to become a classic of popular ethnography."—*The Independent*, London "A genuine and engrossing book that is both sharp and intuitive; it closes around you and reaches inside you, controlling

your every thought and movement as you read it. . . . Impossible to forget."—*Sacramento Book Review* "Three stars. . . . [A] spiritual adventure story."—*People* "A fascinating look into the lives of the Piraha, an Amazonian community of hunter-gatherers."—*The Minneapolis Star Tribune* "Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes makes the rain forest sound like a magic mushroom."—*Harper's Magazine* "A riveting account of a Christian missionary 'converted' to the viewpoint of the Amazonian Indians he had intended to evangelize."—*The Huntsville Times* "Vivid. . . . The book is fascinating. . . . May serve to bring the furor of linguistics and language research to readers who otherwise never catch sight of it."—*Science*

"In this fascinating and candid account of life with the Pirahã, Everett describes how he learned to speak fluent Pirahã (pausing occasionally to club the snakes that harassed him in his Amazonian "office"). He also explains his discoveries about the language-findings that have kicked off more than one academic brouhaha."—*Publishers Weekly*, Signature Review

"Rich account of fieldwork among a tribe of hunter-gatherers in Brazil . . . introduce[s] non-specialists to the fascinating ongoing debate about the origin of languages. . . . Everett's experiences and findings fairly explode from these pages and will reverberate in the minds of readers."—*Kirkus*, starred review

"Dan Everett has written an excellent book. First, it is a very powerful autobiographical account of his stay with the Pirahã in the jungles of the Amazon basin. Second, it is a brilliant piece of ethnographical description of life among the Pirahã. And third, and perhaps most important in the long run, his data and his conclusions about the language of the Pirahã run dead counter to the prevailing orthodoxy in linguistics. If he is right, he will permanently change our conception of human language."

—John Searle, Slusser Professor of Philosophy, University of California, Berkeley

"Dan Everett is the most interesting man I have ever met. This story about his life among the Pirahãs is a fascinating read. His observations and claims about the culture and language of the Pirahãs are astounding. Whether or not all of his hypotheses turn out to be correct, Everett has forced many researchers to reevaluate basic assumptions about the relationship among culture, language and cognition. I strongly recommend the book."

—Edward Gibson, Professor of Cognitive Sciences, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

About the Author

Daniel L. Everett is the Chair of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at Illinois State University.

From the Hardcover edition.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Margaret Holt:

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Bertram Staten:

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Jonathan Baker:

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