

Cro-Magnons 'just like you and me,' Tulane professor says in new book

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Trenton Holliday, professor of anthropology in the School of Liberal Arts, has written a book on early humans and their lives during the ice age. (Photo by Tracie Morris Schaefer)

Trenton Holliday, professor of anthropology in the School of Liberal Arts at Tulane University, thinks human evolution is cool, and he thinks you should, too.

In his new book, *Cro-Magnon: The Story of the Last Ice Age People of Europe*, Holliday hopes to share just how cool human evolution is. The book explores where

we as *Homo sapiens* came from and how we became the modern humans who exist today.

“They’re people like you and me,” Holliday said about the titular prehistoric humans. Cro-Magnons, sometimes called “European early modern humans,” were members of our species, *Homo sapiens*, who lived in Europe at the end of the last ice age. “They had language, they created art. Some of them lived in the same place all year long, which we often think of only happening with agriculture.”

In the book, Holliday describes the work he and other paleoanthropologists do to learn all about prehistoric humans. There are snapshots throughout his time as a researcher, digging in the field and studying specimens at universities around the world.

Holliday also describes what researchers know about the lives of the Cro-Magnons, like their diets, how they may have reacted to a warming planet at the end of the ice age and the art they created. “Their art is really unsurpassed,” said Holliday. “It’s ever bit as good as what you see in the Renaissance.”

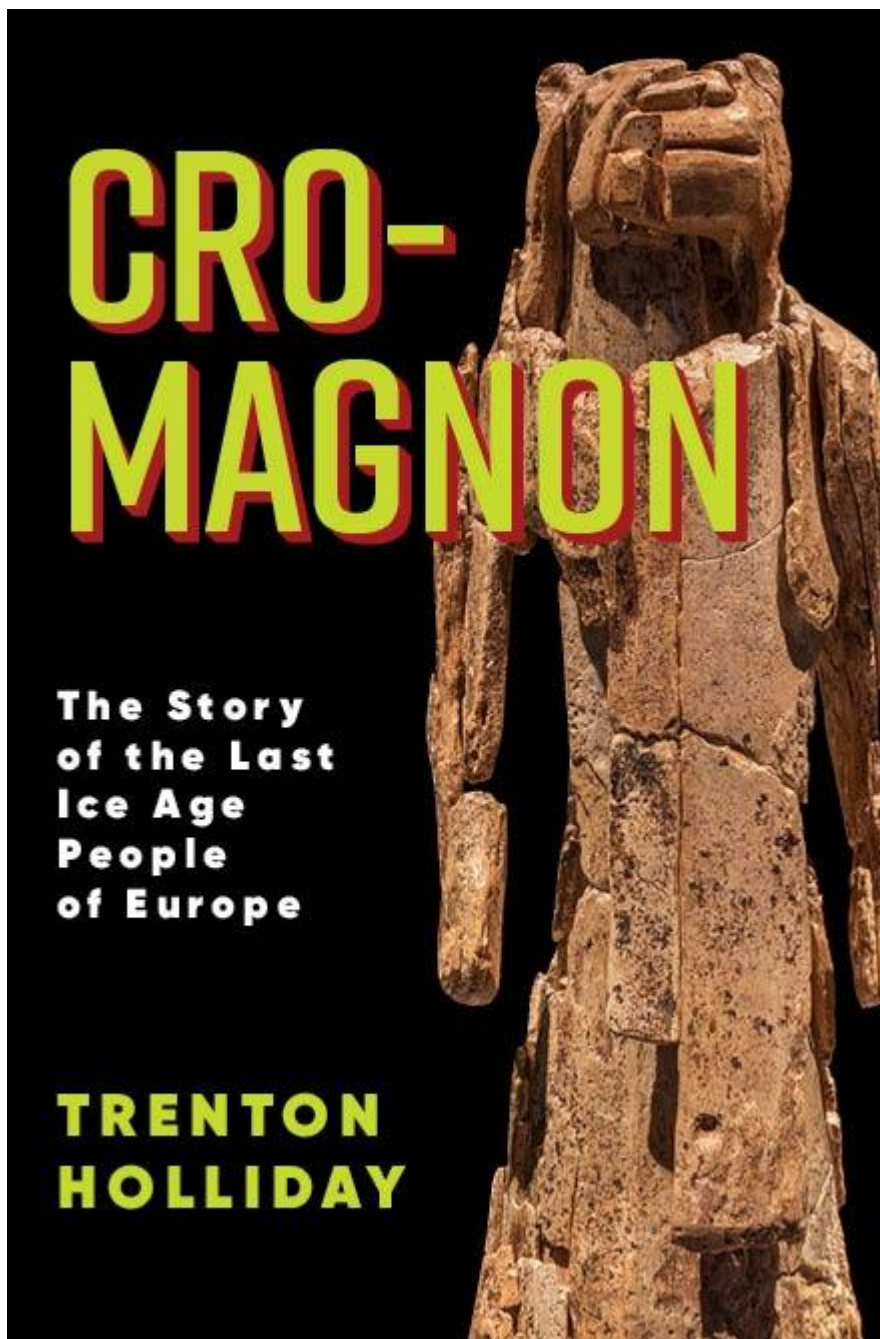
The book touches on some more well-known prehistoric hominins, like the Neandertals. Cro-Magnons and Neandertals most likely interacted with each other, although *Homo sapiens* clearly came out on top. That doesn’t necessarily mean that Neandertals were stupid, Holliday said. “I’m a defender of Neandertal cognition.”

Neandertals tend to get a lot of attention, though, and Holliday wanted to focus on the early *Homo sapiens* he has studied for most of his career. “They appeal to me,” he said. “They were people with real human foibles and real human stories.”

Holliday wrote much of the book during a sabbatical year in 2020 and 2021. “It was a very different sabbatical than the way I envisioned it,” said Holliday. “I thought I’d be at a coffee shop, you know, and instead I was cramped into a corner of what had been my children’s playroom with Legos everywhere.”

It worked out, though. Holliday got most of the book written in that time, driven by what he called “pure curiosity.” At the end of the day, the reason he studies human evolution, and the reason he wrote a book about Cro-Magnons, he said, is simple. “I just think it’s cool.”

Cro-Magnon: The Story of the Last Ice Age People of Europe by Trenton Holliday will be available July 18, 2023, from Columbia University Press.



"Cro-Magnon: The Story of the Last Ice Age People of Europe" is published by Columbia University Press and will be available July 18, 2023. (Cover art provided by Columbia University Press)