

Sapiens – A Brief History of Humankind

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This book was recommended to me by our long-lost colleague Lewis Levitz who left South Africa in 2007 and is now practicing ophthalmology in Melbourne. South Africa's loss, Australia's gain. In Chapter 4 of this book, the author says that the journey of the first humans to Australia is one of the most important events in human history. Well, I'm sure that this journey was also one of the most important events in the Levitz family history!

This book and its follow-up *Homo Deus* (which I will review in the next issue) have been among the most enlightening, interesting, and educational books that I have read in many years.

Prof Harari is a Professor of History at the University of Jerusalem. I would have loved to be one of his students as he makes the telling of history so entertaining. But his knowledge spreads into many other areas besides the usual history of mankind. This book is a mini-course in history, economics, evolution, anthropology, psychology, science, religion and many other subjects. If you understand the history of a subject, you have a good foundation for understanding the subject itself.

Can you name two of the most defining moments in the history of mankind?

According to this author one of them must surely be the moment that the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs struck the Earth millions of years ago. If this hadn't happened, we humans would not be here today.

The other defining moment was in July 1945 when the first atomic explosion was detonated in the desert of New Mexico. Ever since then, mankind has had the power not only to alter future history but to end it completely. Ironically, the atomic bomb has probably saved more lives than any other single invention in history. Not only did it end WWII, but it has served as a deterrent for many wars that would have occurred thereafter.

Modern man has largely overcome the

three most terrible curses of the past: famine, war and plague. It is mainly thanks to science that we have so successfully overcome these in most parts of today's world. Harari explains that it's actually thanks to the invention of money and capitalism that science has worked to transform technology into what we have today.

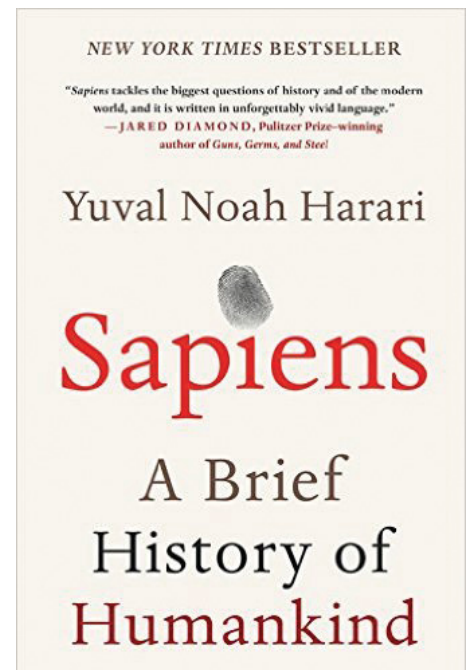
Money, he says, is the most universal and most efficient system of mutual trust among humans ever devised. Without this trust, cooperation among humans would not have been what it is today and global trading networks would have been virtually impossible. Economic growth fuelled by credit also depends largely on trust. **Harari states that today a country's credit rating is more important than its natural resources** and he tells some good stories explaining all this, which is so relevant to South Africa today.

It all started with the **Cognitive Revolution** about 70 000 years ago. This was when humans started to think differently and to cooperate with each other in large numbers thanks to the emergence of fictive language. Harari calls this the beginning of the history of mankind. This part of the book engenders the reader with a sense of wonder at the subtle interactions of our genetics and environment.

Who would have thought that heating our food in pre-history would have released more energy so that our gut could get smaller and release the energy restrictions on brain size and growth.

The **Agricultural Revolution** started about 12 000 years ago. We generally think of this as a good thing but I was shocked when the author described it as possibly the biggest fraud in all of history! He describes how the agricultural revolution has brought more misery to both man and animals than anything else he knows of. Hunters and foragers before this were probably far happier overall. The root cause of many of today's ailments and diseases can be traced back to the Agricultural Revolution.

The **Scientific Revolution** started about



500 years ago when humankind started to admit its ignorance. This seems to be exactly the same as an individual's cognitive development today. It's only when you can admit your own ignorance that you can start learning and start progressing. If you think you know it all, your cognitive development will stagnate. Also about 500 years ago capitalism started to rise and this propelled science and technology to give unprecedented power to humans.

The **Industrial Revolution** started about 200 years ago. Family and community took a back seat to state and market. Unfortunately, many plant and animal species were forced into extinction by the industrial toxic wave.

Now we are in the Digital Revolution and the Information Age. The pace of change has been exponential. It is now so rapid that human psychology can hardly keep up and cyborgs will soon be taking over. Cyborgs combine man and machine. Computers and AI (artificial intelligence) will combine with humans to produce super-beings with god-like powers in the near future.

Many aspects of this book are controversial and have been criticised, especially by religious organisations, as being inaccurate. But, of course, a book of this size and scope is bound to have inaccuracies. Any intelligent reader will accept this of all that they read. The author admits that much of what we think we know about history is based on conjecture. He also is quick to point out his own ignorance of many subjects that are discussed.

I can highly recommend this book to ophthalmologists and all doctors because most of us doctors are not well educated in history and all the other topics covered in this book. I found it difficult to put down. 