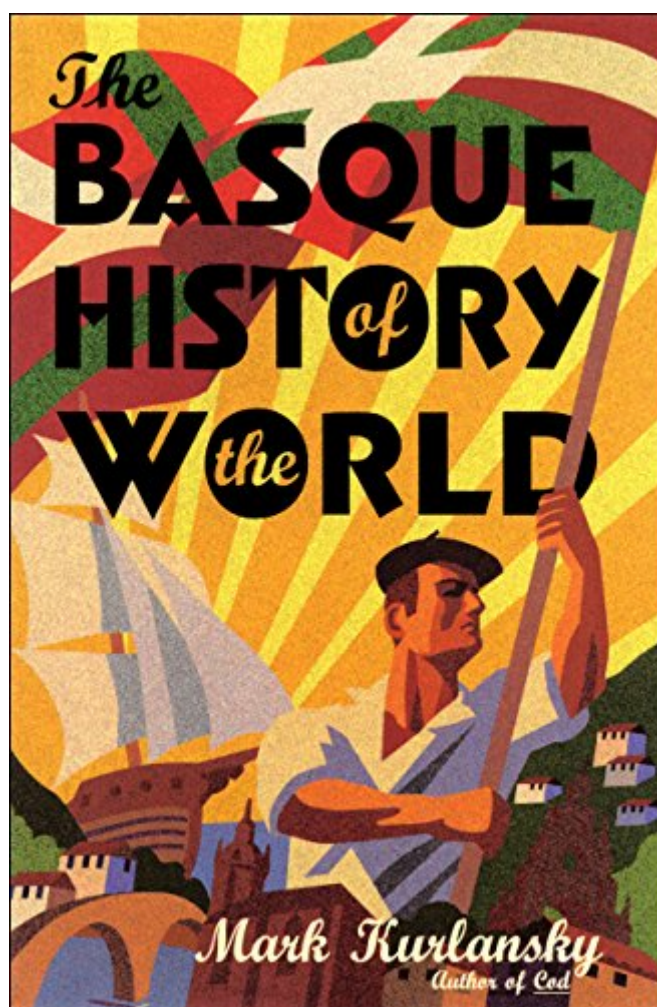


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The Basque History Of The World



Synopsis

The Basque History of the World is the illuminating story of an ancient and enigmatic people. Signs of their civilization existed well before the arrival of the Romans in 218 B.C., and though theories abound, no one has ever been able to determine their origins. Their ancient tongue, Euskera, is equally mysterious: It is the oldest living European language, and is related to no other language on Earth. Yet despite their obscure origins and small numbers (2.4 million people today), the Basques have had a profound impact on Europe and the world for more than 2,000 years. Never seeking more land, they have nonetheless fiercely defended their own against invaders ranging from the Celts and Visigoths to Napoleon and Franco. They have always been a paradoxical blend of inbred tradition and worldly ambition, preserving their indigenous legal code, cuisine, literature-even their own hat and shoe-while at the same time striving immodestly to be leaders in the world. They were pioneers of commercial whaling and cod fishing, were among the first Europeans in the Americas, Africa, and Asia during the age of exploration, and were prosperous capitalists when capitalism was a new idea, later leading the Industrial Revolution in southern Europe. Their influence has been felt in every realm, from religion (the charismatic Ignatius Loyola founded the Jesuits in 1534) to sports and commerce. Today, even while clinging to their ancient tribal identity, they are ready for a borderless world: The unique Basque concept of nationhood has never been more relevant, at a time when Basques are enjoying what may be the most important cultural renaissance in their long existence.

Mark Kurlansky's passion for the Basque people- their heroes and commoners alike-and his exuberant eye for detail shine throughout The Basque History of the World. Like his celebrated book Cod, it blends human stories with economic, political,

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Customer Reviews

I've always been interested in basque culture and language, have even tried to learn euskera on my own. That said, I also am very interested in spanish culture (castilian, galician, catalan etc.) as such and have lived in Madrid for a while. I found this book very readable and hard to put down, Kurlansky has a knack for presenting the material in an entertaining and readable fashion without getting stylistically bland. Despite that, I have some gripes with it. Kurlansky is obviously a journalist and writes the book as such, but I for one would have wanted more of a historians account. His choice of not using footnotes or endnotes, but just supplying a general bibliography at the end, is very annoying, because that way he is able to put down statements without backing them up. I even found one wrong statement, that basque ships had been sighted in Iceland in 1412. That's wrong,

these ships were english, ushering in what is called the English Age in icelandic history (basques didn't arrive in Iceland until the end of the 16th. century, there are at least no accounts available of earlier encounters). Kurlansky is not the only one guilty of making this mistake, but if he would have dug a bit further he would have found out the truth. So it goes to show, if he trusted his sources so blindly in this case, what else is inaccurate there? Again, the use of footnotes/endnotes would have solved this, as one would have been able to verify each statement. Kurlansky is also quite romantic, and even if he tries to criticize when criticism is due, it's quite obvious that his sympathy lies with the basques. This mix works quite well in the earlier chapters on prehistory, but not as well when he talks about the political situation today.

Kurlansky has written a brilliant introduction to a mysterious people. It is also a timely one, although not universally popular considering its rather lax treatment of ETA violence. Kurlansky does perhaps harbour sympathies for the Basque people and even for the most extreme of their nationalist tendencies, but he does not let this completely cloud his judgment, and it is not entirely clear that Kurlansky "takes sides" or endorses one course of action or another. I can see why it would be easy to become so attached to the Basques and their culture, their language, and the ongoing fight they have pursued in order to keep these fundamentals of who they are intact. People deserve to keep their history, heritage, language, and cuisine, and the Basques have a long, rich, and misunderstood history which deserves the kind of recognition Kurlansky's book brings to their cause, wherever Kurlansky's personal sympathies lie. I felt that Kurlansky presented basically unbiased information, particularly about the history of the Basques in centuries past. The book is filled with revelations about this formidable and fascinating culture, and I feel that these kinds of explorations in Kurlansky's research and writing dominated this work much more so than current political issues or separatist violence. Sure, it is easy enough for me to say this, completely isolated from the violence and the everyday problems these tense relations may create, but I can say that there are groups in the world who are routinely terrorized by other groups without provocation. (Perhaps "terrorized" is not the ideal word choice because I do not see a reign of terror in the making. I do see that some people may perceive the unrest as such depending on their vantage point).

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