Finding Fairness
From Pleistocene Foragers to Contemporary Capitalists
Justin Jennings

“A sweeping history of human societies redefined by the importance of our evolved expectation for fairness, which appears to have been just as critical to the human story as big brains, bipedalism, the capacity for language, and opposable thumbs.”—Neill J. Wallis, coeditor of New Histories of Pre-Columbian Florida

“In this magisterial and wide-ranging comparative study of how human societies organize themselves, Jennings convincingly shows that fairness is a key historical player and a dynamic catalyst of social change. Understanding its power is a vital contemporary concern, one that we can hardly afford to ignore.”—Dimitri Nakassis, author of Individuals and Society in Mycenaean Pylos

In this ambitious work, Justin Jennings explores the origins, endurance, and elasticity of ideas about fairness and how these ideas have shaped the development of societies at critical moments over the last 20,000 years. He argues that humans have an innate expectation for fairness, a disposition that evolved during the Pleistocene era as a means of adapting to an unpredictable and often cruel climate. This deep-seated desire to do what felt right then impacted how our species transitioned into smaller territories, settled into villages, formed cities, expanded empires, and navigated capitalism. Paradoxically, the predilection to find fair solutions often led to entrenched inequities over time as cooperative groups grew in size, duration, and complexity.

Using case studies ranging from Japanese hunter-gatherers to North African herdies to protesters on Wall Street, this book offers a broad comparative reflection on the endurance of a universal human trait amidst radical social change. Jennings makes the case that if we acknowledge fairness as a guiding principle of society, we can better understand that the solutions to yesterday’s problems remain relevant to the global challenges that we face today. Finding Fairness is a sweeping, archaeologically grounded view of human history with thought-provoking implications for the contemporary world.

Justin Jennings is senior curator of Latin American archaeology at the Royal Ontario Museum, as well as associate professor of anthropology at the University of Toronto. He is the author or editor of many books, including Globalizations and the Ancient World and Drink, Power, and Society in the Andes.