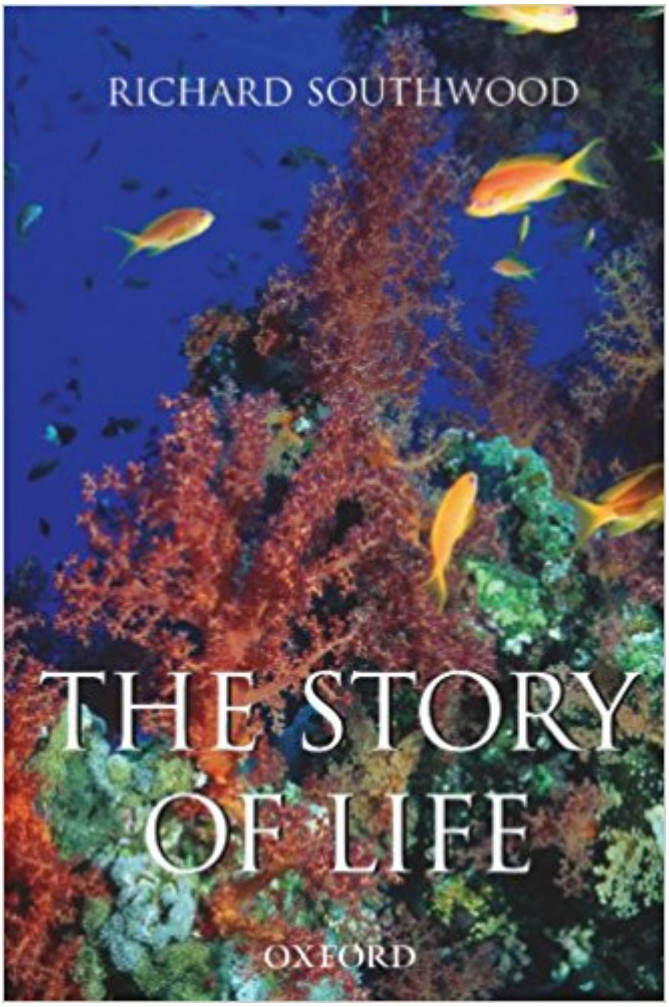
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The Story Of Life



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Synopsis

How did life begin? What was ’snowball earth’? Why did the dinosaurs become extinct? Are we all descended from ’African Eve’? Will humans be responsible for the next major extinction? These and many other fundamental questions are addressed in this masterly account of The Story of Life, by eminent biologist and teacher Richard Southwood.The story unfolds with the formation of the earth around four thousand million years ago. Life first emerged a hundred million years later, and it took another fifteen million years for more complex life-forms to appear. Periods of relative calm were punctuated by five major extinctions, with innumerable minor jolts along the way. Then, five million years ago, an able ape evolved that gradually came to dominate and control the other animals and plants. The future now lies in the hands of thissingle species, Homo sapiens.In this carefully crafted story, Southwood’s love of his subject, and for the life he describes, shines through, to engage and inform scientist and general reader alike.

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Customer Reviews

The three reviews are quite accurate. I did not read the whole book, only chapters here and there. But all chapters are readable with the minimal high school biology background.There is enough detail for the science fan as well, species are named, examples are well chosen. Illustrated to keep your attention. Each chapter starts with a map of the land masses of that period on a globe picture.

Perfect Condition

does this look like a good book? not a please read. enjoy the class

According to the author, this book derives from a course of lectures he gave to first year life science students at Oxford (Preface, pg. iv). Appropriately, it reads like something for high school students. But it actually asks a deep and challenging question: are we humans self-destructive or are we wise enough to avert the course of further damaging the milieu that we, and other life forms, dwell in?The author puts heavy emphasis on the impact of geology, plate tectonics and, of course, climates on evolution. In particular, extinctions, punctuating the course of the story of life, are the norm rather than exception. Paradoxically, organisms that are most adapted to their immediate surroundings are most susceptible to extinction.Other major themes on evolution are also described, usually on passing: e.g. convergence, nature's proneness to utilize existing structures to develop other functions, co-evolution, etc; these are all fascinating.Out of roughly 250 pages, only 40 or so (chapters 1-4) are devoted to the pre-Cambrian world; but close to 50 are essentially on the rising of humans (chapters 11 and 12).The closing section deliberates on the magnitude humans have had on the whole world. We are reminded, one last time in the book, that climate hugely determines the course of evolution, and no single species is immune to the danger of extinction. A timely warning indeed.

This is an impressive book for anyone considering studies in any of the earth sciences. A swift, panoramic view of life's history, it is well organised and presented. Southwood examines some ideas concerned with life's beginnings, then moves along evolution's path. He sets the environmental scenario, describing continent formation and movement. He then describes how plant and animal life reacted to these changes. There's a wealth of good detail, supplemented by fine illustrations tied directly to the text.Among this book's attributes is the division of chapters by geologic ages. Opening the chapter with a world map of the period sets the environment. He explains how the shifting land forms impacted weather through changes in reflected sunlight and

modified oceanic currents. With the environment fluctuating from warm and moist to cool, dry conditions, rainfall changed, forcing life to modify to survive. Some changes were too abrupt to follow and large extinction events resulted. Nowhere, from our viewpoint, were these changes more noteworthy than in human evolution. His chapter on that most significant topic provides an excellent overview of what is known. He provides a fine diagram of the various "hominins" but adroitly skirts the contentious issue of lineages.With such a vast subject range and limited space, Southwood has achieved a minor triumph. Research and assessment make earth sciences a dynamic discipline, with breakthroughs in the various subfields emerging more rapidly than ever before. He presents the latest information available without disturbing the flow of narrative. If this book has a shortcoming, it might be the "Further Reading" section which can only be described as sparse. While such a list can never be complete, a dozen titles that should have found a place here come to mind. That doesn't limit the value of this work, however, as the books cited are excellent resources for further reading. [stephen a. haines - Ottawa, Canada]

Let me say first that you're not going to get an exhaustive thousand-page scientific tome covering vast amounts of detail. The book aims at breadth rather than depth--it might serve as the text for Geology 101 or the like. You get lots of drawings of represenative sample of life from the earliest stages up to the present. Each chapter has a nice map showing the continents that existed. So the strength here is the flavor of life rather than the minute details. There are plenty of books about, say, the Cretaceous that are rife with detail. But the problem might be that you're losing track of the overall view of the development of life.The book also covers the catastrophes--the mass extinctions. There are tables that plot the number of species in the different eras, and explanations of what caused the declines. This is not a book that deals heavily with controversy, although controversies are discussed. So you'll see the Conway Morris view of the Burgess Shale, and the Jay Gould view as well. This is basically a very well-written introductory work, and it is one that will whet your appetite for more detailed books.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. It covers the history of life on Earth in surprising detail and includes very nice illustrations and diagrams that help clarify things. It is able to bring together the chemistry, biology, ecology, and geology in a single volume that was clear and fun to read. Not so technical that you need a degree in the field to understand it and yet not too simplistic so it does not bore those that do. A very good book.

Southwood's "The Story of Life" is a great, easy to read book on Earth's history and the evolution of life. Recommended to anyone interested in species evolution and evolution over large timescales.

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