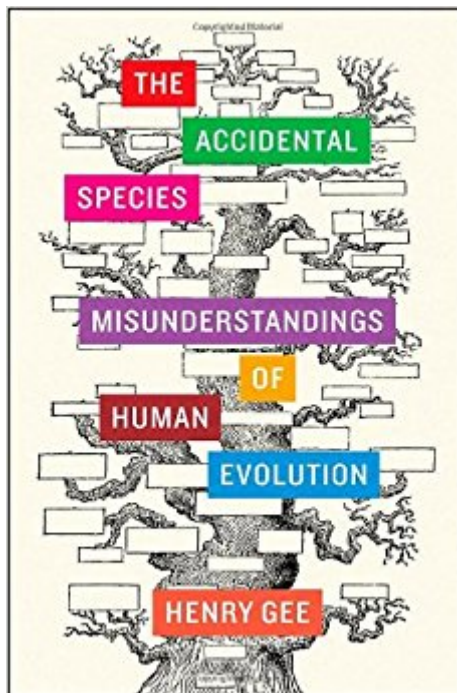




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The Accidental Species: Misunderstandings Of Human Evolution



Synopsis

The idea of a missing link between humanity and our animal ancestors predates evolution and popular science and actually has religious roots in the deist concept of the Great Chain of Being. Yet, the metaphor has lodged itself in the contemporary imagination, and new fossil discoveries are often hailed in headlines as revealing the elusive transitional step, the moment when we stopped being “animal” and started being “human.” In *The Accidental Species*, Henry Gee, longtime paleontology editor at *Nature*, takes aim at this misleading notion, arguing that it reflects a profound misunderstanding of how evolution works and, when applied to the evolution of our own species, supports mistaken ideas about our own place in the universe. Gee presents a robust and stark challenge to our tendency to see ourselves as the acme of creation. Far from being a quirk of religious fundamentalism, human exceptionalism, Gee argues, is an error that also infects scientific thought. Touring the many features of human beings that have recurrently been used to distinguish us from the rest of the animal world, Gee shows that our evolutionary outcome is one possibility among many, one that owes more to chance than to an organized progression to supremacy. He starts with bipedality, which he shows could have arisen entirely by accident, as a by-product of sexual selection, moves on to technology, large brain size, intelligence, language, and, finally, sentience. He reveals each of these attributes to be alive and well throughout the animal world—they are not, indeed, unique to our species. *The Accidental Species* combines Gee’s firsthand experience on the editorial side of many incredible paleontological findings with healthy skepticism and humor to create a book that aims to overturn popular thinking on human evolution—the key is not what’s missing, but how we’re linked.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“Henry Gee, paleontology editor at Nature, confronts two commonly held views of evolution and effectively demolishes both, persuasively arguing that evolution doesn’t work the way most people believe it does and that the entire concept of human exceptionalism (the idea that humans are fundamentally superior to other animals due to language, technology, or consciousness) is erroneous. . . . He buttresses these points with an impressive and accessible overview of the pattern of human evolution, showing just how little we actually know and arguing that different evolutionary stories could likely fit the extant data.” (Publishers Weekly) “If you only read one book on evolution this year, make it this one. You will be dethroned. But you won’t be disappointed.” (Geoscientist) “The Accidental Species is an excellent guide to our current knowledge of how we got where we are. . . . Highly recommended.” (BBC Focus) “Gee sets out vehemently to dispute our common tendency to see ourselves as the pinnacle of creation, the bold, brilliant branch that is the final growth of the evolutionary tree of life. . . . a thought-provoking and challenging book.” (Library Journal) “With a delightfully irascible sense of humor, Henry Gee reflects on our origin and all the misunderstanding that we impose on it. The Accidental Species is an excellent primer on how—and how not—to think about human evolution.” (Carl Zimmer, author of *A Planet of Viruses*) “The Accidental Species is at once an eminently readable and important book. For almost three decades Henry Gee, senior editor at Nature, has helped bring some of the most important discoveries in paleontology to the scientific community and the public at large. Employing years of experience, sharp wit, and great erudition, Gee reveals how most of our popular conceptions of evolution are wrong. Gee delights in shedding us of our assumptions to reveal how science has the power to inform, enlighten, and ultimately surprise.” (Neil Shubin, author of *Your Inner Fish*) “Quite simply, the best book ever written about the fossil record and humankind’s place in evolution.” (John Gribbin, author of *Alone in the Universe: Why Our Planet Is Unique*) “If you only read one book on human evolution, or indeed one book on evolution, make it this one.” (Ted Nield, author of *Incoming and Supercontinent*) “You may think there was nothing more to say about evolution, but The Accidental Species proves that there is—and wonderful stuff it is.” (Brian Clegg *Popular Science Book Review*) “Gee is a paleontologist, an evolutionary biologist and a

senior editor at the journal Nature. He is also a blues musician and a major Tolkien fan – a set of quirky characteristics that may help explain the combination of science and humor that pervades *The Accidental Species*. It is Gee's contention that scientists have been completely wrong in seeing humans as the apex of evolution. He denies that we developed big brains, the ability to use tools and all the rest through some kind of progression toward superiority. It was a lot more random, he says: We just kind of turned out this way. He illustrates his premise with detailed analysis and a mocking tone. (Washington Post) "Gee's big beef in *The Accidental Species* is with a common and popular narrative in which the evolution of man is a steadily unrolling tale of progress. Think of the classic image of a knuckle-dragging, ape-like creature giving way to a hunched, primitive man who in the following frames becomes taller and bolder until finally he looks like a Premier League football player minus the shorts. The truth, Gee argues . . . is much more complex and surprising." (Telegraph) "The *Accidental Species* should be a welcome addition to the bookshelf of any social scientist with an interest in evolution. Recent work in the area . . . highlights imaginations captured by prehistorical ancestral roots. Gee's writing provides background for the curious newcomer. Offering high readability and large dollops of humour, our 10-year-old read a chapter to me when I was driving. Recommended. (LSE Review of Books) "[A] persuasive book. . . . Gee is good at explaining how fossil evidence has been (mis)interpreted to fit that famous picture of man rising from the ape, growing taller and wiser with each step before culminating in us. The reality, he points out, is very different: until recently (no later than 50,000 years ago) there were many species of humans across the world. Some, such as the Neanderthals, had brains at least as big as ours; while others, such as the diminutive hobbit found on the Indonesian island of Flores, were more closely akin to the apes. (Financial Times) "If you want a primer on modern thinking about human evolution, you could do far worse than *The Accidental Species*. Gee writes well and has a taste for the absurd and the unintentionally amusing. You will learn much about the state of the fossil record and about how hard it is to make sense of the limited findings that we do have. (BioScience) "An editor at Nature, Gee possesses a prose style that hews to that magazine's rigorous standards of scientific journalism while at the same time exhibiting a colloquial vivacity. . . . It's with this kind of sparkling, clear-eyed, often droll prose that *The Accidental Species* conducts a Cook's tour of evolution, specifically human evolution. (Barnes and Noble Review) "Paleontologist and science writer/editor Gee has written a slim and engaging polemic against – human exceptionalism, which he takes generally to mean the idea that human evolution is

goal-directed and we are its culmination. . . . A very readable book by a knowledgeable author. (Reports of the National Center for Science Education)

Henry Gee is a senior editor at Nature and the author of such books as *Jacob's Ladder*, *In Search of Deep Time*, *The Science of Middle-earth*, and *A Field Guide to Dinosaurs*, the last with Luis V. Rey. He lives in Cromer, Norfolk, England, with his family and numerous pets.

The key to understanding *H. sapiens* is the process of natural selection and throw out the term evolution. The search for "missing links" is futile as each hominid species is unique and should be considered as such rather than placed in a questionable chart of who was the ancestor modern humans. It is remarkable how much of Darwin's early theories continue to hold up. Gee clearly cites our attempt to justify human superiority as a product of progressive evolutionary traits is pure myth. Viruses are far more advanced in their ability to adapt and spread than humans will ever be. Humans are not the only species to use "language," "tools," or technology puts us in our place as just another unique species on the planet with the one exception, we may be the one to destroy our host. One of the best books on the nature of human evolution and exceptionally thought provoking. Would love to make this required reading for all students of biology at the college if not the high school level.

Book Review: *The Accidental Species...Misunderstandings of Human Evolution* BY Henry Gee, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2013, pages 218 reviewed by Samuel A. Nigro, MD copyright c May 2016 "Evolution is a word we use to describe changes in organisms due to the interaction of hereditary variation, superabundance, environmental change, and time. Evolution has neither memory nor foresight. It has no scheme, design, or plan....In and of itself, evolution carries no implication of progression or improvement. Absolutely none. Zip. Nada. " (Preface-Kindle 1%). Two Kindle pages later: "In this book I shall show you how and why the view of evolution presented in the popular media is wrong and why we cannot use it to bolster our own position in creation. I shall also show you how to challenge what one reader of a draft of this book has called "human exceptionalism"--the tendency to see human beings as exceptional by virtue of various attributes as language, technology, or consciousness. There is nothing special about being human, any more than there is anything special about being a guinea pig or a geranium. This insight should allow you see the world afresh, and marvel at each and every creature as it is, for its innate wonder and uniqueness, not as a way station toward some nebulous, imagined transcendence." Another two

pages: "In reality, science is about neither Facts nor Truth, but the quantification of doubt...All scientific discoveries are provisional, set to be overturned by results gained from more data, better instrumentation, and new ideas....That is, science is not about Truth, but Doubt; not Knowledge, but Ignorance; not Certainty, but Uncertainty." And he ends his Preface with: "Once upon a time we thought the earth was the center of the universe, but were shocked to find that this was not the case. We thought that Man was the pinnacle of Creation, but despite Darwin, many still cling to this view--for which there is neither any excuse nor justification." After his Preface destroys contemporary evolution but with Gee adamantly still believing in it, we are then treated to ten chapters of his doubt mania--worth scanning for his proclaimed negations, his science based dogmatic Doubts, his declared Ignorances, and his pontificated Uncertainties. We read about fossils, dogs, crows, bacteria, pigs, people, ginuea pigs, prehumans, geraniums, and more non-human things galore. This becomes a real spiritual experience as is common from pseudo-scientists expressing their beliefs outside the periodic table. It was a fun-head shaking scan as I imposed his unFactual unTruth "science" dogma on his own work. The penultimate Chapter 11: The Way We Think is worthy of brief comment. Basically, "self-awareness" is "sentience" and all creatures have it as a "materialist" identity to existence. Gee obviously confines consciousness of self giving no expansion to consciousness-of-consciousness (C2) which clearly enables humans to partially escape from materialism, such as being able to fly without feathers, write with computers, among other human creations, as well as un-natural anti-human destructions like contraception, abortion, genderlessness, children as irrelevant, and anti-nature polluting everything almost. For Gee, "thinking" is, as for all other creatures, without the awareness to celebrate birthdays or the significance of consciousness-of-consciousness. The last chapter is "Afterword: The Tangled Bank"--about 5 kindle pages. He professes that he wants to end his book on a "crumb of comfort" because reviewers were distressed at his "extended dustup" of everything he minimalizes. His offered comfort is that all existence scenarios are still meaningless including the "stories" humans tell about any thing and every thing, but that humans must take comfort in "stories"--like he did in chapters 2 thru 10. Thus, he closes by unwittingly speaking about his story-filled book, proving it to be an oxymoronic example of his anti-existential nihilism and his own "imagined transcendence".

It is a nice read, presenting some unorthodox views and data. However, author often falls in the same pitfalls as the mainstream scientists he lashes against. It's also a bit of a dry read from time to time. All in all, not bad for single read.

My favorite book of 2014. You thought that evolution was some "cosmic striving for order and perfection," right? Sorry, but an objective reading of the evidence leads an open mind to a very different conclusion. The author, Henry Gee, has a well functioning BS detector and obviously loves shredding other scientists who cling to their human exceptionalism based specious arguments. I would not get into a science argument with this guy!

An excellent evaluation of current findings relating to human evolution. The importance of this evaluation is that evolution is a random process that has the potential to modify a species in multiple directions.

A clear exposition of descent with modification being directionless, contingent with the environment of the time, and not 'guided' in any way towards an outcome that suggests progress.

An excellent and witty read. If you read this and still think humans are somehow special, then you will be unique yourself! A brilliant critique of the fallacy of progression in evolution. A must read for people who want to understand the actual science of evolution and natural selection, instead of a fairy tale.

Here's a knowledge tester and expander for filling in information gaps in my knowledge of human evolution studies. It's a fascinating read written by someone with a broad background who's obviously experienced in discussing scientific subjects.

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