



Origins Reconsidered: In Search of What Makes Us Human

Richard E. Leakey , Roger Lewin

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Richard Leakey's personal account of his fossil hunting and landmark discoveries at Lake Turkana, his reassessment of human prehistory based on new evidence and analytic techniques, and his profound pondering of how we became "human" and what being "human" really means.

Origins Reconsidered: In Search of What Makes Us Human Details

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Jacques St-Malo says

Fun to read and a great intro to anthropology. The first 9 chapters present a convincing thesis that establishes *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus* as the key transitional species between ape-like and human-like primates. These early *Homo* species were the first to make stone-flake tools. Earlier hominids such as the australopithecines were, say the authors, little more than bipedal apes. Of course, much research has been carried out since then, so this is quickly becoming outdated as a reference.

Ken Hasner says

As someone who has a great interest in evolution and how our ancestors' lives and environments shaped the lives we lead today, this was a must read. This was a follow up book that builds upon the groundbreaking work of his first book, "Origins". In it he challenges some of his earlier assertions, armed with the tools of age and experience (wisdom) and further hard research findings. Anthropology is one of those fields that can be terribly dull if not approached correctly but Leakey is one of those rare authors who can make your mind paint a picture from his words. There is a section (which is central to the book) about the fossilized remains of an ancient hominid boy found along the shore of Lake Turkana in Kenya. When you read his description of how the boy may have lived which he derives from fossil evidence and knowledge of local geography and geology, you are taken back to that place in the early Pleistocene era and see the water and the reeds and feel the warm breezes that this boy might have felt. This is what a great writer does and it kept me reading and wanting more.

To summarize, if you have an interest in anthropology, evolution, adventure or just want to read something well written and learn a little about our history as mammals, this is a great choice.

Irene says

Love this stuff and I didn't need a degree in archaeology to understand it!

Shelley says

Much more an autobiography of Leakey than an anthropological treatise.

Christina Startt says

I started this book a year ago, and picked it up whenever fiction began to be too much.

Scientific, philosophical, and entertaining, this book kept me jotting notes and questions down nearly every page. Leakey takes information from his own studies and those of other scholars to explore where we've been, where we are, and where we're going. One of the best things about this book is that he looks at many view points, not just those of paleoanthropologists and archaeologists. Religion and science of all kinds appear in Leakey's quest to explore humanity.

Of course, he ends his narrative without a concrete answer as to the future of Homo sapiens. And it irks, terrifies, and awes me to try and project my mind a billion years into the future. But apparently, all of this is what makes me human.

Zjay says

Leakey recounts his team's discovery of an almost complete Homo erectus fossilized skeleton near Lake Turkana. He takes issue with those who argue that Homo sapiens violently replaced the premodern peoples. There is no evidence of that. Recent DNA analysis confirms his suspicions and suggests some interbreeding may have taken place. Perhaps a less violent type of replacement. This book introduces many of the issues paleontologists and others have been grappling with over the last half century.

Kassilem says

I decided a few weeks ago that I wanted to read up on anthropology to get ready to go back to school in the department. I picked Richard Leakey's book up by chance but it was probably the best book I could have picked up. Leakey has connected many dots for me. The material is fairly dense if you've never taken an anthropology class before, but if you have it's a fairly simple read, and engaging as well. It didn't feel like I was reading textbook material. It felt like Leakey was trying to inform the entire world about human history, not just those who already know the technical terms. But it wasn't overly simple, either. You have to have a base in the knowledge. I'm going to buy this book soon. I've got dozens of quotes and passages that I know I'll want to look at again soon as I'm studying the topic. Whether you're in the field or just curious this book is a great read.

Brian Engleman says

This was a pretty decent read, fit for the layman and the well-read alike. I appreciate the value of Leakey's field experience, his lifetime of learning from parents who basically invented the science of paleoanthropology. He doesn't have a degree, and sometimes you can see the chip on his shoulder from that. He is also prone to flights of fancy from time to time, and he definitely thinks very highly of himself. I could have done without the chapter on how Richard Leakey thinks he disproved the existence of God by digging up some bones. But if you can try to look past his ridiculous ego, Leakey gives us a pretty decent book here.

Nina says

The personal fallout between Leakey and his fellow paleo-anthropologist Johanson is evident in both their books and is rather amusing. Johanson's books are more riveting -- more like detective stories -- but Leakey is more philosophical and contemplative. The book quotes Geertz: " One of the most significant facts about us may finally be that we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand lives but end in the end having lived but one." And Pascal: " When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant, and which know me not, I am frightened and am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then... The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me." Leakey's book discusses the evolution of the body, consciousness, language, and culture, and concludes in the end that we're an accident of nature that will pass away as other species have passed.

Karen says

I really enjoyed this book. It's very broad, Leakey covers a lot of ground, not merely the physical remains, but he draws on other scientists' research to talk about language, consciousness, religion, art and culture. The very first chapters seem to jump around a lot; they move back and forth from discoveries to theory, needlessly, it seemed to me. But things settled down further in the book, and it was very well written and very interesting. He does often give an opinion on things he's not really qualified to, but it's his book, so I guess that's okay. I had read *The First Word*, by Christine Kenneally, which talks about some similar ideas about language and evolution. Her book is more focused and in depth, and equally well written.

Lindsay says

The chapter about Lascaux Cave and Altamira intrigued me the most. A compelling read!

Noelle says

Great, easy to read, and full of excellent evolutionary anthropology.

Deborah Edwards says

Leakey finds a way to describe the complexities of hominid evolution in a way that is as elegant and smooth as his own speaking voice. I was lucky enough to hear him lecture at UNM (before his accident) and he lived up to my hero-worship. His books were one of the reasons I became enthralled with anthropology and this one does not disappoint.

SeaOfSound says

An engaging read about the historical unknown moment when man transformed himself from primitive homo-erectus to free-thinking homo-sapien.

Leaky goes into great detail about the East African fossil, Turkana Boy that he discovered in the 70's and it's relation to brain growth, language and emotional development and the other holy-grail fossils from that era.

If you enjoyed "Guns, Germs & Steel" you'd probably find this just as fascinating.

Karen says

I realize I read this before not long after it came out in 1992. Much of the information about hominins is outdated now... still, it's based on Richard Leakey's experiences, so it's valuable in that way.
