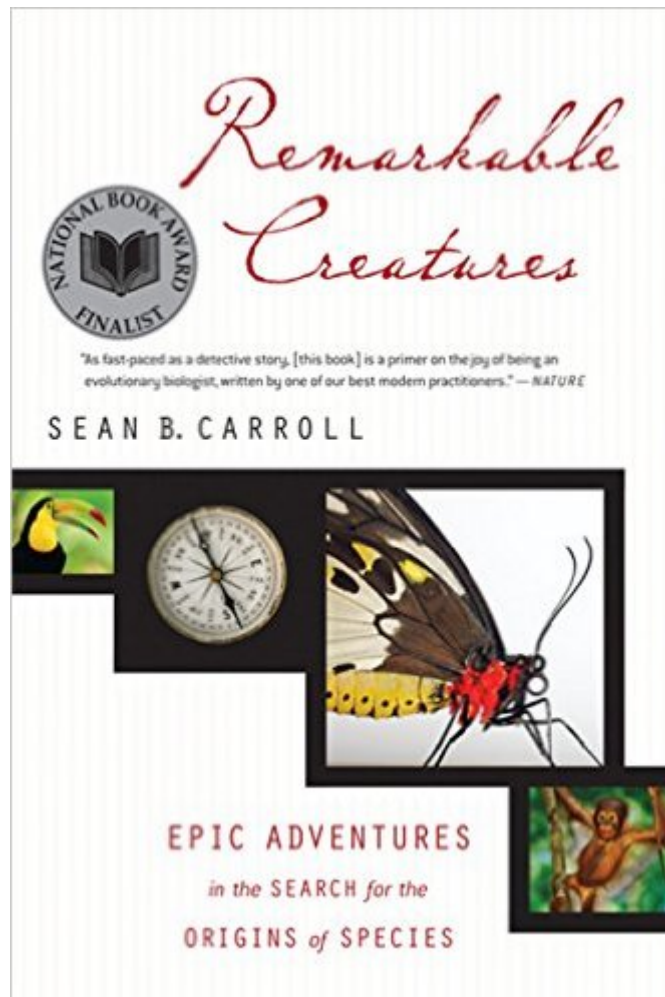


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Remarkable Creatures: Epic Adventures In The Search For The Origins Of Species



Synopsis

An award-winning biologist takes us on the dramatic expeditions that unearthed the history of life on our planet. Just 150 years ago, most of our world was an unexplored wilderness. Our sense of its age was vague and vastly off the mark, and much of the knowledge of our own species' history was a set of fantastic myths and fairy tales. In the tradition of *The Microbe Hunters* and *Gods, Graves, and Scholars*, Sean Carroll leads a rousing voyage that recounts the most important discoveries in two centuries of natural history: from Darwin's trip around the world to Charles Walcott's discovery of pre-Cambrian life in the Grand Canyon; from Louis and Mary Leakey's investigation of our deepest past in East Africa to the trailblazers in modern laboratories who have located a time clock in our DNA.

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Customer Reviews

"Remarkable Creatures: Epic Adventures in the Search for the Origins of Species" deserves to be widely read, especially by those unfamiliar with how we gained our current knowledge about the world and our place in it. Unfortunately, those who stand to gain the most from reading it will probably avoid it like the plague because--GASP!--it's about EVOLUTION! At a time when the battle between science and superstition continues to rage in America's courts and classrooms, "Remarkable Creatures" offers an excellent survey, in a most entertaining and enlightening way, of some of the key scientific discoveries in the last 200 years that shaped our understanding of the history of life on earth. It is an interesting blend of adventure stories and detective mysteries that examines the lives of some of the past and present-day scientists and explorers who came up with

"paradigm shifts" that shook conventional wisdom to its very foundations. The first three chapters of "Remarkable Creatures" tell the stories of Charles Darwin, Alfred Wallace and Henry Walter Bates. On epic sea voyages and dangerous wilderness expeditions in the 1800s, these men collectively gathered overwhelming evidence to support the then-heretical ideas of evolution, natural selection and "survival of the fittest." The scope, elegance and impact of their work, which shocked their contemporaries and profoundly changed the face of scientific inquiry forever, are still amazing to consider even today. Next are six chapters telling the stories of paleontologists who, through tireless efforts under the most primitive field conditions in remote regions of the earth, deciphered the long natural history of life before man. For example, in the early 1900s, Charles Doolittle Walcott found fossils in the Burgess Shale beds in the Canadian Rockies that recorded the "Cambrian Explosion"--an unprecedented increase in the number and complexity of marine animals over a very short period of geologic time. Roy Chapman Andrews ventured into Mongolia's forbidding Gobi Desert in the 1920s, searching for evidence of ancient humans. Instead, in the shadows of the Flaming Cliffs, he discovered a treasure trove of dinosaur and mammal fossils, including the first dinosaur eggs ever found. The chapter "The Day the Mesozoic Died" is a true detective story in the best tradition of the genre. While studying fossilized single-celled sea creatures in the early 1970s, Walter Alvarez became curious about a half-inch-thick layer of clay that he found in a limestone outcropping in Italy. Little did he know that his investigation of this mysterious layer would, years later, lead to the irrefutable conclusion that a giant asteroid had smashed into the earth 65 million years ago. This cataclysmic event darkened the skies for thousands of years and doomed more than 80 per cent of the species existing at the time to extinction. Mr. Carroll's summary of the unraveling of that complex global mystery is one of the best I've read. The final chapters of "Remarkable Creatures" look at the evolution of humans from the earliest hominid ancestors to present-day homo sapiens. The obligatory story of the work of Louis and Mary Leakey in Tanzania's Olduvai Gorge, where they uncovered remains of tool-making early humans, is followed by a report on today's cutting-edge DNA techniques that add new capabilities and precision to the study of ancient life. A particularly interesting chapter in this section deals with the disappearance of the Neanderthals--a primitive hominid once thought to be an ancestor of modern-day humans but now seen more as a cousin. "Remarkable Creatures" is an outstanding high-level summary of key discoveries in paleontology and geology over the last two centuries. If it whets your appetite, as it did mine, you can find entire books, or indeed shelves of books, that expound in far more detail on each topic Mr. Carroll covers. But few books do a better job of putting the study of life on earth into an overall scientific and historical perspective. I recommend it highly.

Sean Carroll has written another winner, sure to sharpen the scientific literacy of its readers. This one is not as technical as Carroll's other books. It is a series of mini-biographies of scientists who contributed evidence to and refined the theory of evolution - starting with Humboldt, who inspired Darwin. Much of the time, enough background information is given to link their childhood obsessions to their life's work. One of them has had hundreds of books written about him - Charles Darwin. Although none of the others were as famous as Darwin, they appear to have worked with the same vision and determination and most were famous during their time. In every case possible, Carroll uses original field notes and original scientific articles written by his subjects - if not personal interviews. Carroll follows Humboldt, Darwin, Wallace, and Bates on their individual voyages of discovery. They were all subjected to the dangers of ocean travel, wild animals, tropical disease, tribal people, and a primitive lifestyle. He takes us along with Dubois, who found the first primitive human remains in Java - Java Man. We meet the diplomatic Charles Wolcott who excavated the Grande Canyon for the United States. He was responsible for one of the most important mother lodes of fossils ever found - the Burgess Shale - and its treasures involving the Cambrian explosion. We go with the pistol-toting Roy Chapman Andrews to Mongolia and find the first dinosaur eggs. Scared to death of snakes, Chapman is said to have inspired the George Lucas's character, Indiana Jones. Father and son Alvarez follow their curiosity about a strange archeological layer found around the world at the 68 million years ago mark. The layer never has fossils in it, but lots of iridium. This clue led them to the now generally accepted theory that a meteor hit the Yucatan Peninsula, led to the extinction of dinosaurs, thereby opening a niche for mammals. John Ostrom discovered the most important dinosaur fossil in the twentieth century in Wyoming in 1964, linking dinosaurs to birds. The last time that happened was with *Archaeopteryx* in 1861 but the link was questioned until Ostrom discovered *Deinonychus*. Michael Crichton modeled his Raptors after *Deinonychus* in Jurassic Park. The story of Tiktaalik is about using educated guesses to decide where to look for fossils. Neil Shubin expected a transitional species linking fish to amphibians to live some 375 million years ago and the fossils would be found on the banks of stream deltas. A geology text sent him and his crew to the Canadian Arctic Islands, where he found his prize in 2004. "Arriving in the midst of yet another wave of the long-running creationist battle against evolution, the creature that was so obviously transitional between fish and land animals was a most welcome and potent blow to the skeptic's rhetoric about the purported lack of transitional forms in the fossil record." Louis and Mary Leakey and their children get a whole chapter covering their amazing digs in Africa. Linus Pauling and Allan Wilson used a whole new field of science to investigate fossils -

molecular biology. Conventional paleontologists were reticent to give credence to the new science but after a decade or two, it became obvious that species genealogies could be more accurately drawn by these methods, complete with timing of separation from common ancestors. The torch of DNA studies was passed to the Swedish Svante Paabo, who proved we all came from Africa and that Neanderthals were a distant relative, split off from us several hundred thousand years ago. For those of us who are familiar with most of these scientists and their stories, Carroll's book is a treat to read. He has put together a unique combination of memoirs. For those to whom this subject is new, it should be just as fascinating. A scientific background is not necessary - just an open mind.

I'll try leave the trite evolution vs. creation vs. alien debate elsewhere, and focus on what this book is all about: The STORY of how our science(s) have come to be; our understanding of ourselves, and of our past, which still is not complete, and may very well never be complete. And what a fantastic adventure it is. The author has a special ability to mix science with a compelling narrative to keep that keeps the level of interest high. Each character (past scientists) are given their own stories, accompanied by their own struggles, beliefs (right or wrong), methodologies, and findings. Building upon one another, as the adventures of these "remarkable creatures" (human beings and the scientists themselves), the story flows well through the times and advanced in sciences to almost be something out of a movie, with each successive scientist receiving the baton of knowledge to further the knowledge... except, these stories are not only entertaining, but true. Regardless whether your beliefs are that your god (whichever one you picked) created everything, or that we evolved from some kind of soupy glop (against highly improbable odds), or that we're the offspring of extraterrestrial bacteria that was seeded (intentionally or not), this book is an incredible read, and whose facts are nary debatable. Certainly the best book I've read in a long while, and one that is really worth of 5 stars - EXCELLENT. Would highly recommend. Storytelling at it's finest: Stories of the scientists whom are sorting out the stories of our ancient past.

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