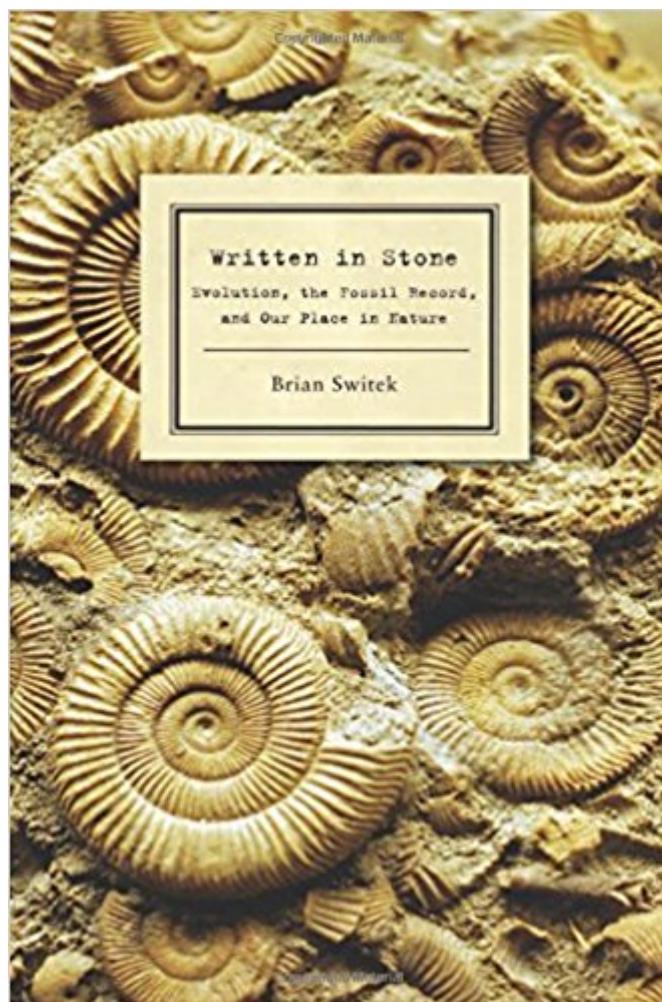


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Written In Stone: Evolution, The Fossil Record, And Our Place In Nature



Synopsis

Switek seamlessly intertwines two types of evolution: one of life on earth and the other of paleontology itself.â •—Discover Magazineâ •—In delightful prose, [Switek] . . . superbly shows that ‘[i]f we can let go of our conceit,â ™ we will see the preciousness of life in all its forms.â •—Publishers Weekly (starred review)“Highly instructive . . . a warm, intelligent yeomanâ ™s guide to the progress of life.â •—Kirkus Reviews“Magisterial . . . part historical account, part scientific detective story. Switekâ ™s elegant prose and thoughtful scholarship will change the way you see life on our planet. This book marks the debut of an important new voice.â •—Neil Shubin“Elegantly and engagingly crafted, Brian Switekâ ™s narrative interweaves stories and characters not often encountered in books on paleontology—at once a unique, informative and entertaining read.â •—Niles Eldredge“If you want to read one book to get up to speed on evolution, read *Written in Stone*. Brian Switekâ ™s clear and compelling book is full of fascinating stories about how scientists have read the fossil record to trace the evolution of life on Earth.â •—Ann Gibbons“[Switek's] accounts of dinosaurs, birds, whales, and our own primate ancestors are not just fascinating for their rich historical detail, but also for their up-to-date reporting on paleontologyâ ™s latest discoveries.â •—Carl Zimmer"After reading this book, you will have a totally new context in which to interpret the evolutionary history of amphibians, mammals, whales, elephants, horses, and especially humans.â •—Donald R. ProtheroSpectacular fossil finds make today's headlines; new technology unlocks secrets of skeletons unearthed a hundred years ago. Still, evolution is often poorly represented by the media and misunderstood by the public. A potent antidote to pseudoscience, *Written in Stone* is an engrossing history of evolutionary discovery for anyone who has marveled at the variety and richness of life.

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Customer Reviews

I've been a reader of Brian Switek's *Laelaps* blog for years, and so I've known *Written in Stone* was coming. For years, I waited. At last, 'tis here! And I have only one thing to say to the author: Brian, this had better be the start of a long and prolific career, because one's not enough, buddy. This book constantly surprised me - not because it was good (it's Brian Switek, so obviously it's good!), but because of the number of times it made me say, "I didn't know that!" It's populated with bajillions of scientists I've read a lot about, people like Charles Darwin and Nicolaus Steno and Richard Owen, some of whom have been so extensively babbled about in the pop sci books that it seemed nothing new and interesting remained to reveal - but Brian almost always managed to find a little something awesome that hasn't made it into the 42,000 other books about them. And lest you think this is merely a history of paleontology, keep in mind that Brian fleshes out that history with the newest of the new discoveries. I'm amazed by how much territory he managed to cover without seeming to skimp. It's not that big a book! It wasn't just things about people I didn't know, but how and why certain traits evolved. Brian's filled gaps in my knowledge I didn't even realize I had. That chapter on horse evolution: definitely worth the wait. Got me thinking in whole new directions, that did, and that kind of thinking is like solid gold to an SF writer. He set out to prove that the fossil record, despite some arguments to the contrary, is essential to understanding evolution, and I do believe he succeeded. It certainly seems like we wouldn't have discovered as much as we did without the evidence those big, extinct critters showed us.

Birds are descended from dinosaurs. But there is a lot of history to that idea. Paleontologists did not simply uncover fossils of dinosaurs and realize that living birds are a surviving lineage of theropods. Where can one turn to learn of all this? Brian Switek, whose blog *Laelaps* (in its current evolutionary stage with *Wired*) I have been reading for several years now, has just published his first book, *Written in Stone*. Each chapter focuses on a particular group of animals that we now have great fossil evidence showing their evolutionary history: birds, whales, early rodent-like mammals, elephants, horses, and humans, to name a few. We come away with a full understanding of the branching nature of the evolution of life on Earth, as Switek dispels the notion of progressive, ladder-like, and human-oriented evolution. He also gives us the sense of the vast amount of extinct

vertebrates (relatives of ours included), for some of what we see on the planet today - horses, for example - are just a peek of the diversity of forms in the groups in which they are nested. "To focus solely upon our ancestors is to blind ourselves to our own evolutionary context" (21). Wielding a wealth of science information while attending to historical detail, *Written in Stone* offers a very-readable narrative of how European and American scientists have understood fossils over the centuries. While not an academic historian - he is a freelance science writer and a Research Associate in paleontology at the New Jersey State Museum - Switek gives importance to the historical development of ideas in paleontology.

When I picked up this book, I was interested to see whether Brian Switek had anything new to bring to the table. Beyond the discovery of *Tiktaalik* a few years ago, has palaeontology nowadays got anything to add to the story of evolution? Well, the answer is in: this is a very good book on the fossil evidence for evolution. However, I'm not so sure that this in itself is necessary, or sufficient; more on this below. The book starts with an excellent summary of the development of geology and palaeontology in the first half of the 19th century, and how this created a fertile breeding ground for the development of evolutionary thinking. Most importantly, it tore scientific thought away from a literal interpretation of the six-day creation account found of the Book of Genesis. The geologic record showed that living things had changed over a long period of time, and that the more fossils were found, the more apparent the patterns of change became. Those patterns of change were explained by evolution, and, reciprocally, the fossils became evidence for evolution itself. Primed with this introduction, Switek documents the discoveries of fossils linking fish with the first tetrapods (creatures with four limbs); how feathered theropod dinosaurs were the ancestors of birds; how the forebears of whales were land-dwelling relatives of hippos, that once lived in what is now Pakistan; the evolution of horses, and how they lost all but one of their toes; and, finally, how we humans are linked to a common ancestor that we share with chimpanzees. All this is excellent.

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