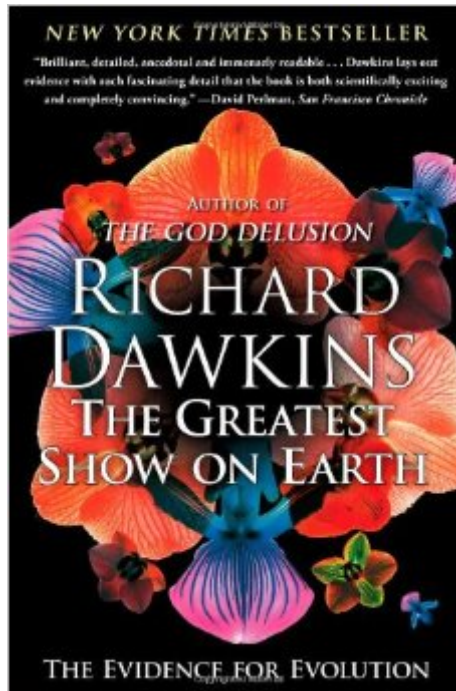




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The Greatest Show On Earth: The Evidence For Evolution



Synopsis

Richard Dawkins transformed our view of God in his blockbuster, *The God Delusion*, which sold more than 2 million copies in English alone. He revolutionized the way we see natural selection in the seminal bestseller *The Selfish Gene*. Now, he launches a fierce counterattack against proponents of "Intelligent Design" in his New York Times bestseller, *The Greatest Show on Earth*. "Intelligent Design" is being taught in our schools; educators are being asked to "teach the controversy" behind evolutionary theory. There is no controversy. Dawkins sifts through rich layers of scientific evidence—from living examples of natural selection to clues in the fossil record; from natural clocks that mark the vast epochs wherein evolution ran its course to the intricacies of developing embryos; from plate tectonics to molecular genetics—to make the airtight case that "we find ourselves perched on one tiny twig in the midst of a blossoming and flourishing tree of life and it is no accident, but the direct consequence of evolution by non-random selection." His unjaded passion for the natural world turns what might have been a negative argument, exposing the absurdities of the creationist position, into a positive offering to the reader: nothing less than a master's vision of life, in all its splendor.

Book Information

Paperback: 496 pages

Publisher: Free Press; Reprint edition (August 24, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1416594795

ISBN-13: 978-1416594796

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1.3 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 674 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #26,857 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #8 in Books > Science & Math > Evolution > Organic #245 in Books > Textbooks > Science & Mathematics > Biology & Life Sciences > Biology #381 in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Biology

Customer Reviews

Reviewed by Jonah Lehrer
Richard Dawkins begins *The Greatest Show on Earth* with a short history of his writing career. He explains that all of his previous books have naïvely assumed the fact of evolution, which meant that he never got around to laying out the evidence that it [evolution] is true. This shouldn't be too surprising: science is an edifice of tested assumptions,

and just as physicists must assume the truth of gravity before moving on to quantum mechanics, so do biologists depend on the reality of evolution. It's the theory that makes every other theory possible. Yet Dawkins also came to realize that a disturbingly large percentage of the American and British public didn't share his enthusiasm for evolution. In fact, they actively abhorred the idea, since it seemed to contradict the Bible and diminish the role of God. So Dawkins decided to write a book for these history-deniers, in which he would dispassionately demonstrate the truth of evolution beyond sane, informed, intelligent doubt. After only a few pages of *The Greatest Show on Earth*, however, it becomes clear that Dawkins doesn't do dispassionate, and that he's not particularly interested in convincing believers to believe in evolution. He repeatedly compares creationists and Holocaust deniers, which is a peculiar way of reaching out to the other side. Elsewhere, Dawkins calls those who don't subscribe to evolution ignorant, fatuously ignorant and ridiculous. All of which raises the point: who, exactly, is supposed to read this book? Is Dawkins preaching to the choir or trying to convert the uninformed? While *The Greatest Show on Earth* might fail as a work of persuasive rhetoric, Dawkins is too angry and acerbic to convince his opponents—it succeeds as an encyclopedic summary of evolutionary biology. If Charles Darwin walked into a 21st-century bookstore and wanted to know how his theory had fared, this is the book he should pick up. Dawkins remains a superb translator of complex scientific concepts. It doesn't matter if he's spinning metaphors for the fossil record (like a spy camera in a murder trial) or deftly explaining the method by which scientists measure the genetic difference between distinct species: he has a way of making the drollest details feel like a revelation. Even if one already believes in the survival of the fittest, there is something thrilling about learning that the hoof of a horse is homologous to the fingernail of the human middle finger, or that some dinosaurs had a second brain of ganglion cells in their pelvis, which helped compensate for the tiny brain in their head. As Darwin famously noted, There is grandeur in this view of life. What Dawkins demonstrates is that this view of life isn't just grand: it's also undeniably true. Color illus. (Sept. 29) Jonah Lehrer is the author of *How We Decide* and *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*. 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.

"Like a detective reconstructing a crime" (San Francisco Chronicle), Dawkins amasses a mountain of evidence in this richly illustrated, enormously readable explanation of the theory of evolution. Though Dawkins may have softened his attitude toward those who can reconcile their religious beliefs with evolution, he still harbors great hostility toward its detractors, equating them to Holocaust deniers—a label that riled the New York Times Book Review. Objecting to

Dawkins's abrasive dogmatism, many critics felt that the biologist is at his best when he forgets his opponents and focuses on the science. He is indeed a master of explaining complex scientific ideas to nonscientific readers, and though *The Greatest Show on Earth* may not be his best book, it is a well-written, captivating review of the science behind the theory. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Dawkins provides an extraordinarily detailed and diverse account of evolutionary processes as observed through genetic, morphological and geological data. It is intentionally redundant in the sense that he overlaps data from many disciplines to demonstrate the "oneness" and validity of evolution as a biological fact. That works reasonably well. The problem is that he uses critics of evolutionary theory as a "straw-man" counterpoint to his argument throughout the book, so that the entire text reads as an argued defense of evolution. This makes sense if the reader is assumed to doubt evolution as a fact--but my guess is that such critics don't read Dawkins to begin with, so the book bogs down with too much "preaching to the choir." Most readers are likely to be fully sympathetic with his point of view, so his redundant lecturing is much less appreciated than the redundant overlaying of data he persuasively provides.

After reading Dawkins's *"The Magic of Reality"* to my kids each night (which my 13 y/o and 9 y/o both love), I snuggled into my own bed and also read his latest book (for adults), *"The Greatest Show on Earth"*. While I have read almost all of Dawkins's books, I must say this is amongst my favorites.....literally bringing tears of amazement to my eyes. Dawkins brings stunning clarity and broad wisdom in presenting objective, unifying, diverse, and virtually irrefutable scientific evidence for evolution. He leaves no doubt. He shows that evolution is by no means a theory in the lay definition of "theory", i.e. unproven conjecture. Rather he presents evolution in the strictly scientific definition of "theory", i.e. a proven, reproducible, testable, dependable concept. I would argue that evolution is even more, actually a basic LAW OF NATURE. As such it is as real as the Law of Gravity, or the Laws Governing Conservation of Mass and Energy. Even the most narrow-minded, uniformed, biased zealot would be amazed by the incredible breadth of evidence Dawkins presents in support of what I call "the law of evolution". He provides centuries of bacterial, plant, and animal speciation data, accurate geological and cosmological dating information, traditional/mendelian genetic insights, modern (DNA) molecular genetic revelations, chemical/isotopic explanations, and of course, actual fossil record information (surprisingly the last proving to be the least important of all). Amazingly, all of this independent and indisputably derived information converges upon, and

can be explained by, only one simple evolutionary fact.....that every living species on this planet derived from a common shared ancestor. He presents ancestry "trees" which demonstrate how such common ancestors emerged amongst both plants and animals, many tracing back to the beginnings of life on earth billions of years ago. He completely debunks the "fossil search for a missing link" gambit as completely irrelevant, despite that argument being so often advocated by creationists and intelligent designers. Dawkins does not discuss religion at all in his text, but rather only presents solid objective evidence of all types, yet understandable to non-scientists. He throws this evidence open to close scrutiny and challenge by anyone. Whether to embrace or reject the idea of evolution, one certainly needs to at least consider these facts. Dismissing evolution as only "a theory" while continuing to completely ignore proven facts, is simply disgraceful. Humans desperately and rightfully fear Nature's obvious indiscriminate and often cruel power. It seems difficult to rationalize such indifference in the context of a "responsive and all-loving God". Even worse, it is virtually impossible to mentally conceive of the unimaginably long timeframe over which genetic change occurs under varying selective pressures. Thus it is much easier to simply take the memetic way out, i.e. succumb to delusional (but biblically appealing) notions of a 6000 year old earth, designed and ruled by a divine power that is still responsive to our needs and pleas. Understanding evolution actually brings us much closer to a more realistic "God" than ever before, enabling us to finally see ourselves as top dog contenders in the cosmological and timeless realm of NATURE. As such, we are perhaps one of her more amazing genetic outcomes ever. Dawkins delivers warm clarity in revealing that, as well as in explaining how and why it happens. From such knowledge should emerge confidence that our own species will continue to survive and thrive along with, and in spite of, Mother Nature's fury.

Richard Dawkins brilliantly goes into depth teaching a vital subject in the field of Biology, and does the much needed service of tearing creationism a new one while he does it. High Schools dodge around the subject of evolution far too frequently, so I feel like "The Greatest Show on Earth" was a much needed addition to the global library to combat the wave of unreasonable dogmatic religious belief that prevents so many of the indoctrinated from looking at the world through a scientific lense.

Dr Dawkins has written another tour de force akin to his previous triumph, "The Gos Delusion". Evolution is a fact and no longer a theory. Dawkins relates the theory of evolution in a lucid and engaging style for the general reader. I highly recommend this book!

One Of The Best Book I've Read In A Long Time. Id Recommend It To Everyone, Everyone Could Use More Information On The Theory Of Evolution Of Natura Selection. The Public School SyStem Only Explains AbouT 1% Of What There Is To Know About It And With The ReceNt Rise OF Creationism It's Even More Important To Educate People On It. This Book Will Leave No Doubt In The Rational Mind. Even Those Without A Basic UnderstandingOf Evolution Will Be Able To Understand Most Of It. I've Already Had 3 Family Members Read it.

This is an excellent book for anyone who wants to understand better the principles by which biological evolution operates. It exposes the fallacious "thinking" of people who deny scientific facts and cling to notions of supernatural events producing life on earth. Even if you are already an evolution "convert, you will find it entertaining and not overly technical.

A marvelous read in which Dawkins, as only he can, methodically and logically displays the truth and power of Darwin's revolutionary discovery to a degree of certainty that no reasonable reader can deny. The main aim of this book is not to destroy beliefs and to tarnish tradition (although I think Richard wouldn't mind if that happened, too), but to show the wonderful truth that a simple and elegant process, tinkering away for eons and eons, can give rise to a group of beings that can contemplate and understand its own origins. This book was written to display that Evolution is undoubtedly and undeniably, the greatest show on Earth.

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