



The Stone Age: Hunters, Gatherers and Woolly Mammoths

Books Reviewed:

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New to Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

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5

The Stone Age was a period in the history of the world that lasted for more than three million years. How do you introduce the under 11s to what we have discovered about how people lived over such a vast timescale? Marcia Williams does this splendidly by setting what we know or can imagine in the context of exciting stories about a fictional Stone Age clan, Clan Woolly. The storyteller is Sparrow, a Stone Age inventor, who has some help from Rocky, a playful animal. But first a 'Dear Reader' letter explains how we know something about people's lives so very many years ago. Bones and stone tools unearthed by archaeologists help inform speculation, but we 'have to imagine many things about Stone Age lives'. The book is organised in six sections, arranged in time sequence: 'The Last Neanderthal?', 'Hunter Gatherers?', 'The Miracle of Fire?', 'Man's Best Friend?', 'From Nomads to Farmers?' and 'The End of the Stone Age?'. The timeline at the bottom of each spread also supports young readers' developing sense of chronology. As in her other books, Marcia uses a distinctive comic-strip format which enthuses and connects with her readers. The size of the lively, colourful cells varies and some large ones showing people active in prehistoric landscapes are included; and there is a block of text at the foot of each one as well as witty comments in speech balloons.

Readers are drawn into the life of the people of Clan Woolly who we first meet sharing the earth with the more ancient Neanderthals that they eventually replaced. Why did the Neanderthals die out? It seems likely that they could not survive the rigours of the Ice Age. A main message in the book is that inventions were major shapers of people's lives as the Stone Age progressed just as new technologies change our lives today. Hunter Gatherers had to search constantly for plants and for animals to capture, using stone tools. The discovery of how to make fire meant people could now cook food and keep warm. Marcia remarks that if fire had not been invented 'my brilliant cooking skills would have been wasted and your poor toes would have dropped off in the cold!' Another significant development was when wolves were tamed and other wild animals such as goats, sheep and pigs were domesticated. Over time some wolves evolved into the dogs that worked with and befriended the clan. 'From Nomads to Farmers?' shows how from small beginnings farming seems to have grown and, crucially, advances in tool use meant people had more control over their environment. The Stone Age ended and the Bronze Age began when copper and tin were combined to make bronze, a strong alloy from which more sophisticated and effective weapons could be made.

This book does not hide the harsh and brutal side of Stone Age life. The weather could be cruel as the Ice Age took hold and attacks from bears and other beasts were ever present - ?you were as likely to be eaten as to eat!?. Did these early people have a gentler side ? perhaps loyalty to their clan and some feeling for children? Seven year old Rafael was touched when I read about a young girl called Mouse who rescues a Neanderthal baby whose mother had been killed by wolves. This is one of those exceptional books that help young readers acquire a cognitive space where their knowledge and understanding about a period before history began can be expanded and refined as they learn more. And who knows, perhaps new discoveries will inform their understanding - our knowledge about the past is not static but dynamic and ever changing. Rich with information in text and illustration, this book is a hugely imaginative achievement. Teachers will find it has considerable potential for inspiring classroom activities: writing, perhaps in the role of one of the characters, discussion, art work and improvised drama would all help children assimilate what they have learnt.

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