



What Is Life?

By Lynn Margulis, Dorion Sagan



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Half a century ago, before the discovery of DNA, the Austrian physicist and philosopher Erwin Schrödinger inspired a generation of scientists by rephrasing the fascinating philosophical question: *What is life?* Using their expansive understanding of recent science to wonderful effect, acclaimed authors Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan revisit this timeless question in a fast-moving, wide-ranging narrative that combines rigorous science with philosophy, history, and poetry. The authors move deftly across a dazzling array of topics—from the dynamics of the bacterial realm, to the connection between sex and death, to theories of spirit and matter. They delve into the origins of life, offering the startling suggestion that life—not just human life—is free to act and has played an unexpectedly large part in its own evolution. Transcending the various formal concepts of life, this captivating book offers a unique overview of life's history, essences, and future.

Supplementing the text are stunning illustrations that range from the smallest known organism (*Mycoplasma bacteria*) to the largest (the biosphere itself). Creatures both strange and familiar enhance the pages of *What Is Life?* Their existence prompts readers to reconsider preconceptions not only about life but also about their own part in it.

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What Is Life? By Lynn Margulis, Dorion Sagan Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

There is much art as well as science in this beautifully illustrated treatment of topics relating to the genesis, organization and diversity of life forms on Earth. Margulis, a well-known professor of botany at the University of Massachusetts, and her son, Sagan, who previously collaborated on other works (*Origins of Sex*; *Microcosmos*) present a wide-ranging compendium that samples key facets of biology in conjunction with philosophic ideas and historical perspectives. The volume is configured for browsing. Numerous color photographs and charts convey a sense of wonder. While hugely informative, the text itself tends to the lyrical, sometimes lapsing into disconcerting private language. The issues emphasized reflect the authors' sympathy for a less dogmatically mechanistic and more phenomenological overview of what constitutes life, as exemplified by the Gaia hypothesis, which posits that the whole earth is a unified living organism. Library of Science, Natural Science, Astronomy and Reader's Subscription book clubs alternates.

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From Library Journal

To the question, what is life?, world renowned biologist Margulis and science writer Sagan (her coauthor on *Mystery Dance*, LJ 7/91, and her son) respond: Life is matter that chooses. Mammalian cells are descended from the amalgamation of different strains of ancient bacteria. All life is connected to us through time and space. Species of organisms diverge into new kinds, yet earlier patterns never entirely disappear. Every species of plant, animal, and fungus perishes, and similar new taxa evolve from them or their kind. The human species may eventually disappear, but something else will evolve from our kind. We learn that we are not the only creative and original creatures but part of a global aggregation. Yet while we are not the only species to make evolutionary choices, we are the ones whose choices will make a difference as to what type of planetary ecosystem we leave for those species that follow. Beautifully executed with numerous photos and illustrations, this thought-provoking work is recommended for general readers and informed lay readers. Gloria Maxwell, Kansas City P.L., Kan.

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From [Booklist](#)

In a lusciously illustrated format, a noted microbiologist and her son give multifaceted answers to the title's question. Essentially, any given cell is a window to the past through which Margulis and her scientific colleagues can view early environmental conditions. The initial chapters describe what life is at its most minimal--a self-organizing, self-preserving, and self-reproducing system of matter--then the authors move into the major division of living beings: bacteria, and everything else, termed eukaryotes. How the "everything else" came about, begetting increasing levels of cellular then multicellular order, stemmed from the odd symbiotic results of microbe swallowing microbe. To reinforce their exuberant narrative of that teeming scene, the authors conclude each topic with a pithy, eye-grabbing definition of life. Chapters on the animal, fungus, and plant kingdoms wind up this colorful volume. An informative focus on the microscopic that is richly compatible with the macroscopic paleobiology of Stephen Jay Gould's *Book of Life* (1993); libraries having both books deliver patrons a one-two punch. *Gilbert Taylor*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Robert Riggio:

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