

New Fiction from Eddie Freeman: “The Skirt Fetcher”



Sadie was a do-gooder, someone who was aware of the deeply rooted systematic injustices that perpetuated oppression throughout the world, and who wanted to do something meaningful about it. She was a liberal cliché and she knew it. Sadie found it interesting how drugs caused the woman who lived behind the grocery store to give an outward physical representation to the inner processes of her mind. Which is to say, while most of us carted around incorrectly remembered personal histories, useless grievances, and unhelpful fantasies, this woman had found a way to bring her mental garbage into the physical realm; she filled shopping carts full of non-redeemable waste, trash which was result of overproduction which was caused by capitalism. Sadie could admit that she did not want the transient woman in her own apartment, and she didn't believe handing money to the woman would be helpful, but almost involuntarily, Sadie cultivated empathy for the woman. Sadie's mental garden of empathy was bathed daily in love, and attention, but it was admittedly hard for Sadie to share the fruits of this garden with anyone. Sadie strived to pass out her excess empathy at her workplace, as though her empathetic thoughts were lemons that grew in unneeded quantities in her front yard and could be left up for grabs in a plastic bag by the cash register. Sadie worked for Saint-Loup, a high-end clothing boutique.

A stocky woman, wearing expensive boots and a fashionable top entered the store. The woman maintained a powerful-yet-clumsy gait, as though she were important but unsure of herself.

“Villeparisis dress, size forty,” the woman said.

It took Sadie a moment to realize the woman was requesting a garment. Sadie fetched the dress from the back and brought it to the sale's floor. The shade of the dress channeled a rosé targeted at hip young women. The dress had a sash in front which, if asked, Sadie would describe as sexy-Michelle-Obama chic. Had the designer not added a few almost imperceptible qualities, the piece would resemble something a punk girl could wear to prom to both sincerely celebrate and ironically comment on the occasion. The Villeparisis' touch ensured the garment was worthy of a stylish and well-mannered rich woman. The outfit was cliché, original, traditional, and new, all at once. Though, in Sadie's opinion, the garb was a few years out of style. The woman tried it on and nodded. Some women, who were spending upwards of four thousand dollars on a dress, wanted Sadie to spend the better part of an hour engaging in flattery. Sadie sensed that this woman wanted as little human emotion as feasible to seep into the interaction. The woman paid with a card, and Sadie learned her name was Rachel. When Sadie handed Rachel the bag containing the dress, Rachel grabbed it without a word and walked out.

Sadie, who was thirty years old, lived with her mother and younger brother in Napa. For a time, she had paid sixteen hundred dollars a month to rent a detached in-law unit, which consisted of four hundred square feet of livable space. That space had been cramped with her mattress and boxes containing psychology text books, much loved novels of her childhood and books she had not yet had the chance to read. Most nights, her seventy-year-old female landlord invited her into the main house to watch TV. Sadie accepted. After a year and half of watching murder shows on the couch of her landlord, she figured that if she was going to spend her nights watching TV with an older lady, she might as well save sixteen hundred dollars a month and live with her mom.

At dinner that night, a pizza her brother brought home from his job at King's Pizza, Sadie recounted her interaction with

Rachel. Though their exchange with Rachel was wordless, Sadie believed she had allowed her acceptance of Rachel to shine through her eyes.

“It’s possible she just didn’t want to talk,” her brother, said. “Like, maybe she was holding in a fart.”

When Sadie was twenty-one, she had graduated from the University of Irvine with a Bachelors in Psychology. She knew that to utilize her degree and training, she would need either a masters or a doctorate. Instead of immediately applying to graduate school, Sadie increased her hours at Target. She had no illusions about the American health care system. She knew that an individual’s insurance might cover a year of therapy sessions, but by the time a provider had an opening, six months of that year had passed, and then the individual might be seen less than once a month. Sadie daydreamed about opening her own clinic where financially strapped people could walk in and receive free therapeutic attention, but she also knew that earning a doctorate would put her in six figures in debt. As a woman in her early twenties, she had believed she was using everything she had learned from the university when she helped Target customers, some of whom could clearly benefit from mental health services. She gave them as much validation and encouragement as she could. For Sadie, the logical next step was to work for a high-end clothing boutique that paid its employees more, and had fewer customers. That way, Sadie could shower the relatively small number of shoppers with meaningful attention. Sadie had recently begun working for Saint-Loup. She had embarked on her dream job. She was beginning to understand that her brother and mother viewed her life choices differently.

Two weeks later, Rachel returned to Saint-Loup. She said she wanted a conservative cocktail dress, something that would be appropriate for her son’s birthday party. Rachel had offered a

detail about her personal life and Sadie would not shirk from the opportunity to support her.

“I couldn’t imagine being a mother. The cooking, cleaning, waking the kids up, being a chauffeur, it’s like you work twelve jobs,” Sadie said.

“My son is twenty-four,” Rachel said.

Sadie nodded empathetically.

Sadie wanted to be absolutely present. With her facial expression, she yearned to say that even if Rachel was addicted to pain pills, even if she interacted with her child as little as possible, even if she spent every day burning through her husband’s money, and had never had a job of her own, Sadie would give the woman something that she lacked—something that she needed. She smiled as though she would give her soul to Rachel, as though, if she had her druthers, she would run away with Rachel to a concert, a night club, or a cabin in the woods, where the two friends would share with each other, from the infinite patience dwelling inside of them, except, it wouldn’t really be patience, because patience wasn’t needed with friends who cared so deeply about each other.

Rachel found a dress, tried it on, and decided not to buy it.

Sadie’s mom made turkey chili for dinner that night. Her brother Evan ate quickly, putting away more than his two female family members combined.

“At work today, this old boomer was screaming, you make people eat out of a box at this restaurant? Cause I accidentally entered his order in as to-go. I put his pizza on a pan and he was fine. Anyway, it’s too bad you weren’t there Sadie. You could’ve given him your phone number, and told him that when

he woke up in the middle of the night, weeks later, upset that his pizza was in a box, he could've called you, and received comfort and support," Evan said.

His smile indicated that he had thought up this joke hours ago and had waited all day to deliver it at the world.

"And it's too bad you're not a stand-up comedian, because humanity would benefit immensely from your witty observations on life," Sadie said.

After dinner, Sadie went to her bedroom and browsed Tinder. The first profile she saw belonged to Tony, a man she knew in high school. Sadie acknowledged the significant drawbacks involved with online dating in her hometown. She swiped left on Tony and blocked his profile. Almost immediately, her phone rang. She cursed herself for maintaining the same phone number since she was fourteen years old.

"Yes?" Sadie said.

"It's nice to hear your voice," Tony said.

Sadie said nothing.

"I'm wondering if you told people... about our thing... because, I'm an important person in tech now. ... I want to know you're not disparaging my reputation," Tony said.

"Oh," Sadie said.

"If you told anyone, you should tell them you forgive me."

"I don't forgive you," Sadie said.

She hung up her phone and blocked the number. Once, when Sadie was in high school, she had found Tony attractive. He invited her to his house when his parents were out of town. She drank the whiskey and cokes he handed her. She had been able to keep her clothes on, but he had forced himself on top of her,

grabbed parts of her body, penetrated her with his fingers, and brought himself to completion. At the time, she told no adults of the incident.

At the store the next morning, Sadie noticed a short man in a starched, tucked in, checkered dress shirt, and grey slacks. Sadie asked a number of times if he needed help, but he always demurred. He was content to watch the store while writing things on his phone. The other employee on the sale's floor ignored the man completely.

A couple in their sixties walked in. The woman wore heels, faux leather pants, and a flowy grey cashmere sweater over a white top. The man, who was shorter than his wife, dressed in worn blue jeans and an old Kirkland flannel, as though proudly flaunting his wife's fashionable inclinations. The woman admired a long, Verdurin scarf. Sadie stood by eagerly. The man locked eyes with her.

"This would make a great addition to my rape kit," the man said.

"He's so wild," the woman said, and patted his arm.

"I'm looking at woman's clothes, I just want my life back," the man said.

"We admire your sacrifice," Sadie said.

After the couple left, Rachel entered the store. There were customers who called out to Sadie because of their obvious need, a need that perhaps only Sadie could perceive. Sadie wanted a valid connection with Rachel's core. Rachel exited the fitting room wearing a twelve-hundred-dollar sweater.

"It looks fine," Sadie said.

Rachel reentered the dressing room. As Rachel changed, Sadie

thought about a time when she was a child, when she viewed her friends as a natural resource that enabled her to live, no less necessary to her existence than clean drinking water.

Sadie saw her current life as relatively empty. She had excess energy to devote to Rachel, but had absconded from her duty.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said you looked fine. You looked absolutely incredible in the sweater. It was stunning,” Sadie said.

“It’s okay,” Rachel said.

“No, you’re an incredible woman, and the sweater brought out your incredible nature. I should’ve told you that you’re incredible. I’m just off today,” Sadie said.

Rachel said nothing.

Sadie took a deep breath.

“I’m off today because this boy sexually assaulted me in high school and last night he called me on the phone,” Sadie said.

“Oh, I hope the rest of your day goes better,” Rachel said.

Rachel looked like there was more she wanted to say, but whether her unspoken words contained support or an admonishment, Sadie could not tell. She left the store. Sadie had not noticed, but the man in the starched shirt was typing furiously on his phone during this interaction.

The next customer Sadie helped was a blond hipster woman who wore tight blue jeans, black chunk heels, and a grey V-neck shirt. The woman was beautiful and she had expertly applied her makeup, but compared to the other customers, her clothes were heavily used. The woman was younger than Sadie. She tried on a number of La Petite Bande tops. Finally, she approached Sadie, holding a La Petite Bande garment.

“Do you ever have sales, or offer discounts?” the hipster woman asked.

Sadie held the blouse in her hand. She looked at the woman and understood how badly she wanted it.

“Would a seventy-dollar discount work?” Sadie asked.

“Yeah,” the woman said.

“Some of our clothes get stained with lipstick, when people try them on. The lipstick comes out easy, with just a little bit of vinegar. If this top had a stain on it, I would have to give you the discount,” Sadie said.

The woman brought the top to her mouth and kissed it.

“That works,” Sadie said.

She rung up the blouse, subtracting seventy dollars from the total.

On Tuesday, Sadie had the day off. She went for a run and was back in her apartment, covered in sweat, getting ready to take a shower, when her phone rang.

“Sadie, this is Celine Diaz.”

Celine was the owner of Saint-Loup. Sadie had met her only once before, during her job interview. A woman named Ashely worked as the store manager, handling all of the day-to-day operations. Sadie had heard rumors that Celine was a multi-millionaire, if not a billionaire, who had purchased Saint-Loup during a period of brief-but-intense interest in clothing retail. According to the rumors, Celine had recently become interested in learning how to fly a helicopter, opening sustainable sushi restaurants, and making wine. Saint-Loupe was receiving less attention.

"I want to thank you for your hard work and attention to detail when arranging clothes," Celine said.

"You're welcome," Sadie.

"Do you know who Marcus is?" Celine asked.

"No," Sadie said.

"That does explain some things. Marcus oversees a lot of my business ventures. He acts as my eyes-on-the-ground when I'm otherwise occupied. He informed me that you had told a customer about a sexual assault you experienced. He mentioned the customer was Rachel Feldman. She's been a loyal patron for years. He took the liberty of calling her and she agrees that we should let you go. Marcus also said, that you advised a customer to damage a top in order to receive a discount," Celine said.

"Yes, I did those things," Sadie said.

"We're going to discontinue your employment, but the problem is, we don't have anyone to replace you at this moment. If you're willing to stay on for a few weeks, I'll give you a good reference. You can quit right now, but then you wouldn't be able to apply for unemployment," Celine said.

"I can stay," Sadie said.

Sadie wasn't in a position to turn down any income.

Sadie put on a holey pair of jeans and a Lou Reed t-shirt. For a moment, she fantasied about wearing the outfit to her remaining shifts. She imagined the conversations the outfit would spark. Sadie loved an ice cream sundae that was available at a popular fast-food restaurant, but she found it difficult to justify the treats' plastic cup, which would outlive her. Being fired was a good justification. She bought the sundae and began walking around downtown.

She passed a number of restaurants that had only a few, if any guests, which made sense, as it was a dead time between late lunch and early dinner. The outside patio of Baddiel's was completely packed. A sign indicated that the space was reserved for a private event. Sadie sat on stone bench in front of the patio and surveyed the scene. Many of the men gathered were guys in their twenties, who wore dress shirts, and gave arrogant looks to the other people present, as though every man thought they were the next Mark Zuckerberg. Within five years, the most interesting aspect of the other people present would be the stories they would tell about the future tech celebrity, the man they were now sitting across from. Sadie guessed correctly that she was looking at tech workers. A few of the men were in their fifties, but they had hip haircuts and were in good shape. A youthful and industrious energy permeated the group. A few women were present but Sadie was able to get a good look at only one lady, a redhead with colorful Ed Hardy style tattoos. She wore lipstick and kept a cocky smile, as though she was more than used to holding her own in a roomful of men. Despite her loneliness, Sadie was not in the habit of openly gawking at groups of strangers. She assumed some men noticed her, in her terrible jeans and questionable t-shirt, but something about the scene had piqued her curiosity. She wouldn't stop staring until she determined what it was. Most of the men sat at one of five giant tables, conversations were conducted across several tables at once. At the far end of the patio, away from the loud men, a pair of women sat at a two-seater. One of the women appeared to be in her late fifties or early sixties, the other in her thirties. The ladies looked at one another with a laser focus, but it didn't seem as though they were particularly enjoying each other's company. Sadie assumed they were afraid to look at the guys. The older woman was Rachel.

Two men wearing dress shirts exited the patio and walked in front of Sadie.

“Excuse me. Sorry, I have an awkward question. Like a really awkward question. Why are those two women over there sitting by themselves?” Sadie asked.

“That’s our boss, Rachel, and her secretary,” one of the men said.

“And why are they sitting alone?” Sadie asked.

The men exchanged looks. Their facial expressions indicated they had had a few drinks each.

“Rachel is a little girl who took on a man’s job. We make predictions about the specific demand for medical equipment over the next sixteen quarters. Our work impacts a billion-dollar industry, but Rachel doesn’t even know what an algorithm is. She can’t spell it,” the man said.

“I got my first job when I was seventeen working for Jack in the Box. My boss there was better than Rachel,” the second man said.

One of the men on the patio caught the eye of the guys talking to Sadie. With a happy drunk grin, he pointed to Rachel. He had inferred who they were talking about.

“Our boss has Downs syndrome. That’s why she’s alone,” the man on the patio said.

He spoke loudly. It was likely Rachel heard him and possibly Rachel saw Sadie, though she tried to hide behind the men she was talking to. Not a single person spoke in Rachel’s defense.

During Sadie’s last shift, Rachel walked in. She surveyed the clothing, and refused to look at Sadie. Ashley, the only other employee present, was helping a customer. After Ashley finished, she ran to the back to complete her managerial tasks. Rachel finally approached Sadie.

“Sachar skirt, red, size forty,” Rachel said.

She went to the back to fetch the skirt.

E.O. Wilson on Biology as Politics, Culture, and Human Nature

One of the most illustrious living scientists, E.O. Wilson, is still active and writing great books well into his ninth decade. In this article I will review two of his most recent works, *The Social Conquest of Earth* (2012) and *The Meaning of Human Existence* (2014).



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Wilson, a biologist considered to be the world’s foremost expert on ants and sociobiology, is a gifted writer who explains difficult concepts for non-expert readers. My interests have always lain mostly within the humanities—history, literature, and philosophy above all—but reading these two books has opened my eyes in a couple ways. Firstly, that biology strongly determines many of the things often considered as separate and non-overlapping fields of study—history, politics, and the arts, for example. Secondly, that the fields of science and the humanities really would be

best served by combining their forces and engaging in joint dialogue and research. I will attempt to explain these in greater detail.

The Social Conquest of Earth is the story of how the most successful and dominant organisms in Earth's history are the ones that developed eusociality—namely, the social insects of termites, bees, wasps, and especially ants on one hand, and human beings on the other. Eusociality is the term for the systematic cooperation between a large number of organisms in a given species for the benefit of the group over the benefit of individuals. Out of hundreds of millions of years of evolutionary history and the rise and fall of as many different species, this trait of social cooperation has only arisen 20 times as far as experts can tell (mostly species of the aforementioned insects, along with two varieties of shrimp, and two species of naked mole rats that are the only other eusocial mammals besides humans). Wilson spends the rest of the book explaining why it was so rare, why human beings in particular are so unique, and how this relates to the rest of the world's history.

“The origin of eusociality has been rare in the history of life because group selection must be exceptionally powerful to relax the grip of individual selection. Only then can it modify the conservative effect of individual selection and introduce highly cooperative behavior into the physiology and behavior of the group members.” This is the key point of why social cooperation is so rare, leading to what Wilson calls the iron rule of genetic social evolution: **“It is that selfish individuals beat altruistic individuals, while groups of altruists beat groups of selfish individuals.”** This is true for all the relevant species, but especially for humans as we will see.

So how did such a trait evolve in the first place? Wilson lists three reasons: “One solid principle drawn from this analysis of the hymenopterans [the ants], and other insects as

well, is that all of the species that have attained eusociality, as I have stressed, live in fortified nest sites. A second principle, less well established but probably nonetheless universal, is that the protection is against enemies, namely predators, parasites, and competitors. A final principle is that, all other things being equal, even a little society does better than a solitary individual belonging to closely related species both in longevity and in extracting resources from the area around a fixed nest of any kind.”

A significant part of the book deals with detailed descriptions of ant (and termite and bee) colonies and how they developed socially, which is Wilson’s particular specialty (at one point he mentions nonchalantly how he discovered and named 442 new species of ant). More interesting is how he compares and contrasts these social insects with humans, and describes the evolutionary process by which humans became a uniquely transcendent species. (For another interesting take on what happens when the planet’s two most successful species go head to head, see the classic short story [“Leiningen Versus the Ants”](#), which I remember reading in high school English class).

Wilson describes the development of *Homo sapiens* as a maze, ultimately random, with each subsequent mutation bringing us closer to our modern form and capabilities. The first necessary adaptation was existence on the land so that fire could be harnessed (this is why highly intelligent dolphins and whales will never develop civilizations). The second necessary adaptation was large body size which allowed for bigger brains and advanced reasoning and culture (this excludes all eusocial insects). The third necessary adaptation was the use of grasping hands with soft spatulate fingers that

THE
SOCIAL
CONQUEST
OF EARTH



EDWARD
O. WILSON

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

could hold and manipulate objects (this eliminates all large land animals besides the apes). The next necessary step was a dietary shift to a large amount of meat, a much more efficient source of protein that led to both larger brains and more social communities (this also excluded all other apes who are either vegetarian or, like chimpanzees, get only a small fraction of their calories from meat [additional note: I have often [written](#) of my [vegetarianism](#) and how good it is for people, animals, and the [environment](#); I do not see any disconnect, however, between our ancestors' adoption of meat into their diet for extra caloric and social development in a very limited world, and our current need to cut down grossly or eliminate meat consumption from our diets for the good of ourselves and life on our planet]). "About a million years ago the controlled use of fire followed, a unique hominid achievement." This was likely because early human ancestors found cooked meat from animals burned in forest fires, and began to bring the fire with them. "Cooking became a universal human trait. With the sharing of cooked meals came a universal means of social bonding...along with fireside campsites came division of labor." This maze seems very logical and easy to trace in hindsight, and from here it is relatively easy to trace the rest of human social development.

Wilson comes to some similar conclusions as another biologist Yuval Noah Harari, whose *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* I reviewed [here](#). For instance, he says "The origin of modern humanity was a stroke of luck—good for our species for a while, bad for most of the rest of life forever." He spends a lot of time describing how human culture developed to favor group cooperation over individual interests, and how this has affected our history, culture, and even psychology. "An unavoidable and perpetual war exists between honor, virtue, and duty, the products of group selection, on one side, and selfishness, cowardice, and hypocrisy, the products of individual selection, on the other side." In fact, he comments at length on the tribal instincts of our species which lead to

the worst part of our nature, yet has been ingrained in our cultural development over thousands of generations of evolution. "The elementary drive to form and take deep pleasure from in-group membership easily translates at a higher level into tribalism. People are prone to ethnocentrism. It is an uncomfortable fact that even when given a guilt-free choice, individuals prefer the company of others of the same race, nation, clan, and religion...Once a group has been split off and sufficiently dehumanized, any brutality can be justified, at any level, and at any size of the victimized group up to and including race and nation." What a history of human war and social conflict this sociobiological fact entails.

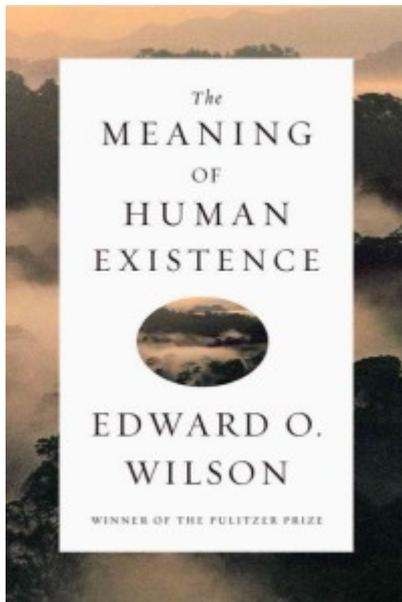
A portion of the book is spent on laying out the case for the theory of group selection versus the theory of kin selection, which had been the most popular one for four decades. The latter, discussed by Charles Darwin, formally theorized in 1964 by W.D. Hamilton, and popularized by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 *The Selfish Gene*, states that kinship is the dominant criteria for genetic reproduction. Wilson references a new mathematical model and a variety of examples to show why group selection is actually the more likely reality. Altruism, for example, never fit well in the kin selection model, but it is the basis for Wilson's theory. Dawkins, a renowned polemicist, did not take lightly to the dismissal of his preferred theory, and it led to quite the biological war of words in the press ([here](#) is a summary). I am not equipped to weigh in on what is still a controversial issue in evolutionary biology, but Wilson makes his case very convincingly.

Another fascinating aspect of the book that warrants mentioning is its discussion of how human cultural development differs from other animals. Somewhat surprisingly, Wilson says that we did not invent culture. Our common ancestor with chimpanzees did millions of years ago. "Most researchers agree that the concept of culture should be applied to animals and

humans alike, in order to stress its continuity from one to the other and notwithstanding the immensely greater complexity of human behavior.” Accordingly, he mentions how dolphins and whales have culture, shown by their imitative social interactions. He reminds us again, though, why such intelligent creatures did not progress as far as humans in social evolution: “Unlike primates, they have no nests or campsites. They have flippers for forelimbs. And in their watery realm, controlled fire is forever denied.” Culture is especially dependent on long-term memory, a trait which humans possess far above all other animals. Our enlarged brains have made us into storytellers and planners, able to imagine past and future scenarios, invent fictions (a point also highlighted in Harari’s book *Sapiens*), and delay immediate desires in favor of delayed pleasures.

The Social Conquest of Earth explores a number of other engaging topics, but in the name of brevity I will conclude my synopsis here (in this New York Times “The Stone” [article](#), Wilson also gives a nice summary of his ideas). I think one of the most important points of the book is the connection between biological development and what we usually think of as humanistic studies. I, for one, will be rethinking much of what I thought I knew about political and ethical philosophy. If we simply trust facts coming from scientific research, we will not need to construct theoretical hypotheses about how human societies developed and invented laws—those of Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and Rousseau, for example. Likewise with thorny questions of morality—if we consider that we are social animals who evolved successfully to work together, but that we still maintain the older individualistic impulses that go against the group, it helps to understand why humans behave the way they do. Perhaps Nietzsche was right, but not in the way he intended. We need not use the terms good and evil to characterize human actions—we can assess them as altruistic or selfish. Wilson comments: “Individual selection is responsible for much of what we call sin, while group selection is

responsible for the greater part of virtue. Together they have created the conflict between the poorer and the better angels of our nature.”



The Meaning of Human Existence is a slimmer volume with a more multidisciplinary approach, but no less ambitious than its predecessor as the title implies. In it, Wilson rehashes some of the same information as before, such as another extended case for group selection theory over kin selection (prompted no doubt by the controversy it stirred up two years earlier). For the most part, though, Wilson attempts to give a brief but comprehensive version of human history and development, and how we can advance as a species by uniting scientific and humanistic studies, and overall being better stewards of our immense, godlike power over the planet.

Here are some interesting quotes in my opinion that give some flavor of what the book is about:

“The function of anthropocentricity—fascination about ourselves—is the sharpening of social intelligence, a skill in which human beings are the geniuses among all Earth’s species. It arose dramatically in concert with the evolution of the cerebral cortex during the origin of *Homo sapiens* from the African australopith prehumans. Gossip, celebrity worship, biographies, novels, war stories, and sports are the stuff of modern culture because a state of intense, even obsessive concentration on others has always enhanced survival of individuals and groups. We are devoted to stories because that is how the mind works—a never-ending wandering through past scenarios and through alternative scenarios of the future.”

“What we call human nature is the whole of our emotions and the preparedness in learning over which those emotions

preside. Some writers have tried to deconstruct human nature into nonexistence. But it is real, tangible, and a process that exists in the structures of the brain. Decades of research have discovered that human nature is not the genes that prescribe the emotions and learning preparedness. It is not the cultural universals, which are its ultimate product. Human nature is the ensemble of hereditary regularities in mental development that bias cultural evolution in one direction as opposed to others and thus connect genes to culture in the brain of every person."

"It is tribalism, not the moral tenets and humanitarian thought of pure religion, that makes good people do bad things."

Both books are highly recommended reading for anyone interested in life's big questions, which should be everyone. In *The Social Conquest of Earth*, Wilson opened with a discussion of Paul Gauguin's masterpiece, "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?", and what led the painter to create such a work. Gauguin lived an interesting life, giving up everything in a quest for truth and beauty (as portrayed in William Somerset Maugham's great roman à clef, *The Moon and Sixpence*). The painting reveals the questions which are still central to religion, philosophy, and science; these questions may perhaps never be solved, but Wilson overall gives as good a try as anyone at some likely answers. He ends on a positive, if quixotic, note that if humanity can harness its power for good, we can conquer our gods and demons: "So, now I will confess my own blind faith. Earth, by the twenty-second century, can be turned, if we so wish, into a permanent paradise for human beings, or at least the strong beginnings of one. We will do a lot more damage to ourselves and the rest of life along the way, but out of an ethic of simple decency to one another, the unrelenting application of reason, and acceptance of what we truly are, our dreams will finally come home to stay."