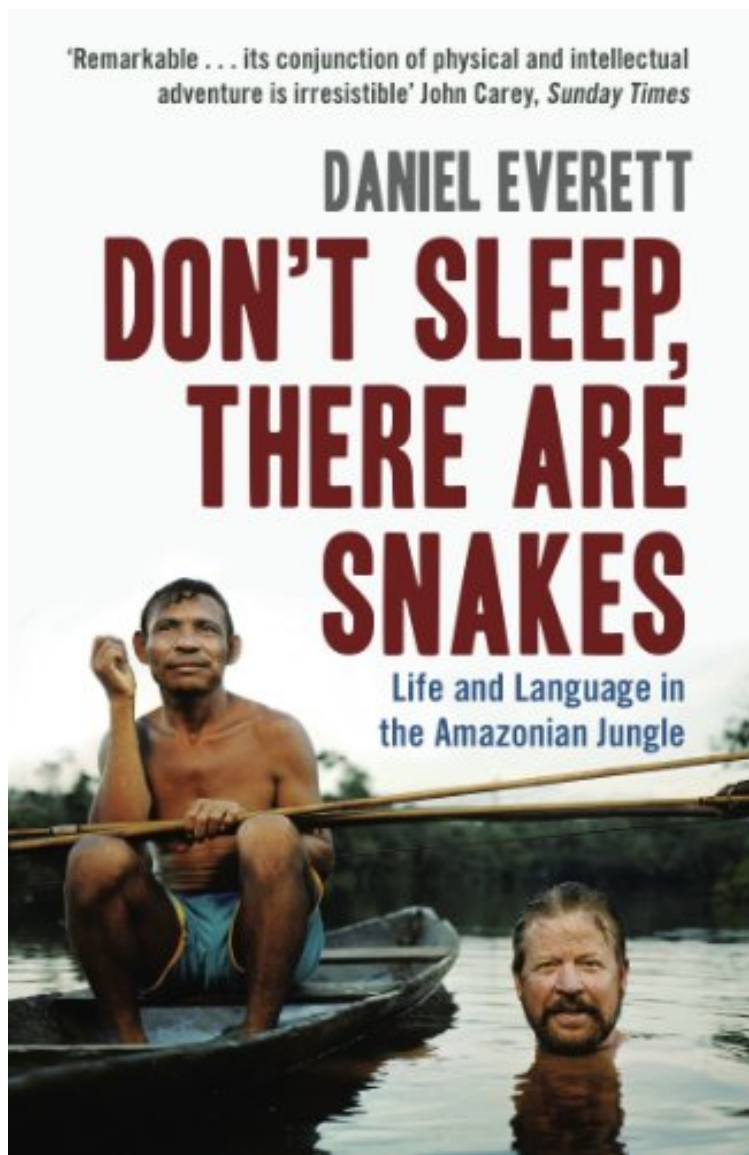


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Don't Sleep, There are Snakes: Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAlthough Daniel Everett was a missionary, far from converting the Pirahs, they converted him. He shows the slow, meticulous steps by which he gradually mastered their language and his gradual realisation that its unusual nature closely reflected its speakers' startlingly original perceptions of the world.Everett describes how he began to realise that his discoveries about the Pirah language opened up a new way of understanding how language works in our minds and in our lives, and that this way was utterly at odds with Noam Chomsky's universally accepted linguistic theories. The perils of passionate academic

opposition were then swiftly conjoined to those of the in a debate whose outcome has yet to be won. Everett's views are most recently discussed in Tom Wolfe's bestselling *The Kingdom of Speech*. Adventure, personal enlightenment and the makings of a scientific revolution proceed together in this vivid, funny and moving book. Extrait Prologue Look! There he is, Xigaga, the spirit. Yes, I can see him. He is threatening us. Everybody, come see Xigaga. Quickly! He is on the beach! I roused from my deep sleep, not sure if I was dreaming or hearing this conversation. It was 6:30 on a Saturday morning in August, the dry season of 1980.

The sun was shining, but not yet too hot. A breeze was blowing up from the Maici River in front of my modest hut in a clearing on the bank. I opened my eyes and saw the palm thatch above me, its original yellow graying from years of dust and soot. My dwelling was flanked by two smaller Pirah huts of similar construction, where lived Xahobisi, Khoibihai, and their families. Mornings among the Pirahs, so many mornings, I picked up the faint smell of smoke drifting from their cook fires, and the warmth of the Brazilian sun on my face, its rays softened by my mosquito net. Children were usually laughing, chasing one another, or noisily crying to nurse, the sounds reverberating through the village. Dogs were barking. Often when I first opened my eyes, groggily coming out of a dream, a Pirah child or sometimes even an adult would be staring at me from between the paxiuba palm slats that served as siding for my large hut. This morning was different. I was now completely conscious, awakened by the noise and shouts of Pirahs. I sat up and looked around. A crowd was gathering about twenty feet from my bed on the high bank of the Maici, and all were energetically gesticulating and yelling. Everyone was focused on the beach just across the river from my house. I got out of bed to get a better look and because there was no way to sleep through the noise. I picked my gym shorts off the floor and checked to make sure that there were no tarantulas, scorpions, centipedes, or other undesirables in them. Pulling them on, I slipped into my flip-flops and headed out the door. The Pirahs were loosely bunched on the riverbank just to the right of my house. Their excitement was growing. I could see mothers running down the path, their infants trying to hold breasts in their mouths. The women wore the same sleeveless, collarless, midlength dresses they worked and slept in, stained a dark brown from dirt and smoke. The men wore gym shorts or loincloths. None of the men were carrying their bows and arrows. That was a relief. Prepubescent children were naked, their skin leathery from exposure to the elements. The babies' bottoms were calloused from scooting across the ground, a mode of locomotion that for some reason they prefer to crawling. Everyone was streaked from ashes and dust accumulated by sleeping and sitting on the ground near the fire. It was still around seventy-two degrees, though humid, far below the hundred-degree-plus heat of midday. I was rubbing the sleep from my eyes. I turned to Khoi, my principal language teacher, and asked, "Whats up?" He was standing to my right, his strong, brown, lean body tensed from what he was looking at. "Dont you see him over there?" he asked impatiently. Xigaga, one of the beings that lives above the clouds, is standing on the beach yelling at us, telling us he will kill us if we go to the jungle. "Where?" I asked. "I dont see him." "Right there!" Khoi snapped, looking intently toward the middle of the apparently empty beach. "In the jungle behind the beach?" "No! There on the beach. Look!" he replied with exasperation. "In the jungle with the Pirahs I regularly failed to see wildlife they saw. My inexperienced eyes just werent able to see as theirs did. But this was different. Even I could tell that there was nothing on that white, sandy beach no more than one hundred yards away. And yet as certain as I was about this, the Pirahs were equally certain that there was something there. Maybe there had been something there that I just missed seeing, but they insisted that what they were seeing, Xigaga, was still there. Everyone continued to look toward the beach. I heard Kristene, my six-year-old daughter, at my side. "What are they looking at, Daddy?" "I dont know. I cant see anything." Kris stood on her toes and peered across the river. Then at me. Then at the Pirahs. She was as puzzled as I was. Kristene and I left the Pirahs and walked back into our house. What had I just witnessed? Over the more than two decades since that summer morning, I have tried to come to grips with the significance of how two cultures, my European-based culture and the Pirahs culture, could see reality so differently. I could never have proved to the Pirahs that the beach was empty. Nor could they have convinced me that there was anything, much less a spirit, on it. As a scientist, objectivity is one of my most deeply held values. If we could just try harder, I once thought, surely we could each see the world as others see it and learn to respect one another's views more readily. But as I learned from the Pirahs, our expectations, our culture, and our experiences can render even perceptions of the environment nearly incommensurable cross-culturally. The Pirahs say different things when they leave my hut at night on their way to bed. Sometimes they just say, "Im going." But frequently they use an expression that, though surprising at first, has come to be one of my favorite ways of saying good night: "Dont sleep, there are snakes." The Pirahs say this for two reasons. First, they believe that by sleeping less they can harden

themselves, a value they all share. Second, they know that danger is all around them in the jungle and that sleeping soundly can leave one defenseless from attack by any of the numerous predators around the village.

The Pirahs laugh and talk a good part of the night. They don't sleep much at one time. Rarely have I heard the village completely quiet at night or noticed someone sleeping for several hours straight. I have learned so much from the Pirahs over the years. But this is perhaps my favorite lesson. Sure, life is hard and there is plenty of danger. And it might make us lose some sleep from time to time. But enjoy it. Life goes on. I went

to the Pirahs when I was twenty-six years old. Now I am old enough to receive senior discounts. I gave them my youth. I have contracted malaria many times. I remember several occasions on which the Pirahs or others threatened my life. I have carried more heavy boxes, bags, and barrels on my back through the jungle than I care to remember. But my grandchildren all know the Pirahs. My children are who they are in part because of the Pirahs. And I can look at some of those old men (old like me) who once threatened to kill me and recognize some of the dearest friends I have ever had men who would now risk their lives for me. This book is about the lessons I have learned over three decades of studying and living with the Pirahs, a time in

which I have tried my best to comprehend how they see, understand, and talk about the world and to transmit these lessons to my scientific colleagues. This journey has taken me to many places of astounding beauty and into many situations I would rather not have entered. But I am so glad that I made the journey it has given me precious and valuable insights into the nature of life, language, and thought that could not have been learned any other way. The Pirahs have shown me that there is dignity and deep satisfaction in facing life and death without the comfort of heaven or the fear of hell and in sailing toward the great abyss with a smile. I have learned these things from the Pirahs, and I will be grateful to them as long as I live. *Revue de presse* "Absorbing. . . Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes . . . shares its author's best traits: perseverance, insight,

humor and humility. Both the Pirahs and their interpreter make splendid company, especially for readers drawn to the way language underpins how we mediate our world."--Cleveland Plain Dealer "In this fascinating and candid account of life with the Pirah, Everett describes how he learned to speak fluent Pirah (pausing occasionally to club the snakes that harassed him in his own "office"). He also explains his discoveries about the language-findings that have kicked off more than one academic brouhaha."--Publishers

Weekly, Signature "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 Pirah in the jungles of the basin. Second, it is a brilliant piece of ethnographical description of life among the Pirah. And third, and perhaps most important in the long run, his data and his conclusions about the language of the Pirah 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 Pirahs is a fascinating read. His observations and claims about the culture and language of the Pirahs 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