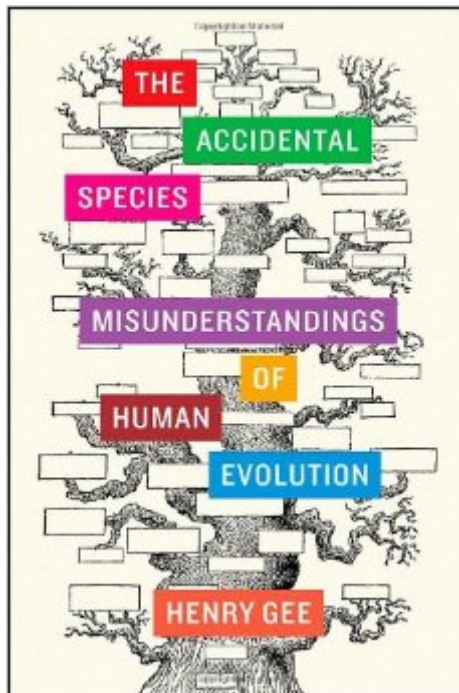


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The Accidental Species: Misunderstandings Of Human Evolution



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.

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Customer Reviews

This is one of the best popular science books of the year, so I feel a touch of regret that it has been published by an academic press. Don't get me wrong, Chicago University Press has done an excellent job with it - the book is a thing of beauty - but there are two ways this can get in the way of a wide readership. One is that people might be put off because academic books tend to be stuffy and dull. This one isn't. And secondly because it is rather expensive. I'd love to see this book as a mass market paperback because I want lots of people to read it. In fact I'd go so far as to say that a copy should be given to every 16-year-old. Not because it's aimed at younger readers, but because this is the best book I've ever read for putting evolution into perspective, and for giving a real understanding of the nature of the fossil record and what it can and can't tell us, not to mention explaining the power and limitations of science. Henry Gee shows eloquently why the concept of a 'missing link', while attractive to journalists, is just wrong - along with those popular drawings that have an apparent evolutionary progression from an ape-like creature, through a cave man, to a modern person. With the enthusiasm of someone who knows his bones firsthand, Gee tells us about what we do know from fossil remains, particularly in early and pre-humans, but also about the huge gaps. He explains clearly and precisely just what evolution is - and what it isn't. And he gives short shrift to creationists who have in the past quote-mined his books to give 'evidence' of how 'even evolutionists' say that evolution is wrong.

Lured by the catchy title, I was rather disappointed by the text. My general impression: Henry Gee is overstating his case. We are an accidental species, because when life started some 4 billion years ago, it was not preordained that an intelligent naked ape called homo sapiens would some day roam this planet, conquer and change it the way we do. As the late Stephen Jay Gould said: Rewind the tape of life, start it again and things could turn out very differently. In this sense we are accidental. Our lineage is full of accidents. But that's not the message of Henry Gee. It seemed to me that he has some kind of axe to grind with people who think that (a) humans are special or even (b) humans are the pinnacle of evolution. While "pinnacle" certainly is too strong a statement, I do think that humans are special. But Gee takes great pains to show that nothing, really nothing of what humans are proud of is special. Technology? His definition is so broad that it is bound to cover everything: "These things we create outside our bodies that allow us to do things we could not have done unaided". Therefore almost any creature that produces something outside its body is creating and using technology. What about Language? Basically not different from the songs of whales or the dances of bees. Intelligence? Don't forget the clever crows! And so it goes on. Once you got his

point the book is rather boring, because he keeps coming back to his leitmotiv again and again. Humans are some kind of big mammals, and that's it. Henry Gee's theory is a night where all cats are grey. It's as if I'd say that Albert Einstein wasn't special because he had two arms, two legs, a nose.... like everybody else. It's true but boring. Well, I remain unconvinced. Modern Humans are special.

I grew up in the fifties, and by the time I'd gotten into high school, I was already well aware of the ubiquitous artist's timeline rendering of the human march of evolution, left to right: amphibian emerging from the slime at the left, to proudly march at the far right in almost naked glory as a recognizable man. The Crown of Creation. Taking that incredibly self-absorbed view to task is the nature of Henry Gee's astounding and brilliant treatise, *The Accidental Species*. This is a book, destined for readers of a scientific bent, to be sure, but it is also at times very, very funny and almost spiritual in its evocation of the interlinked family of all living things. Recent anthropological discoveries and recovered fossil evidence has supported Dr. Gee's position that Charles Darwin's work has been misapplied and misunderstood categorically by science and education for a very long time. The specific area he addresses is the evolution of man, which now appears to resemble less the time-honored timeline rendering, and more the tangled branches of a growing tree. He often refers to Darwin's depiction of evolution, not as a single plane of ordered existence, but more, "A tangled bank", where many lives evolve according to their own needs, simultaneously and continuously visible and invisible. It leaves a much muddier, more complex model than the one I was taught from. Henry Gee, an editor at *Nature* magazine, has written about his facility with new information, often receiving word of a discovery or a data model long before its publication to the community at large. He has a solid track record of sorting those findings which are critically important from those that simply add to the body of data.

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