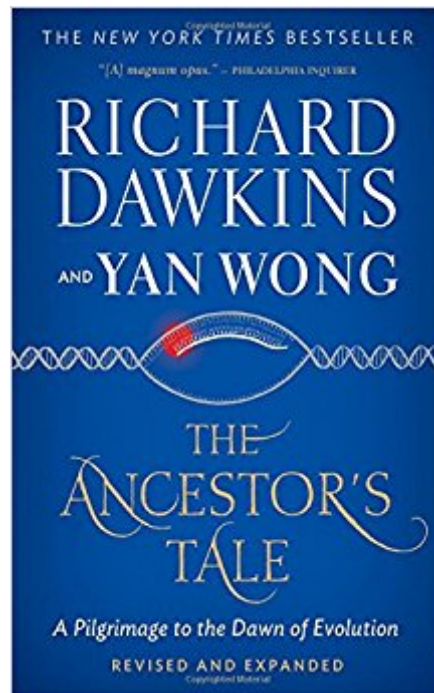




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# The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage To The Dawn Of Evolution



## Synopsis

The renowned biologist and thinker Richard Dawkins presents his most expansive work yet: a comprehensive look at evolution, ranging from the latest developments in the field to his own provocative views. Loosely based on the form of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, Dawkins's Tale takes us modern humans back through four billion years of life on our planet. As the pilgrimage progresses, we join with other organisms at the forty "rendezvous points" where we find a common ancestor. The band of pilgrims swells into a vast crowd as we join first with other primates, then with other mammals, and so on back to the first primordial organism. Dawkins's brilliant, inventive approach allows us to view the connections between ourselves and all other life in a bracingly novel way. It also lets him shed bright new light on the most compelling aspects of evolutionary history and theory: sexual selection, speciation, convergent evolution, extinction, genetics, plate tectonics, geographical dispersal, and more. The Ancestor's Tale is at once a far-reaching survey of the latest, best thinking on biology and a fascinating history of life on Earth. Here Dawkins shows us how remarkable we are, how astonishing our history, and how intimate our relationship with the rest of the living world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Just as we trace our personal family trees from parents to grandparents and so on back in time, so in *The Ancestor's Tale* Richard Dawkins traces the ancestry of life. As he is at pains to point out, this is very much our human tale, our ancestry. Surprisingly, it is one that many otherwise literate people are largely unaware of. Hopefully Dawkins's name and well deserved reputation as a best

selling writer will introduce them to this wonderful saga. *The Ancestor's Tale* takes us from our immediate human ancestors back through what he calls 'concestors'; those shared with the apes, monkeys and other mammals and other vertebrates and beyond to the dim and distant microbial beginnings of life some 4 billion years ago. It is a remarkable story which is still very much in the process of being uncovered. And, of course from a scientist of Dawkins stature and reputation we get an insider's knowledge of the most up-to-date science and many of those involved in the research. And, as we have come to expect of Dawkins, it is told with a passionate commitment to scientific veracity and a nose for a good story. Dawkins's knowledge of the vast and wonderful sweep of life's diversity is admirable. Not only does it encompass the most interesting living representatives of so many groups of organisms but also the important and informative fossil ones, many of which have only been found in recent years. Dawkins sees his journey with its reverse chronology as 'cast in the form of an epic pilgrimage from the present to the past [and] all roads lead to the origin of life.' It is, to my mind, a sensible and perfectly acceptable approach although some might complain about going against the grain of evolution. The great benefit for the general reader is that it begins with the more familiar present and the animals nearest and dearest to us—our immediate human ancestors. And then it delves back into the more remote and less familiar past with its droves of lesser known and extinct fossil forms. The whole pilgrimage is divided into 40 tales, each based around a group of organisms and discusses their role in the overall story. Genetic, morphological and fossil evidence is all taken into account and illustrated with a wealth of photos and drawings of living and fossils forms, evolutionary and distributional charts and maps through time, providing a visual compliment and complement to the text. The design also allows Dawkins to make numerous running comments and characteristic asides. There are also numerous references and a good index.-- Douglas Palmer --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The diversity of the earth's plant and animal life is amazing—especially when one considers the near certainty that all living things can trace their lineage back to a single ancestor—a bacterium—that lived more than three billion years ago. Taking his cue from Chaucer, noted Oxford biologist Dawkins (*The Selfish Gene*, etc.) works his way narratively backward through time. As the path reaches points where humanity's ancestors converge with those of other species—primates, mammals, amphibians and so on—various creatures have tales that carry an evolutionary lesson. The peacock, for example, offers a familiar opportunity to discuss sexual selection, which is soon freshly applied to the question of why humans started walking

upright. These passages maintain an erudite yet conversational voice whether discussing the genetic similarities between hippos and whales (a fact "so shocking that I am still reluctant to believe it") or the existence of prehistoric rhino-sized rodents. The book's accessibility is crucial to its success, helping to convince readers that, given a time span of millions of years, unlikely events, like animals passing from one continent to another, become practically inevitable. This clever approach to our extended family tree should prove a natural hit with science readers. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

An interest way of observing the process of evolution. Richard Dawkins takes you down the road in reverse. Kind of the devolution of the life all the way back to the first signs of ancestral life to all living thing here in planet earth. A bit of an homage to the Canterbury tales throughout. I truly enjoyed this.

I had wanted to read this book for a long time and I have to say I'm disappointed, but not surprised. I simply do not find Richard Dawkins an engaging science writer at the same level as Carl Sagan, Sean Carroll, or Lawrence Krauss. Dawkins seems to be overly fond of discursive prose that does not effectively -- for me -- emphasize the major points. This seems to be a function of his literary style, which lacks the loveliness and clarity that the English language can convey in the hand of more talented writers. My insistent mental image is that he must write by dictating into a microphone while driving a car. I admire Professor Dawkins very much, I just wish I liked his books more than I do.

Incredibly interesting. The only problem with this book is I find myself writing notes and underlining so many phrases that it is taking me quite a long time to read.

In *The Ancestor's Tale*, Dawkins tells the story of the evolution of life backwards, starting with humans (because we find them interesting, for obvious reasons, not because we are somehow the end point that evolution was working towards - in fact, telling the story backwards is in part an attempt to shake off the impression of inevitability that often comes through in chronological retellings of evolutionary history) to single celled organisms. Dawkins tells the story almost entirely with creatures that are still alive today - telling each new animal's story at the point when the branches of the tree of life converge back in time, and avoiding the need to go into more speculative

areas of paleobiology. Along the way, Dawkins introduces many of the methodologies of research in biology and evolution to help us understand why scientists think what they think. The scope of the book is grand, and I get the impression at the end that I've covered nearly as much ground as a traditional college textbook on evolution, but had a lot more fun doing it. Dawkins has argued persuasively that replication had to come before metabolism in the earliest history of life, so my only complaint with the book was that Dawkins didn't provide any of the theories of how viruses fit in with the tree of life. He argues that in the earliest stage of replicators it doesn't really matter if one considers them 'alive', so getting hung up on if viruses are 'living' or not doesn't seem to be a good reason to exclude them from the tale, and I would have liked at least a few paragraphs on the ideas of how viruses evolved. But that petty quibble aside, this book was a brilliant survey. Highly recommended.

All of Dr. Dawkins's books are seminal in their own right; but, most remarkable is THE ANCESTOR'S TALE: A PILGRIMAGE TO THE DAWN OF EVOLUTION. In this treatise, Richard Dawkins creatively, eloquently utilizes backward chronology to search out ancestors to "sensibly aim towards a single distant target." On opposite ends of a small log, he serves as gentle, factual storyteller, bringing us "back to the universal progenitor of all surviving organisms, probably resembling some kind of bacterium." His lexicon includes "rendezvous," "confluence," and, most notably, "concestor." "In a backward chronology, the ancestors of any set of species must eventually meet at a particular geological moment. Their point of rendezvous is the last common ancestor that they all share, what I shall call their 'Concestor': the focal rodent or the focal mammal or the focal vertebrate, say. The oldest concestor is the grand ancestor of all surviving life." And the oldest concestor, according to Dawkins, before animals and plants, before multicellularity, is the single cell progenitor bacteria. "The analogy of insect colony to human body is often made, and it is not a bad one. The majority of our cells subjugate their individuality, devoting themselves to assisting the reproduction of the minority that are capable of it: 'germ-line' cells in the testes or ovaries, whose genes are destined to travel, via sperm or eggs, into the distant future. But genetic relatedness is not the only basis for subjugation of individuality in fruitful division of labor. Any sort of mutual assistance, where each side corrects a deficiency in the other, can be favored by natural selection on both." "If I were stranded on an island with access to only one book, ANCESTOR'S TALE would easily be my first choice... - lc

If you can still read very long books, this one is a winner for anyone interested in evolution. In an

easy conversational style, author Dawkins takes the reader from now all the way back to the common ancestor of most living beings. It is a daunting task but Dawkins shows that he is up to it. Using the research of many who have gone before, Richard Dawkins ties it all together as he joins various species one after the other on his way back through the ages. The reader will be surprised as to whom our nearest cousins are, and maybe even more surprised at how impersonal evolution seems to be as it tries out and discards various forms of living creatures.

One of the most detailed books on evolution for a non scientific publicum I have ever seen. And even for biologists, it has lots of information and interesting insights. The way Dawkins leads the reader through a backwards history of human evolution is original and amusing. The points he chooses as "rendevouz" are used to explain basic concepts in biology, evolution and related sciences, even good explanations on mathematical tools used in evolutionary studies. After he completes the backwards journey to the origins of life, the last quarter of the book is a little "dry" to read, but this is probably a misperception due to the easy reading of the rest of the book. A good reading for curious non-biologist and also for biologist looking for new ways to teach evolution.

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