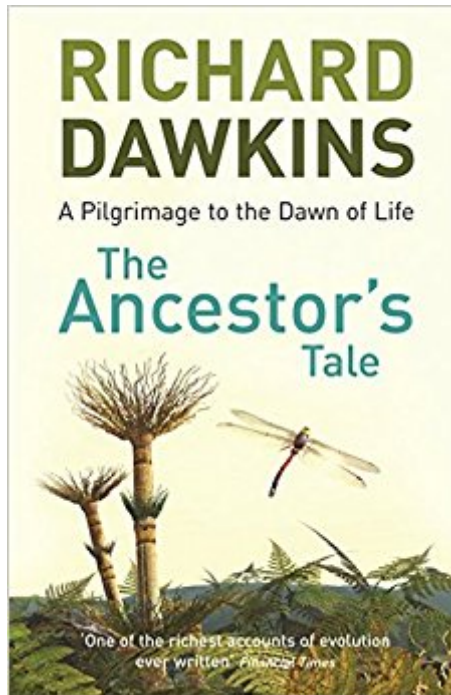


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The Ancestor's Tale (A Pilgrimage To The Dawn Of Life)



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Customer Reviews

A magnum opus from a scientist isn't common these days. Usually, their writings are in stacks of journal papers, with the occasional monograph highlighting a career. Journal articles remain buried in academic libraries, down the aisle from dusty tomes. Dawkins, however, is charged with the task of improving the "public understanding of science". With such a mandate, he is free to indulge in some innovative techniques. In this epic journey through time, he accomplishes that with his usual finesse. Add the lavish illustrations enhancing the text, and you have an outstanding depiction of evolution's saga. Unlike most general surveys of evolution, this one offers some novel approaches. First, of course, is its structure. Instead of vague beginnings, Dawkins opens with a period familiar to all his readers - the scenes around us today. Moreover, that focus is on the part of Nature of most concern to us - "All Humankind". We like to consider ourselves the "point" of evolution? So be it, Dawkins declares, but warns that a change in outlook will likely result as you read this book. From that point, he begins to work backward in time. He stands Chaucer on his head by adding "pilgrims" to our journey at certain waypoints. The "pilgrims" are the Most Recent Common Ancestor of the present population of creatures. Since he begins with Homo sapiens, the most recent common ancestor, which Dawkins [rather, one of his graduate assistants] deems a "concestor", is of course the ancestor of today's chimpanzee. It is a shock to most readers to learn we can make the traverse of nearly 4 billion years in but 39 steps [Hitchcock would have loved it!]. In tracing our mammalian ancestry, Dawkins is able to aid us in peering at the innermost secrets of our bizarre relatives.

Richard Dawkins has a wonderful writing style, and his name on a book is a guarantee of a witty, erudite, and lucid exposition on evolution and how it works. In this book he needs all of this literary artillery, not because he is arguing any contentious issues-in fact he's probably preaching to the choir for most readers-but because the work is lengthy, covers a wide range of topics, and does so in considerable detail. The clever format of the work is a Chauceresque "pilgrimage" to the ancestor of all life, hence the title. Just as individuals join Chaucer's tale of Canterbury and entertain us with their personal tales, so too do the various life forms who join our trip back into time. The author picks certain species to clarify what new is introduced to the complexity of life ways at each bifurcation on the genetic tree. Throughout, he makes it very evident that this is not a tale of organisms but of the genes they contain, and he does a superb job of it. The reader is never allowed to forget what the point of the migration is. I found some of Professor Dawkins' points particularly illuminating because he made things I thought I understood even clearer still. I also found the author's capacity to arrange such a massive amount of information in such a logical order, weaving in important details at key points, amazing to me. Although I know quite a lot of the information, I doubt I could have arranged it in anywhere near such a comprehensible order as the author has. The problem with the work is that it is almost too detailed for the average reader-and this despite the fact that the author does not get drawn into discussing material he has covered in earlier works.

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