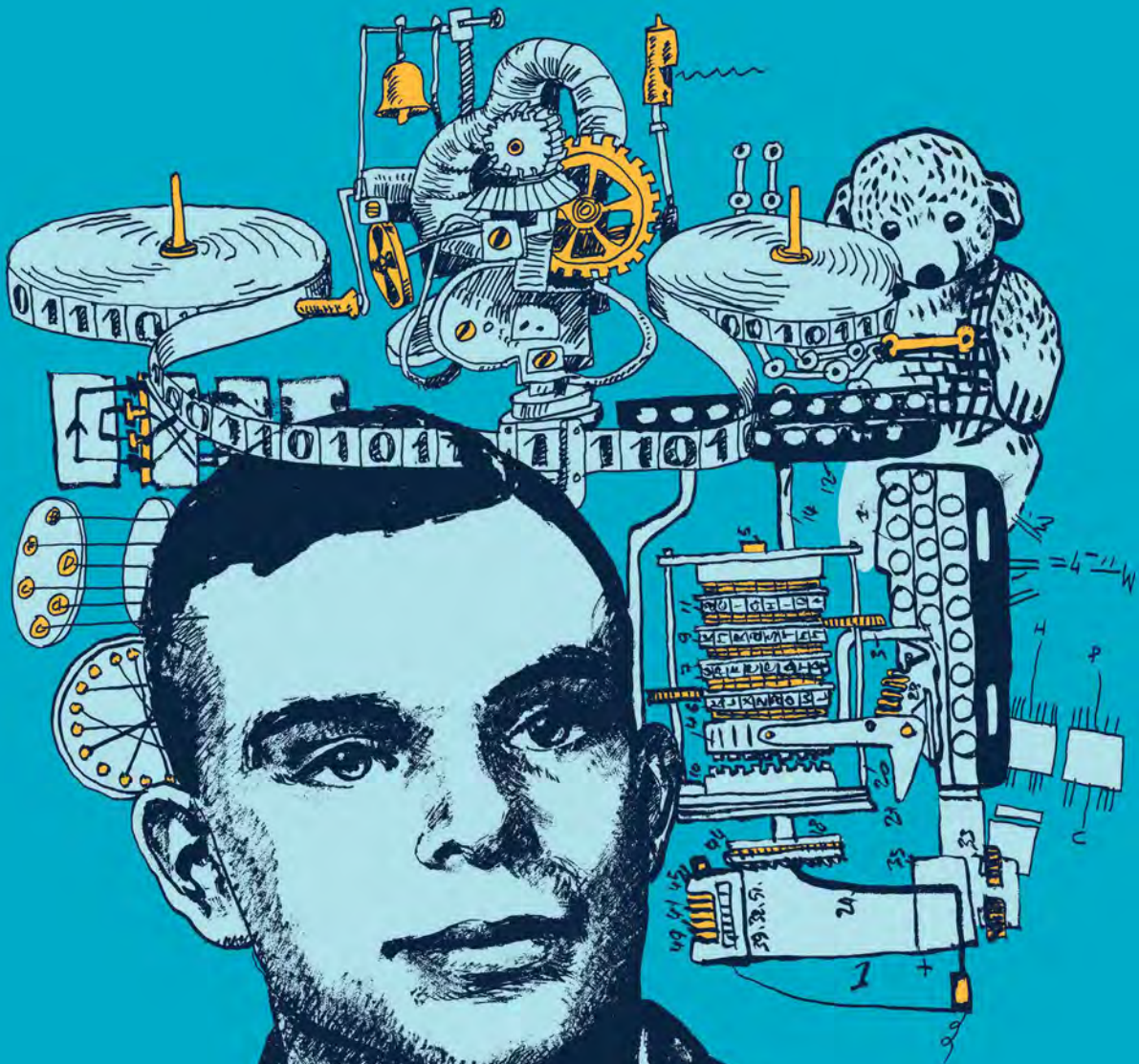


CÉDRIC VILLANI

BAUDOIN

BEAUTIFUL DREAMERS

FOUR GENIUSES WHO CHANGED HISTORY



Gallimard/Grasset

BEAUTIFUL DREAMERS
Four Geniuses Who changed History

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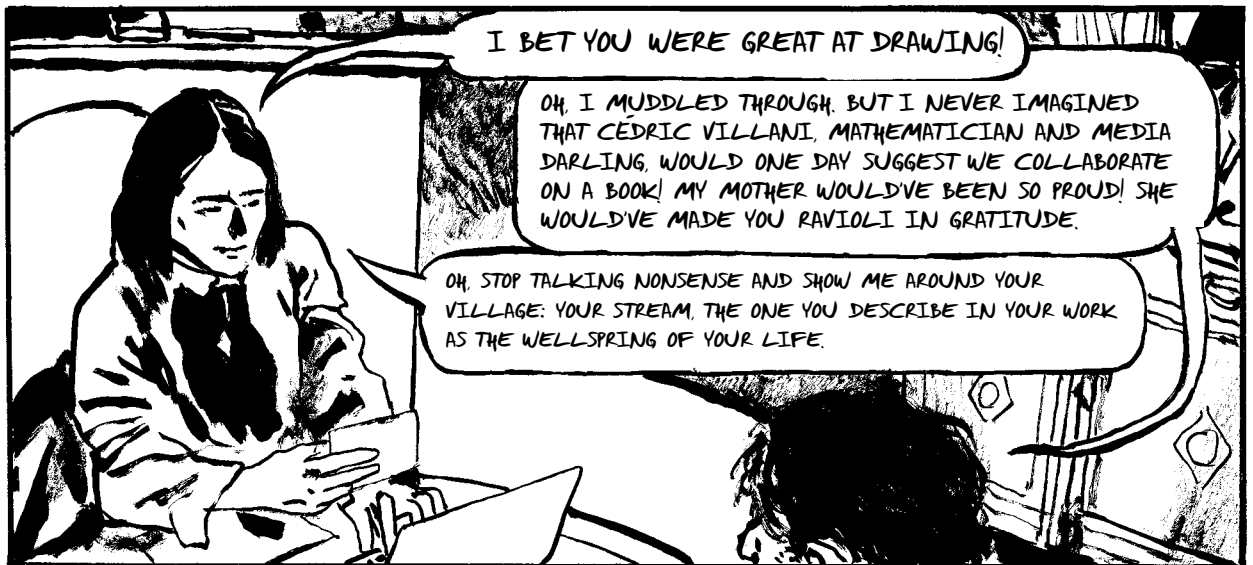
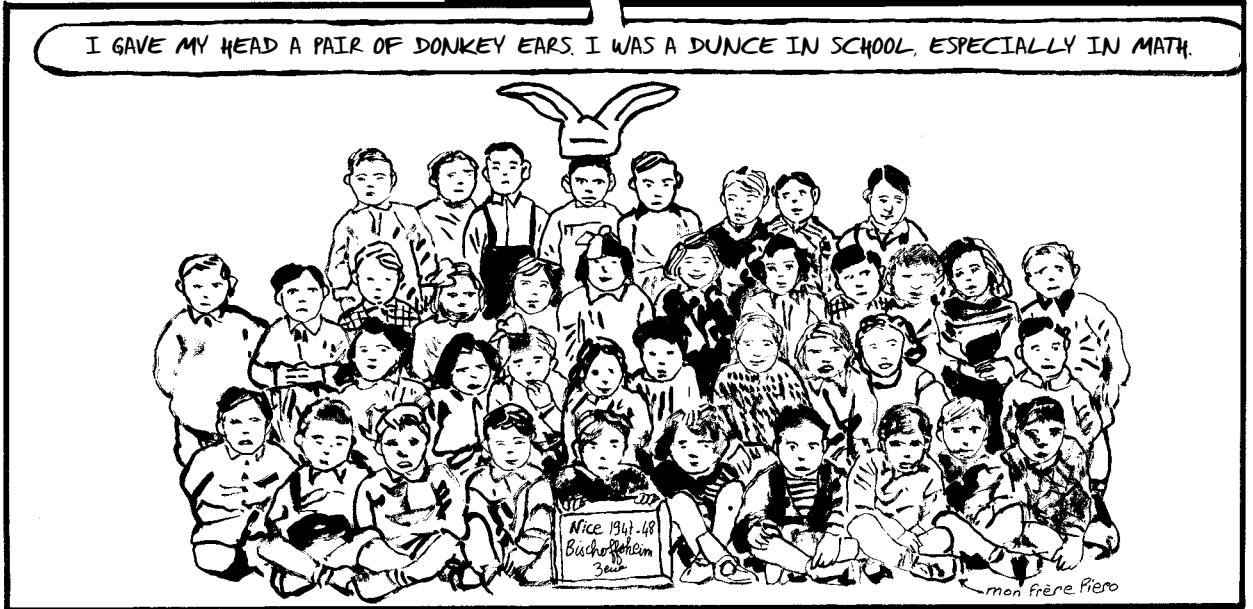
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During World War II, there were those who wanted to swallow the Earth whole, and those who measure the Moon. We often speak of the first, with their Homeric battles and grandiose plans, but the conflict also played out in the feelings and ideas of a few tormented dreamers who belonged to that second category. They wanted to measure the Moon, which is to say mobilize all their neurons in order to understand the inaccessible, use all the world's science to make the impossible happen. And to do so beneath the Moon's mocking gaze, impassive to all human activity.



HERE, LOOK AT THIS PHOTO.

I GAVE MY HEAD A PAIR OF DONKEY EARS. I WAS A DUNCE IN SCHOOL, ESPECIALLY IN MATH.



I BET YOU WERE GREAT AT DRAWING!

OH, I MUDDLED THROUGH. BUT I NEVER IMAGINED THAT CEDRIC VILLANI, MATHEMATICIAN AND MEDIA DARLING, WOULD ONE DAY SUGGEST WE COLLABORATE ON A BOOK! MY MOTHER WOULD'VE BEEN SO PROUD! SHE WOULD'VE MADE YOU RAVIOLI IN GRATITUDE.

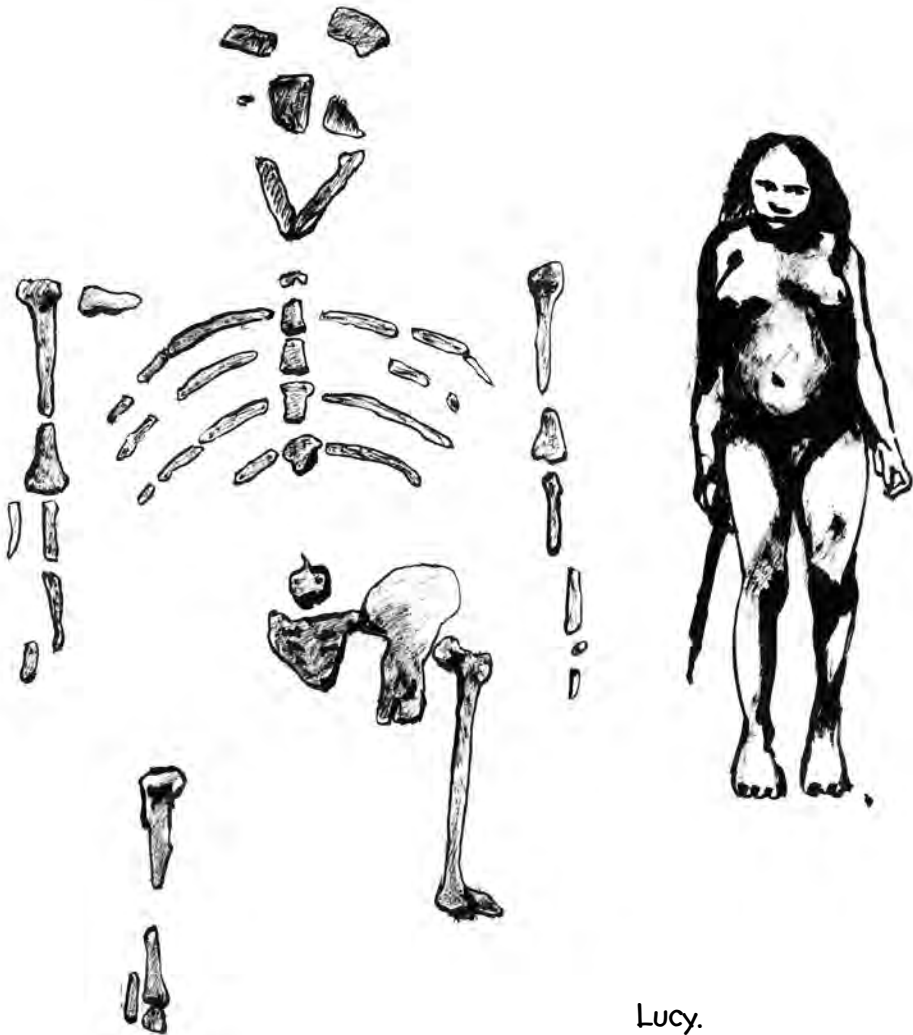
OH, STOP TALKING NONSENSE AND SHOW ME AROUND YOUR VILLAGE: YOUR STREAM, THE ONE YOU DESCRIBE IN YOUR WORK AS THE WELLSPRING OF YOUR LIFE.

Place Villars-sur-Var, as featured in "Couma acò and Piero".

Cédric is wearing a three-piece suit and a floppy necktie, his spider pin on his lapel.

An old lady rises from the stone bench and comes over to him.



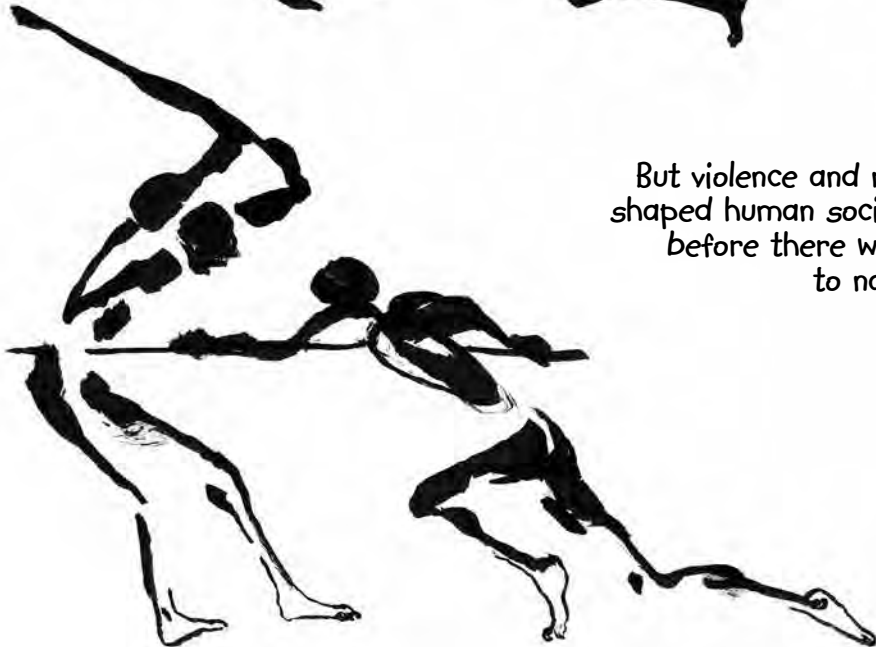


Lucy.
About 3.2 million years old.

Human beings have been hunting, dancing, and speaking for maybe more than a million years.

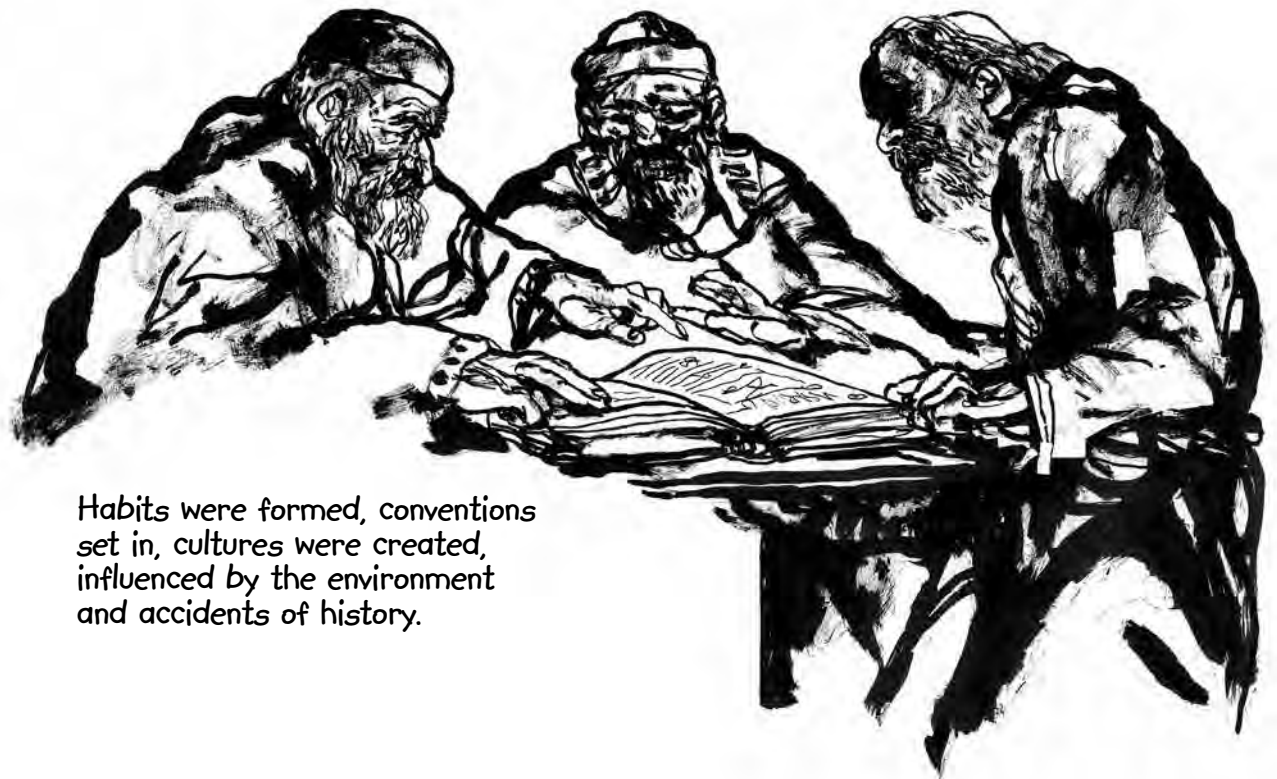


But violence and mutual aid shaped human societies even before there were words to name them.





Over the centuries, the millennia, societies became ever vaster, ever more structured, violence and mutual aid ever more organized. Individual and collective dimensions counted for more than ever before. An idea born in a one brain was multiplied and brought into being by an entire community.



Habits were formed, conventions set in, cultures were created, influenced by the environment and accidents of history.



Built up by feeling our way along, science, a long-term collective endeavor, has worked miracles, revealed laws of the invisible world, and allowed us to exploit them.



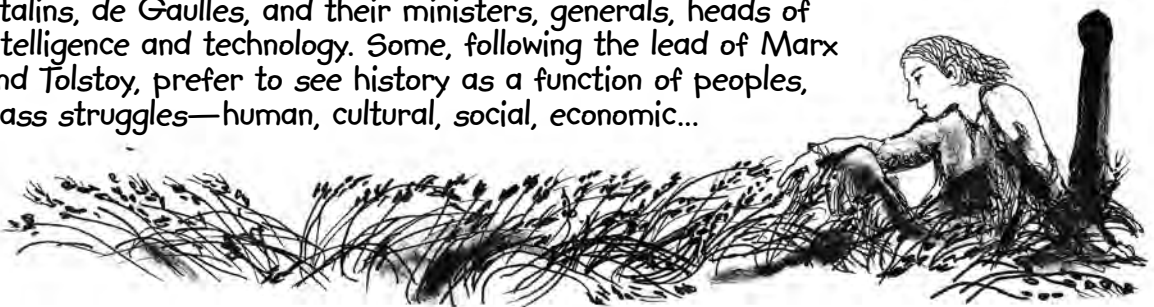
Little by little, armies formed, ever more sophisticated, in the service of ever more specific and uniform cultural identities. Millions of men came to act or oppose each other in unison.



Creating a culture is a beautiful thing. It's important to have an army to defend it. But any principle, no matter what, becomes horrible when taken to an extreme. And so it was that in the year 1945 A.D., the history of humankind reached the height of its inhumanity, with the discovery of unimaginable war crimes: German death camps, the experiments of Japanese Unit 731, the atrocities of the Russian NKVD, tortures carried out on captives on an industrial scale, and the use of never before seen weapons—two atomic bombs. Just two years after the Battle of Stalingrad, the bloodiest in history...



Humans need to give their events embodiment, and human history is often understood in terms of political figures. You have your Hitlers, your Churchills, your Mussolinis, your Roosevelts, Trumans, Stalins, de Gaulles, and their ministers, generals, heads of intelligence and technology. Some, following the lead of Marx and Tolstoy, prefer to see history as a function of peoples, class struggles—human, cultural, social, economic...



But both approaches neglect a fundamental fact: soldiers and scientists aren't just pawns in the service of the community, subject to political orders. They are, first and foremost, often unpredictable human beings; sometimes, their flashes of genius can change the outcome of a conflict; at other times, they have a hard time following commands. Sometimes they do so reluctantly, sometimes they can't at all. They often run up against the wheels and cogs of their own organizations.



History often doesn't recognize their merit, and once the action's over, and they've had enough time to let their thoughts wander, what judgments do they pass on themselves? They've taken part in a great battle with the fate of their country, or the whole world, at stake: are they proud, ashamed, distraught, bitter?



In this tale, we will meet a few of these heroes whom history so rarely mentions. Their individual powers, multiplied by collective action, swung or could have swung the course of the war. And yet, their roles are not covered in history books, their actions are known only to select insiders. The world can go on turning without them. But for them, one last fight remains. The final battle after the war is over, the Ragnarok of the Norse gods.

The battle with their own consciences.

August 6, 1945.

