

Auel, Jean M. The Land of Painted Caves. Grand Haven, MI : Brilliance Audio, 2010.

This is the sixth book in the Earth's Children series by Jean Auel. Fans of her books wait YEARS for the next installment. The first book, *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, was published in 1980. From the first, I enjoyed the story of Ayla, a Cro Magnon child who was orphaned in an earthquake. A Neandertal woman, Iza, the healer in a clan that is searching for a new cave to live in (also because of the earthquake), cares for her. Eventually she becomes part of this clan, though the differences are dramatic. She talks, for one thing, and the Neandertals don't. They use a language of movement and gesture to communicate, augmented by a few sounds.

I first learned of the series after three books were out in paperback. Differences in education between Cro Magnons and Neandertals built into the story was an example in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial I read one day during the 1980's. In *Clan of the Cave Bear*, Neandertal children had only to be reminded of clan memories to understand or learn something. Auel attributed an almost instinctual system of memory to the Neandertals in her story. Cro Magnons, including Ayla, had no Clan memories, and she had to be instructed in things many times. I read the three books, and then read them a second time very slowly. I didn't want to be finished with Ayla.

The setting in Book 1 is a little north of what is now the Black Sea, about 30,000 years ago. In *The Valley of Horses* (bk. 2), Ayla has been banished and is living alone in a cave in a valley far to the north. She takes in the foal of a horse she killed and gentles it, later rides it. She raises a cave lion cub and domesticates a wolf cub. Jondalar's journey with his brother ends near her cave with Thonolan killed by that cave lion, now grown, and Ayla's rescue of Jondalar. Before they leave the valley, Jondalar invents the atlatl, a spear thrower. The sex between them is far too descriptive and quite unnecessary. *The Mammoth Hunters* (bk. 3) has them living with other Cro Magnon people, the Mamutoi, in the Caucasus, where Ayla is adopted by Mamut, the shaman of the group. *The Plains of Passage* (bk. 4) is the story of their journey from central Asia to southern France, and the return to Jondalar's people, the Zelandoni. *The Shelters of Stone* (bk. 5) has them living with the Zelandoni and negotiating Ayla's rank among them as Jondalar's chosen mate (he is the son of the chieftain, his mother).

In book 6, Ayla is training to become a Zelandonii, the equivalent of a shaman or priest/priestess. She and Jondalar have a child, and her training is rigorous. Among many events, this book gives the reader a tour of the painted caves of southern France and provides in story form some cultural aspects of the painting and use of these caves.

Too often in Auel's writing are repeated recitals of earlier information, not just some background information in the early chapters to equip a new reader with enough understanding not to be lost in the book being read. Again and again, Auel adds paragraphs of backstory that are not necessary because she has already given that part of the backstory earlier in the book. These repetitions are enough to demote the story from the status of a sweeping historical fiction epic. The repetitions are often when Ayla is inside her head, questioning herself and Jondalar and everything else because she is an outsider, because she again is not sure Jondalar really loves her. They are full of such angst that in those passages the story almost becomes no better than a romance novel.

Auel's fans wouldn't have to wait so long for the next book if she would tighten up her writing. The books would be a good bit shorter, but the story would be better. Where is her editor? And yet, I will read the next one, no matter how long it is (this audiobook was 29 discs).

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