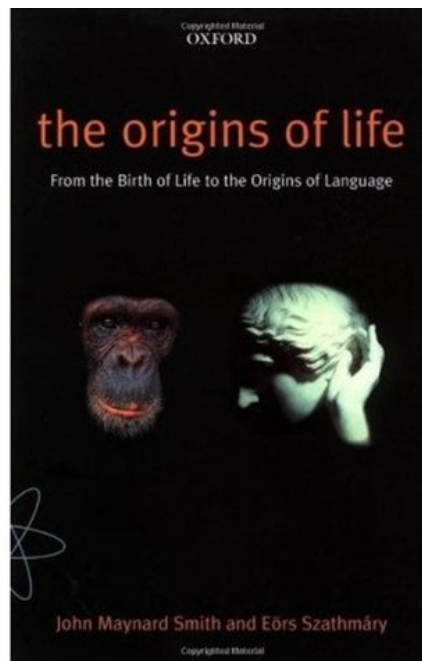




The Origins of Life: From the Birth of Life to the Origin of Language

John Maynard Smith , Eörs Szathmáry

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When John Maynard Smith and Eörs Szathmáry published *The Major Transitions in Evolution*, it was seen as a major work in biology. Nature hailed it as a book of "grand and daunting sweep...A splendid and rewarding tour de force." And New Scientist wrote that it captured "the essence of modern biology," calling it "an extremely significant book which, as a bonus, is very readable." Now, in *The Origins of Life*, Maynard Smith and Szathmáry have completely rewritten *Transitions* to bring their ideas to a wider audience of general readers. Here is a brilliant, original picture of how life evolved on earth, focusing primarily on six major transitionsdramatic breakthroughs in the way that information was passed between generations. The authors offer illuminating explorations of the origin of life itself, the arrival of the first cells with nuclei, the first reproduction by sexual means, the appearance of multicellular plants and animals, the emergence of cooperative animal societies, and the birth of language.

The Origins of Life represents the thinking of two leading scientists on questions that engage us allhow life began and how it gradually evolved from tiny invisible cells into whales and trees and human beings.

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Anton says

Very difficult, but worth it, as it's totally amazing in its chain of reasoning and speculation: demonstrates the possibility of life evolving from inert chemicals to the present day via accident alone. Essential reading for anyone trying to really understand how we might have come into existence (without resorting to theology or mysticism).

Helio says

This book was a disappointment. It gave a bunch of descriptive aspects of lifeforms but not much on how the diversity came about. For instance saying an early eukaryote might have accidentally swallowed some nutritious particle which led to mouths. That is like saying if someone ran into the back of a VW Beetle it might take the shape of the rear end of a VW Rabbit. And then if there was another impact it might knock the engine from the rear to the front. Another calamity might have something fall on the roof going from curved to flat and hence after a series of such bashes viola > an evolved VW. You could cry foul and point out that changes have to occur at the manufacturing stage and so with the organism the change has to be with the DNA not some accidental crumbling of a cell wall. The authors shamelessly use examples from human technology (which are intellectually guided). It is like saying it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, swims like a duck and looks like a duck but it's not a duck. Having to choose between Creationism and Evolutionary Theory is like having to decide if a rainbow is black or white; they are both two dimensional solutions to a five dimensional problem. The chapter on the Origins of Language is a misnomer; it might have been called tidbits on language; there is little about origins much less explain how human language became intricate and embedded in our psyche.

Dietmar says

A comprehensive review of key events that are proposed by the two authors during the evolution of life. Apparently the target of the book is all readers with interests in biology and the formation of complexity of life. Therefore there are some passages in the book that are basic biology that can be easily jumped over by biologists. Nevertheless, the book gives a quite up-to-date review on both theoretical and practical aspects of research about origin of life.

Part of the discussion is rather theoretical (or even philosophical), without much technical aspect involved. For readers with more background in biology (molecular biology, biochemistry, and evolutionary biology), and for readers that need more details about evolution, Ernst Mayr's "What is evolution" can be an interesting companion to this book.

The most inspiring fact mentioned by the authors (though a basic one) is that although there is a one-to-one correspondence between triplets of bases in the gene and amino acids, there is no such correspondence between genes (genotype) and parts of the body (phenotype). As the authors pointed out, "there is not a gene responsible for the nail on your left little finger, and another for the fifteenth eyelash of your right eye". Instead, most structures (a specialized form of phenotype) are influenced by many genes, and most genes

influence several structures.

This suggests that so-far the most prevalent method of single-gene based analysis is bound to fail. Though it is statistically appealing to assume genes are independent from each other, the assumption poses a very strong constrain on how we interpret biological data and understand biology with them.

Santhosh Totiger says

Very concise, not a single word is superfluous. A must read for anyone who is willing to understand how life originated be it on earth or extra terrestrial planet. Now I plan to read their Major transitions. For me this book served its purpose of understanding fundamental ideas behind origin of life.

Eric says

It's hard to write good, clear general science books. A very interesting premise, but somehow didn't grab me very well...but I had just read a really great novel, so that's hard to match with non-fiction.

Xin says

A wonderful book about evolution, especially the major evolutionary transitions such as the emergence of self-replicating molecules and the first multicellular organisms. The author is a famed evolutionary biologist.

Dhananjay says

Too dense. Many concepts are heavy so would have preferred more illustrations/explanations. But still overall important book. Might be outdated about a few chapters/ points.

Jen says

Not a light read by any stretch, but informative and a great compendium of current research on how complex life developed.

Betsy Curlin says

A good chronological account of how life began and evolved, up through humans and the origin of language.

Jon says

Fascinating, if lacking in depth
