



## The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution

*By Richard Dawkins*

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With unparalleled wit, clarity, and intelligence, Richard Dawkins, one of the world's most renowned evolutionary biologists, has introduced countless readers to the wonders of science in works such as *The Selfish Gene*. Now, in *The Ancestor's Tale*, Dawkins offers a masterwork: an exhilarating reverse tour through evolution, from present-day humans back to the microbial beginnings of life four billion years ago. Throughout the journey Dawkins spins entertaining, insightful stories and sheds light on topics such as speciation, sexual selection, and extinction. *The Ancestor's Tale* is at once an essential education in evolutionary theory and a riveting read.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

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*

#### From Publishers Weekly

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.

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#### From Scientific American

In this expansive book, Dawkins, the well-known evolutionary biologist and author (*The Selfish Gene*, *The Blind Watchmaker*, *A Devil's Chaplain*, among others), gives us an eloquent treatise on evolution, neglecting neither the latest developments nor his own provocative views. As the title suggests, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* provides the model for the book's conceit--a pilgrimage back through four billion years of life on earth. We join with other organisms at rendezvous points where we find common ancestors, until we arrive at the "grand ancestor of all surviving life." As Dawkins explains: "Backward chronology in search of ancestors really can sensibly aim towards a single distant target ... and we can't help converging upon it no matter where we start--elephant or eagle, swift or salmonella, wellingtonia or woman.... Instead of treating evolution as aimed toward us, we choose modern *Homo sapiens* as our arbitrary, but forgivably preferred, starting point for a reverse chronology.... Following Chaucer's lead, my pilgrims, which are all the different species of living creatures, will have the opportunity to tell tales along the way to their Canterbury, which is the origin of life. It is these tales that form the main substance of this book."

*Editors of Scientific American (202)*

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#### **Richard Martinez:**

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