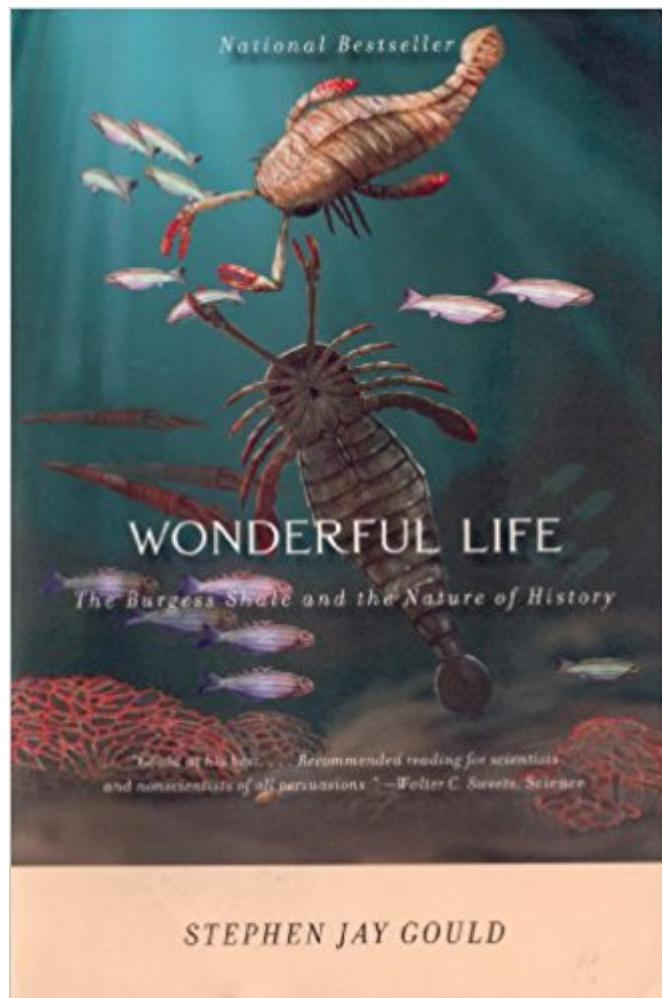


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Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale And The Nature Of History



Synopsis

"[An] extraordinary book. . . . Mr. Gould is an exceptional combination of scientist and science writer. . . . He is thus exceptionally well placed to tell these stories, and he tells them with fervor and intelligence."James Gleick, *New York Times Book Review*
High in the Canadian Rockies is a small limestone quarry formed 530 million years ago called the Burgess Shale. It holds the remains of an ancient sea where dozens of strange creatures lived"a forgotten corner of evolution preserved in awesome detail. In this book Stephen Jay Gould explores what the Burgess Shale tells us about evolution and the nature of history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Gould sets up a premise in this overview and discussion of animals represented in the fossils of the Burgess shale that makes for interesting reading and thinking. The author uses the same premise of the Frank Capra classic, "It's a Wonderful Life" starring Jimmy Stewart. What would life be like if one of the players had never existed? ...like poor old George Bailey who thought everyone would be happier and better off without him. In this book Gould takes the position that animals that exist today do so primarily because they were lucky during their early evolutionary history, along with having

characteristics that allowed them to survive and succeed in their environment long enough to reproduce -- a contingency hypothesis. They turned right instead of left and consequently avoided predation...OR...they turned left instead of right, were eaten, and that was the end of an entire ancestral line. This book is a must read for anyone interested in ideas surrounding the diversity of early animal life. The book provides an informative overview of what evolution is, how the now famous Burgess shale fossil beds were discovered and studied, and why some of the body plans found amongst the Burgess shale fauna are not found today. There are also excellent drawings of Burgess shale fossils and the animals they may once have been, and a reasonable selection of descriptions of their possible behaviors based on animal form and function. Gould also recounts ideas others have had about the Burgess shale fauna and its contribution to our understanding of the Cambrian fauna in general. It's interesting to note that this book was written prior to the discovery of several other Burgess shale-type fossil beds around the world, most notably in China.

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