



THE BOOK OF LIFE

Reviewed by Phil Adds

Edited by Stephen Jay Gould
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“A Flawed Work in Progress”

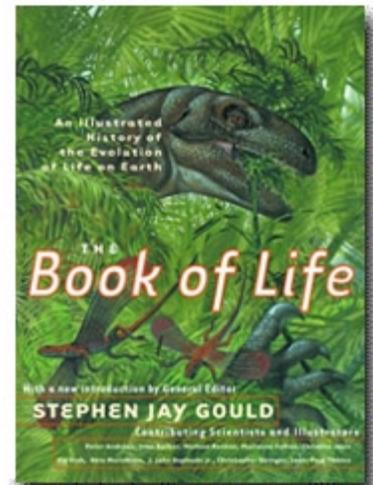
In this book, the contributors and distinguished editor set out to describe the history of life from the beginnings of the earth up to the present day. “Life, the universe and everything”: no mean task in itself. They also attempt to do this in language which is readily accessible to the general reader, while including the latest thinking on evolutionary theory and the lineage of man. And all in 250 pages. The pitfalls in this approach are obvious: while attempting to be all things to all men, it may end up being nothing much to anyone. That the book goes such a long way toward achieving its aims reflects much credit on its authors. In the new introduction written for the 2001 edition, editor Stephen Jay Gould calls the book “a flawed work in progress”. Work in progress it undoubtedly is – how could it be otherwise, when there is still so much to learn? But is it flawed? And if so, how much?

To begin on the positive side, the book is well written, with chapters tracing the development of life from the most simple forms to the culmination (despite its own *caveat* about anthropocentrism) in *Homo sapiens*. The writing is vivid and imagina-

tive, (with occasionally humour), while avoiding the excesses of the BBC’s recent “Walking with Dinosaurs”

series. I particularly liked Michael Benton’s description of the head-butting contests of

the pachycephalosaurs providing “..powerful percussion behind the honks and howls of hadrosaur bands”. There are chapters on early life in the oceans, the rise of the fishes, the evolution of the tetrapods, the dinosaurs, the mammals, and the primates, interspersed with explanatory sections on topics as diverse as continental drift, the structure of the cell, the evolution of the mammal jaw, and the biomechanics of the large dinosaurs. The book is lavishly illustrated, and the many drawings, maps and charts are well integrated with the text.



What, then, of the self-confessed flaws? My first criticism, albeit perhaps a minor one, but one which surely the editor did not have in mind, is that there are errors to some of the illustration captions. Not having access to the original 1993 edition, I don't know if these are old errors which have been perpetuated, or new ones which have crept in. Either way, it is a pity. Secondly, and perhaps inevitably in setting themselves such a challenging task, is the question of the level of knowledge expected of the reader. Clearly, in supplying an explanation of, for example,

the difference between prokaryote and eukaryote cells, there is little expectation of prior knowledge of biology. What, then, is the lay reader to make of a sentence such as “..an eogyrinid anthracosaur (a reptiliomorph group) called Diplovertebron, and two loxommatid (“long-eyed”) batrachomorphs, Megalocephalus and Baphetes”? In general, however, they get it just about right. There is much of interest here for the professional, and a wealth to be discovered for the interested general reader.

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