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Edward Ball

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THE GENETIC STRAND

EXPLORING A FAMILY HISTORY THROUGH DNA



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Edward Ball : The Genetic Strand: Exploring a Family History Through DNA before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Genetic Strand: Exploring a Family History Through DNA:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Not as good as Slaves in the Family, but interestingBy Paula StewartI love Edward Balls' writing, and his dedication to researching his family. This book does highlight the limitations of genetic testing, and it's a graphic lesson in learning to understand what it can and can't do before you invest too much hope in it.I also have his previous book, Slaves in the Family, where he describes his welcoming feelings towards his family's former slaves who, turns out, are also related to him. So it was surprising to read his angst at discovering that he may possibly have African roots, too.4 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Interesting use of the technologyBy AtheenI found this an intriguing book. DNA technology has become almost synonymous with crime detection and paternity suits for most people, but the author, Edward Ball, chose to do a study of his ancestors, using samples of their hair kept as mementoes during the 19th Century and stored away in the secret drawer of an old desk since their collection. Each specimen was labeled with date and individual name, and the author was also possessed of considerable historical information regarding their lives, which fleshed out the family story to a great degree. My aunt Dorothy, who does the family genealogy for the Drakes, Chesters, and other branches of our family, has compiled a long list of names, birthdates, marriage dates, etc, but it contains so little that is relevant to the lives of those listed, that it has little to offer a reader who wants to connect with the past. Here the author tells a tale of a family who owned large plantations, married endogamously by habit, preference and necessity, suffering occasional insanity as a result, and lived through the trials of the Civil War and its aftermath. What a tale. It reads like a novel with expert commentary. The author, though not himself a scientist, did an excellent job of describing the process of DNA extraction, analysis, and interpretation for the lay reader, using the technological jargon sparingly and explaining it well when it was used. Because the information he obtained pertained primarily to his own questions regarding family members, it was a more intimate look at the science and what it can and cannot do. What he discovered was pretty much what might have been expected from what he was told by others and by documents, but the sense that he made of the past was more than worth the effort. The story is very readable and well told. 24 of 26 people found the following review helpful. Using DNA For A Fresh Look At The PastBy John D. CofieldEdward Ball comes from a large Southern family with a long history in Charleston, South Carolina. Using packets of hair his ancestors collected from their children and other relatives and then cached in an old desk, he attempted to learn more about his genetic background by having the DNA extracted and analyzed. He used a variety of labs in both North America and Europe, and finished with some answers and a few new puzzles. One of the deep, dark, secrets of American genealogy is the amount of admixture to be found in most people. There is no such thing as a "pure" Indo-European, Sub-Saharan African, or Native American, though many still maintain that they are racially homogeneous. On the other hand, many who have done a little reading and a little experimenting with DNA research themselves tend to make the assumption that the science is so crystal clear that all the answers are right there, ready to be cheek swabbed and analyzed. Ball does a good job of demonstrating that both assumptions are false. His research indicated possible Native American and Sub-Saharan African ancestry mixed in with his "Nordic" Ball genes, then later indicated that such ancestry might not exist after all. The hair samples sometimes yielded much information, but often remained frustratingly silent. In chronicling his research into his family's past history Ball also gives a good overview of the science behind DNA research, making sense of highly technical terms and jargon so that general readers can get a better sense of what actually takes place in DNA analysis. As a genealogist with a Southern family background very similar to Ball's, I enjoyed reading his stories about his ancestors and his quest to learn more about their racial makeup. One of my great-grandmothers made a collection of hair from herself and her husband and oldest son which I now possess, so I was interested in reading Ball's history of this nineteenth century custom and how he made use of it. I have also had my own DNA analyzed and learned some intriguing things about my own ancestry. In my case, a family legend that a great-great-great-grandmother had been a full-blooded Cherokee Indian was disproved when my mitochondrial DNA, which I inherited from her, proved to be of European origin. Ball has done a good job of making a highly technical science understandable and, more importantly, of demonstrating that that science is still in its infancy and capable of error and uncertainties. His book should be read by anyone considering having DNA research done or by anyone interested in this new and fascinating area.

The Genetic Strand is the story of a writer's investigation, using DNA science, into the tale of his family's origins. National Book Award winner Edward Ball has turned his probing gaze on the microcosm of the human genome, and not just any human genome -- that of his slave-holding ancestors. What is the legacy of such a family history, and can DNA say something about it? In 2000, after a decade in New York City, Ball bought a house in Charleston, South Carolina, home to his father's family for generations, and furnished it with heirloom pieces from his relatives. In one old desk he was startled to discover a secret drawer, sealed perhaps since the Civil War, in which someone had hidden a trove of family hair, with each lock of hair labeled and dated. The strange find propelled him to investigate: what might DNA science reveal about the people -- Ball's family members, long dead -- to whom the hair had belonged? Did the hair come from white relatives, as family tradition insisted? How can genetic tests explain personal identity? Part crime-scene investigation, part genealogical romp, The Genetic Strand is a personal odyssey into DNA and family history. The story takes the reader into forensics labs where technicians screen remains, using genetics breakthroughs like DNA fingerprinting, and into rooms where fathers nervously await paternity test results. It also summons the writers entertaining and idiosyncratic family, such as Balls antebellum predecessor, Aunt Betsy, who published nutty books on good Southern society; Kate Fuller, the enigmatic ancestor who may have introduced African genes into the Ball family pool; and the authors first cousin Catherine, very much alive, who donates a cheek swab from a mouth more attuned to sweet iced tea than DNA sampling. Writing gracefully but pacing his story like an old-fashioned whodunit, Edward Ball tracks genes shared across generations, adding suspense and personal meaning to what the

scientists and Nobel laureates tell us. A beguiling DNA tale, *The Genetic Strand* reaches toward a new form of writing the genetic memoir.

From Publishers Weekly Some locks of hair found in the secret compartment of a family heirloom was the catalyst for Ball, a National Book Award winner for *Slaves in the Family*, to embark on a genetic family history. He became animated with the thought that through DNA analysis of the hair he could discover some truths about his Ball ancestry, such as whether his father's maternal grandmother, Kate Fuller, was part African-American. As he relates his experiences with various DNA labs, Ball also describes the hard science behind DNA forensics, informed by conversations with experts in the field. But the account's drama comes from a finding that suggests a Native American ancestor in his family tree. Another lab contradicts this evidence, and the error affects Ball profoundly, leading him to rail about the fallibility of science, the dangers of making science the new religion and scientists, specifically molecular biologists, the new priests. Forensic DNA testing has become hot (exemplified by Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s televised testing results), and as Ball's own emotions show, is also playing into Americans' sense of identity. Ball's tale will intrigue America's many amateur genealogists and also serve as a cautionary tale. (Nov. 6) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. "Powerful...Ball contributes to at least partly reclaiming the humanity slavery worked to obliterate. He reminds us that slavery was not just about economics or politics or even abstract questions of morality but most essentially about the millions of human beings imprisoned within its chains." -- Drew Gilpin Faust, *The New York Times Book* "Ball is a first-rate scholar-journalist.... Outside Faulkner, it will be hard to find a more poignant, powerful account of a white man struggling with his and his nation's past." -- Shane Harrison, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* About the Author Edward Ball was born in Savannah, Georgia; graduated from Brown University; and was a writer for *The Village Voice*. His first book, *Slaves in the Family*, won the National Book Award. He is also the author of *The Sweet Hell Inside*.