Book Review

Proto: How One Ancient Language Went Global

By Laura Spinney

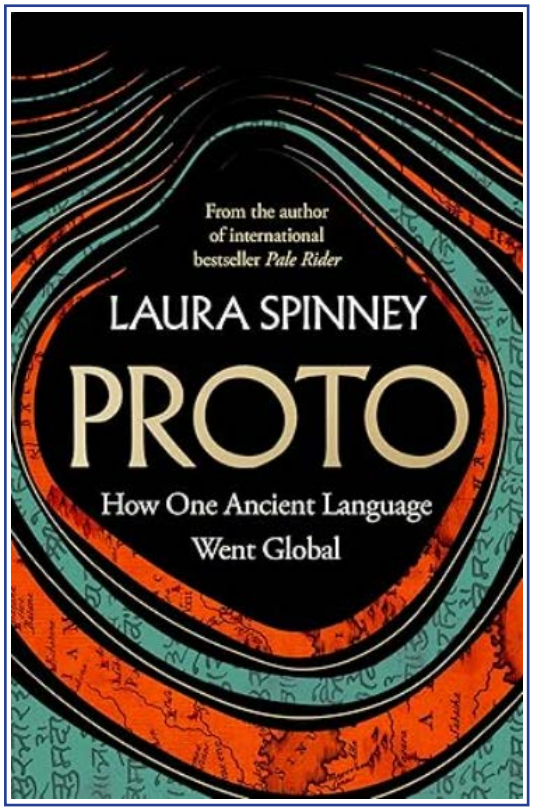
Publisher: William Collins

Language: English

Published - 24 April 2025

Print Length - 352 pages

ISBN: 978-0008626525



About the Author

Laura Spinney is a British science journalist and author known for her non-fiction book "Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World". She is also the author of two novels and a collection of oral history. Her writing on science has appeared in publications like National Geographic, Nature, The Economist, and The Guardian. Spinney's work often combines her expertise in science with a narrative approach, making complex topics accessible to a wider audience. She has been recognized for her ability to weave together historical research, scientific analysis, and compelling storytelling.

Appreciation and Critique

Proto: How One Ancient Language Went Global by Laura Spinney is a compelling exploration of the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) language, believed to be the common ancestor of many modern languages across Europe and Asia. Spinney weaves together linguistics, archaeology, and cultural history to trace how this lost language, though never written down, spread and influenced countless linguistic lineages. Her narrative is both scholarly and accessible, making the complex history of language evolution engaging for general readers. The book's strongest appeal lies in its ability to humanize the ancient speakers of PIE, turning dry linguistic theory into a vivid story of migration, culture, and communication.

Spinney's appreciation for the interdisciplinary nature of language research is evident throughout the book. She draws from linguistic reconstructions, DNA studies, and archaeological findings to support her central thesis: that the speakers of Proto-Indo-European played a major role in shaping the linguistic map of the modern world. Her discussion of the Yamnaya people, thought to be instrumental in spreading PIE, is particularly illuminating. By embedding language in its social and historical context, Spinney makes the subject relevant to current debates on identity, migration, and globalization.

The book also shines in its portrayal of language as a living, evolving force. Spinney appreciates the nuances of how languages morph and blend over time, emphasizing that linguistic purity is a myth. This perspective is both refreshing and important in today's political climate, where language often becomes a tool for exclusion. Her writing underscores the resilience and adaptability of human communication, and she celebrates linguistic diversity as a legacy of our shared ancestry rather than as a divider.

However, while the book is rich in insight, it occasionally sacrifices depth for narrative flow. Some linguistic theories and controversies are touched on only briefly, which may leave academic readers wanting more rigorous analysis. At times, the speculative nature of PIE reconstruction is not fully acknowledged, which might give casual readers the impression that more is known than is actually provable. These moments of oversimplification are rare but notable in a work that

otherwise strives for balance between accessibility and accuracy.

Proto is a thoughtful and ambitious attempt to unravel one of the greatest linguistic mysteries of human history. Laura Spinney succeeds in creating a bridge between scientific inquiry and storytelling, bringing the ancient world to life through the lens of language. While the book could have examined deeper into some technical debates, its overall contribution to public understanding of historical linguistics is significant. It not only informs but also provokes reflection on how language shapes — and is shaped by — the human experience.

Ankita Shrivastava
Assistant Professor,
Department of Finance & Business Analytics
RV Institute of Management (RVIM)
#CA-17, 36th Cross, 26th Main
4th "T" Block, Jayanagar
Bengaluru – 560041, India
E-mail: ankitashri.rvim@rvei.edu.in