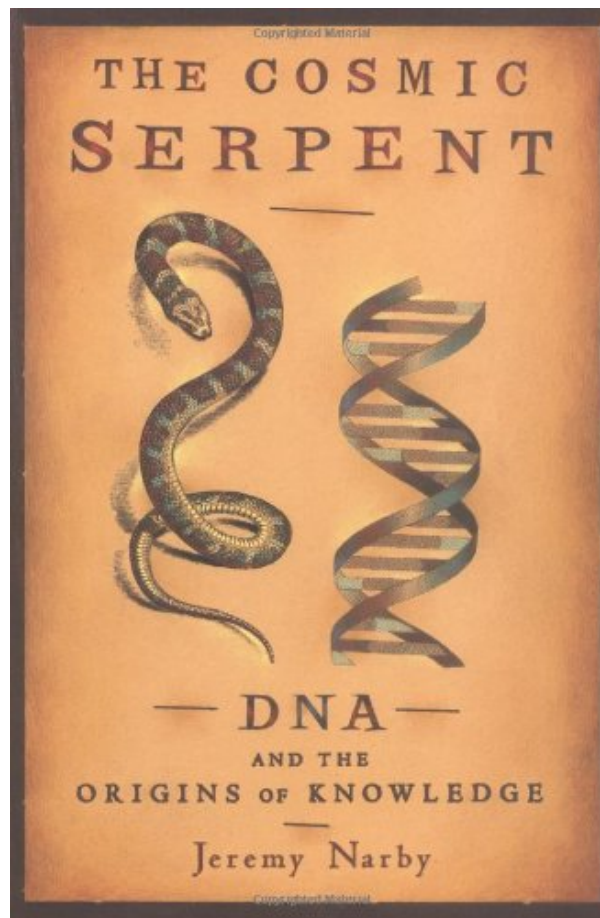
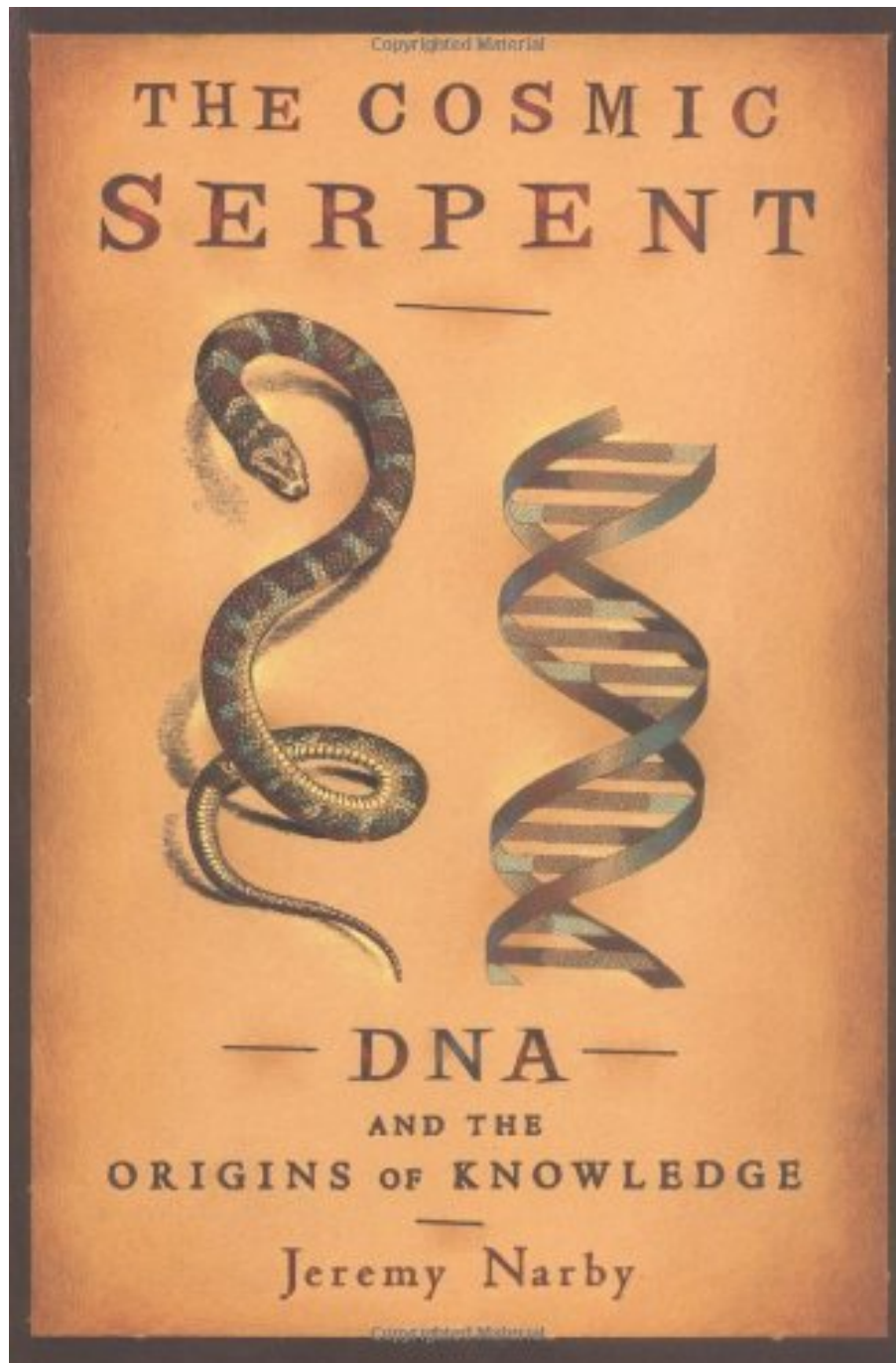


THE COSMIC SERPENT: DNA AND THE ORIGINS OF KNOWLEDGE BY JEREMY NARBY



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From Publishers Weekly

Anthropologist Narby's very personal account of his encounters with Amazonian shamanism and his passionately researched syntheses of anthropological, biochemical, neurological and mythological scholarship fascinate but do not convince. His defense of the rights of indigenous peoples against usurpation by capitalist, technological countries is admirable; his methodology is not. Throughout, Narby appears to mistake enthusiasm for evidence and he takes similarities of form (e.g., any helical pattern, hexagon or snakelike figure) to be proof of identity or of casual connection: that the serpent of shamanic lore is DNA. Of his assertion that the Amazonians' specific knowledge of pharmacology derives from hallucinogenic trance (and not from some other more diffuse source), he undertakes no experimental test, offering the typical complaints that the "presuppositions" of science are too narrow to permit the test. Narby does well to question the assumptions of scientists who dismiss all teleology in favor of mechanistic interpretations that are often deeply inadequate, and he does well to inquire into the meaning of the vast commonality of forms between science and world mythologies, but his answers too often come off as groundless invention. He provides an intriguing detective story, wondrous visions and a wealth of fascinating information on genetic science, shamanism, etc., and he also offers some valuable thoughts on the parochial smallness of official science, but, overall, his book's greatest value, perhaps, is as a case study in the excesses of scholarship gone astray.

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Review

"[A]n intriguing detective story, wondrous visions and a wealth of fascinating information on genetic science, shamanism, etc.." ---Publishers Weekly

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This adventure in science and imagination, which the Medical Tribune said might herald "a Copernican revolution for the life sciences," leads the reader through unexplored jungles and uncharted aspects of mind to the heart of knowledge. In a first-person narrative of scientific discovery that opens new perspectives on biology, anthropology, and the limits of rationalism, *The Cosmic Serpent* reveals how startlingly different the world around us appears when we open our minds to it.

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Most helpful customer reviews

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Good questions, but inconclusive

By DDW Reviews

Jeremy Narby's argument is that when shaman's drink hallucinogenic brews, their consciousness sinks to the molecular level, and literally communicates with DNA, the basic building block of life. DNA appears to shamans, and others who drink these magic brews, as serpents. This is why, Narby claims, serpents loom large in ancient cultures around the world. It is also how shamans get their expert knowledge of plants. When shamans say that the spirit in the plants tell them how to concoct life-saving remedies, they mean what they say. In hallucinogenic trances, the plants speak. Narby goes onto to speculate that the world is one vast communication network among strands of DNA. You don't have to buy the DNA-communication theory to enjoy this book. It is written in an engaging, personal, first person narrative style. It shows how science works, how "eureka moments" occur when one is relaxed and thinking about other things. Maybe his theory is totally off-base, but even so, big ideas like this one often spur research in different, interesting directions. We are only as good as our questions, and Narby's question is a great one: What if the shamans are right?

126 of 133 people found the following review helpful.

...the deer eats the man

By Zane Ivy

Very interesting book. Anthropologists tend to project their own world views on the people they "observe." This book, which is basically a "story" - demonstrates how one Anthropologist, through his experiences in South America, has his own LAE (life altering experience) which enables him to examine his OWN culture...and its assumptions/metaphors. As a "Native" person, who went through the "mainstream" education system and wrestled with the hubris and fragmentation (let's dissect everything!)...it was a pleasant breath of four winds' air to see him face up to his own field's shortcomings. I recommend the book.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

This excellent book remains ahead of its time

By Todd Subritzky

This excellent book remains ahead of its time. 17 years after publication there appears to be little change to the paradoxical self limitations of the rational system of western science with little acknowledgement in sight. I would have liked the author to revisit the hallucinogenic states accompanied with the molecular biology lens that the research uncovered. It would have been interesting to hear the narrative of the revisit when looking for specific clues. I wonder if taking molecular biological tools such as microscopes through to the other side might provide even further insights. Nonetheless this book is an excellent and thought provoking read

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