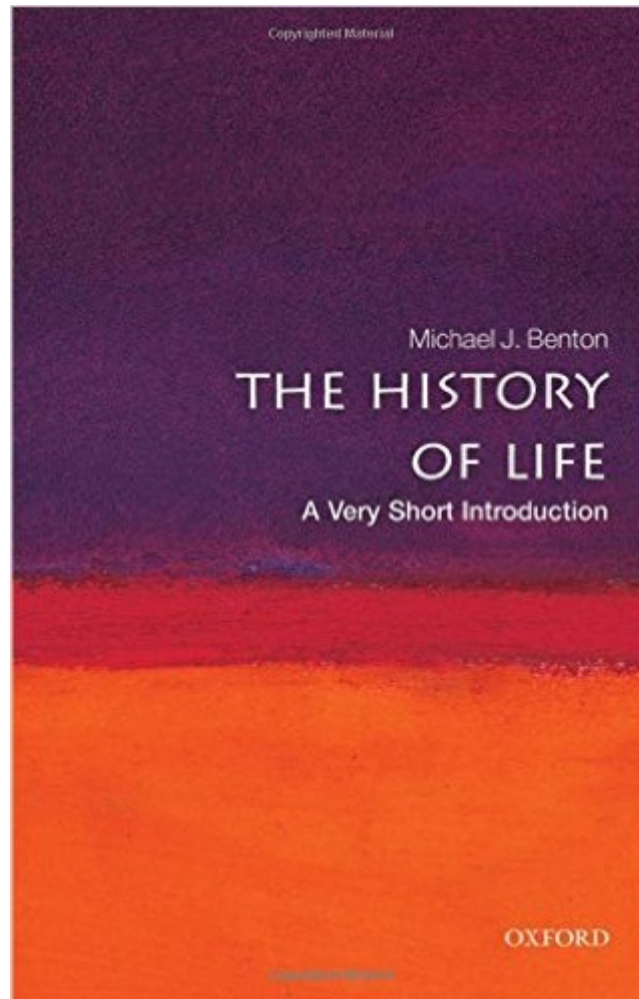


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The History Of Life: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

Here is the extraordinary story of the unfolding of life on Earth, told by Michael J. Benton, a world-renowned authority on biodiversity. Ranging over four billion years, Benton weaves together the latest findings on fossils, earth history, evolutionary biology, and many other fields to highlight the great leaps that enabled life to evolve from microbe to human--big breakthroughs that made whole new ways of life possible--including cell division and multicellularity, hard skeletons, the move to land, the origin of forests, the move to the air. He describes the mass extinctions, especially the Permian, which obliterated 90% of life, and he sheds light on the origins of human beings, and of the many hominids that went before us. He ends by pointing out that studying the past helps us to predict the future: what happens if the atmosphere warms by 5 degrees? What happens if we destroy much of the biodiversity on Earth? These things have happened before, Benton notes. We need only look to the distant past to know the future of life on Earth.

About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

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Customer Reviews

In only around 150 pages, this book covers the whole story of life on earth. That's 25 million years per page! Briefly: biochemical reactions started 4 billion years ago, and genetic materials started to form as well - these provided the basis for single cell organisms to form; multicellular organisms

then evolved, conferring the advantage of specialization of cells; skeletons soon developed and with them an explosion and establishment of all major animal groups (The Cambrian Explosion, c. 540 million years ago); afterwards, first plants then animals started to invade the land - including crucially forests and reptiles (The Carboniferous Period, c. 320 Mya); global warming then ensued, resulting in a huge mass extinction in which 96 percent of all species were eliminated (The End-Permian Extinction, c. 250 Mya); the world slowly got recolonized again - radiation of species occurred - and the precursor of mammals (the cynodonts) also came into existence. Then, a 10-km meteorite struck the earth, depleting sunlight via gigantic dust clouds, killing off large animals - significantly the dinosaurs as well - freeing the stage for small mammals to populate (The Cretaceous-Tertiary Event, c. 65 Mya). From early primates came monkeys, apes and finally us. The author emphasises the orthodox view that we humans are not the pinnacle of evolution, and evolution is not teleological. Yet he admits that we are special: "no other species on Earth, to our knowledge, writes book, or even reflects on the history of its own species." (page 146) - the reader can interpret and meditate upon this in his or her own way. Remarkable - short and succinct. Five stars.

The previous reviews are very good. For my part what I find remarkable about this little book is the amount of detail it provides on how scientists came to arrive at current views on how life developed on earth. At first I was a little put off by the details of who discovered what, particularly when Benton sometimes tells you a bit later that current views are different. But I came to see this as a much better representation of how science works. If you know how ideas were developed, it aids both understanding and retention. Thanks to Benton, I now feel I have the big picture. I did use and annotate a diagram from another book ("Why Evolution is True," also excellent) to help me keep the time progression straight. Highly recommended.

This is a topic that many shy away from, as it seems like it would be too difficult for the average bear, but Benton presents it all in a concise and entertaining manner that is very accessible, even if you don't have a biology or paleontology background. It's a fascinating subject, and Benton has a great sense of humor - the very understated Brit type. Highly recommend it, and I read it in only a few settings. He covers a lot of things and yet it all flows easily and is very understandable and well written. There's a reason he's so well-known in the field of paleontology - he really knows his stuff and is able to present it in a concise manner anyone can understand. Really opens one's eyes to the true mysteries of how we all came to be.

Good overview of early life on Earth, described in chronology. For slightly more in-depth coverage of the same material, one could read "Life On a Young Planet" which is also very good and written a bit more personally by its author. The book focuses primarily on early microbial life on earth through the Cambrian period when life starts getting a bit more "animal" and charismatic. It looks like there are separate "A Very Short Introduction" books dealing with dinosaurs and the animal kingdom if you are looking for reading on those subjects, which are not really covered here or the intended subject matter.

I purchased this item to use as a resource in my 7th grade science classroom. I was disappointed at first that the terminology was way over their head and they would have a hard time understanding it. But then as I started reading it, I was really impressed with the way that it presented and explained the information. My students may not understand it, but I will certainly use what I have gained from it (any maybe some excerpts) in my classroom teachings.

Interesting book about the eras of life. I like the theories how dna and cells formed from a soup of natural chemicals in water heated by volcanic vents. He talks about how various life forms progressed through the ages from simple cells to corals, early sea creatures, walking onto land, the Permian extinction which killed 96% of all species, and of course humans. Was easy for a non scientist to understand. The only drawback is that it didn't have pictures of the life forms, plants and animals talked about, so I had to keep running to my computer for images.

This was a fun read for me. I've been out of college for 44 years and my major was accounting. My interest in The History of Life is a continuation of updating my knowledge at least to 2009 about new theories of life and death.

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