… the way we see the world and act in it — whether the end result is gender inequality or trusting strangers — is significantly shaped by internal beliefs and norms that have been passed down in families and small communities. It seems that these norms are even taken with an individual when he moves to another country. But how might history have such a powerful impact on families, even when they have moved away from the place where that history, whatever it was, took place?’

Christine Kenneally, The Invisible History of the Human Race

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXT

This complex and fascinating book attempts to make sense of human history and the way it shapes our individual thoughts, attitudes and behaviours.

Christine Kenneally is the author of two books, and has won awards for her journalism in Australia and internationally. The Invisible History of the Human Race reaches from the present back into deep history, charting traits inherited via community, family and genetics.

The book is divided into three parts – ‘Ideas about What Is Passed Down Are Passed Down’, ‘What Is Passed Down’ and ‘How What Is Passed Down Shapes Bodies and Minds’. The author has covered a lot of ground (literally), travelling between countries to track down experts and follow ideas through to their conclusion. She faithfully recounts personal stories, examines scientific theories, and charts the various attempts that have been made to discover and record our genetic lineage. She speaks with great authority, and creates the impression that not a single stone has been left unturned in her research for the book.

In her introduction, Kenneally discusses the questions that often drive people towards researching their personal history. Where do I come from? Where do I go from here? What is my legacy? These same questions resonate throughout the book, as readers are asked to trace their own unique combinations of character traits and DNA back through time to their origins.

The Invisible History of the Human Race covers many topics, each pushing the boundaries of where and how we define ourselves. Kenneally constantly reinforces the legitimacy of personal stories, giving examples of the ways that each individual story can be used to shape, highlight and reflect on the bigger picture of human history. This book explores not only the ways our inherited identity can empower individuals, but also the ways it has been used against them. Kenneally covers some of the most significant events in history – the Roman Invasion of Britain, the Mongol Empire, slavery in the United States, the Holocaust – and sharpens our view of them by showing how they constitute part of our genetic makeup.

Each of the topics covered in the book would be fascinating enough in isolation, but the connections Kenneally draws between them make them even more so. She discusses the ways we record and engage with our history, and the rise of popular online tools such as Ancestry.com. These are then considered in relation to written histories, oral histories and now genetic histories. These strands of our past are blended together seamlessly.

Personal history, world history, science and technology walk hand in hand through this book. Because of the broad scope of the content, there are
innumerable ways to engage with the text. From a school perspective, the text could be studied as a whole, or as distinct chapters. It could be studied for subjects including history, gender studies, English, social studies and geography. A number of possible discussions could stem from each of the topics covered, and there are countless links to contemporary issues and material that could enhance these discussions. These notes therefore are predominantly open-ended reading questions, designed to prompt classroom study, essays or personal research projects. There are several activities at the end, however teachers are encouraged to use this book and these notes to supplement a variety of classroom topics.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR


Before becoming a reporter, she received a PhD in linguistics from Cambridge University and a BA (Hons) in English and Linguistics from Melbourne University. She was born and raised in Melbourne, Australia, and has lived in England, Iowa and Brooklyn. She is currently a contributing editor for Buzzfeed News.

Taken from the author’s website www.christinekenneally.com

THEMES
Genealogy
Personal history
World history
DNA
Ethics
Identity
Human behaviour
Family

READING QUESTIONS
✦ What is the appeal of genealogy?
✦ ‘If there are no records, there is no power.’ (Chapter 2) What do you think the author means by this? How are records used to wield power, or to take it away? How might a loss of records mean a loss of power?
✦ What did Ralph Waldo Emerson mean when he said ‘Our age is retrospective’? (Chapter 2) Is this a negative thing?
✦ Why do you think so many people are fascinated by their family histories?
✦ What evidence is needed to prove family connections? How has evidence of family history been used against people?
✦ How is genealogy used against people with lower class status? How does this relate back to the earlier question about power?
✦ Where did people get the idea that some groups of people were inherently superior to others? How did this form the basis for the Nazi party?
✦ What are the three ideas (Chapter 3) that radically changed the way people thought about generations and genealogy?
✦ Who was the first person to study heredity in twins?
✦ Who coined the phrase ‘nature and nurture’?
✦ What is eugenics? What are the ethical issues surrounding eugenics and sterilisation?
✦ How were Grant’s (Chapter 3) ideas interpreted by Hitler? How did he manipulate existing social attitudes against the Jews?
✦ When has forced sterilisation occurred in Australia? What are the human rights issues associated with this?
✦ How does Ottokar Lorenz (Chapter 4) describe the functions of genealogy?
✦ What is antigenealogy? How are genealogy and antigenealogy used to persecute people?
✦ How is genealogy significant for people who have been adopted? What rights do they have to access
birth records, and how do these differ from the rights of people who are raised by their biological parents?

✦ What is your ‘web of information’ (Chapter 5)? How does this web influence your identity? How would you feel if it was taken from you?

✦ Who has the rights to your history? To your DNA?

✦ ‘Totalitarian power thrives when it alienates people from basic information about themselves.’ (Chapter 5) What do you think this statement means? Is it accurate? Who might be affected by this?

✦ How does information go missing?

✦ Who might have ‘a vested interest in forgetting’? (Chapter 5)

✦ Is tracking our personal history disrespectful to the secrets of our ancestors?

✦ How has the internet changed the way we engage with the past? What are the possible implications of this in the future?

✦ What does Marshall Duke (Chapter 6) call the ‘intergenerational self’? What is it associated with and why?

✦ How can we preserve data? What happens if we lose it?

✦ What is the information that gives context for data? How do we preserve that?

✦ What are the ethical issues associated with a resource like Ancestry.com?

✦ What are the different ways that we pass down our histories?

✦ What does genealogy tell us about our past? What could it tell us about our future?

✦ How is our personal identity shaped by what we know about our family history?

✦ What ‘ideas and feelings’ are communicated down to us through our family? How does this shape our attitudes?

✦ In Chapter 7, how do Nunn and Wantchekon define culture?

✦ What are the genealogical effects of the slave trade on later generations?

✦ What factors can influence the likelihood of an idea or feeling being passed down through generations?

✦ What do the terms ‘horizontal transmission’ and ‘vertical transmission’ mean?

✦ What are the problems with candidate gene study?

✦ What can the living body tell us about deep history?

✦ What significant historical discoveries were made through the study of human genomes in Britain?

✦ How can genealogy help explain social history?

✦ What influence did the Mongol Empire have on DNA?

✦ Apart from fame, what might be noteworthy about being descended from someone historically significant?

✦ In Chapter 10 what does Greenspan say is the difference between telling stories and telling the truth?

✦ What are the differences between a genetic family tree and a genealogical family tree?

✦ In what way did Woodward and Sorensen hope that their DNA project would change the way people treat each other?

✦ According to Michele Cooley-Quille (Chapter 11), why is having a strong sense of family so important? Do you agree with this? Why/why not?

✦ What can happen to our sense of self when DNA is used to disprove something we consider part of our familial and personal identity? Support your answer with examples from the book.

✦ What are the risks of delving into your personal history?

✦ What impact does DNA have on our ideas of race? What are the positive and negative implications of this?
✦ How have Robert Lewontin’s (Chapter 11) findings on DNA and race informed contemporary ideas about the existence of race?
✦ How do different family members react to personal history? What conflicts can arise by tracing your past?
✦ How has genetics changed the way we look at our health? Is it always a positive thing, or could it be used in a negative way?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES
1. In this article (http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/17/stella-prize-2015-six-australian-authors-on-the-stories-behind-their-books) in the Guardian, Christine Kenneally talks about her approach to writing a book like this:

‘The writer had to embed themselves in other worlds and systems of knowledge, they had to labour to collect a mound of facts, and then they had to select and structure them, all so the reader would feel that they – the writer – had simply got out of the way of the story.’

The kind of writing used in this book is called ‘creative nonfiction’, which refers to writing that uses techniques normally found in fiction (plot, pace, character) to tell a story that is true. Watch the following YouTube video, outlining the structure of a creative nonfiction piece:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlguuzwdq_Y

– How does Kenneally ‘frame’ her writing?
– What other elements from Gutkind’s talk can you see in her piece?
– Choose a moment from the book that resonates with you, and use it to inspire your own piece of creative nonfiction. You could choose an element that requires further research, or use the material in the book as a way into telling the story of one of your own experiences.

2. Ancestry.com has a free 14-day trial period. Use this (or use pen and paper if you’d prefer) to draw up your own family tree. Put as much information in as you can, and try to find records where possible. Interview your parents and grandparents and try to go back as far as you can.

– Where do you get stuck? Why?
– What have you found that is interesting or surprising about your family?
– Have you been able to see aspects of yourself in any of the family members you discovered in your research?

FURTHER READING
On Christine Kenneally and The Invisible History of the Human Race
Digital Writers’ Festival 2015: Presenting the Stella Prize Longlist (Christine reading from The Invisible History of the Human Race) 10:40–16:03
http://digitalwritersfestival.com/2015/event/stella-longlist/
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/19/books/review/christine-kenneallys-invisible-history-of-the-human-race.html?_r=0
Christine Kenneally talks about The Invisible History of the Human Race: Black Inc. (VIDEO)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDCG0bfFlqQ
The Invisible History of the Human Race: Christine Kenneally: Huffington Post
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christine-kenneally/genealogy-eugenics_b_6367344.html
The Stella Interview: Christine Kenneally
Stella Prize 2015: the shortlisted authors on the stories behind their books: The Guardian
On creative nonfiction
https://www.creativenonfiction.org