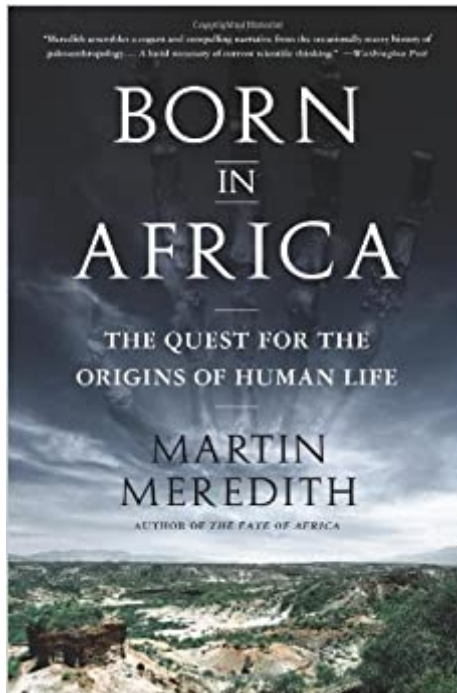




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Born In Africa: The Quest For The Origins Of Human Life



Synopsis

Africa does not give up its secrets easily. Buried there lie answers about the origins of humankind. And yet, though vital clues still remain hidden, scientists have over the last century transformed our understanding about the beginnings of human life. In *Born in Africa*, Martin Meredith follows scientists' trail of discoveries about human origins, recounting their intense rivalry, personal feuds, and fierce controversies as well as their feats of skill and endurance. And he limns their momentous accomplishments: Scientists have identified more than twenty species of extinct humans. They have firmly established Africa as the birthplace not only of humankind but also of modern humans. They have revealed how early technology, language ability and artistic endeavour all originated in Africa; and they have shown how small groups of Africans spread out from Africa in an exodus sixty-thousand years ago to populate the rest of the world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Kirkus Review, April 15, 2011 "An appealing account of human evolution and the fiercely competitive anthropologists who are unearthing our ancestors' remains and arguing over what they mean". The author does a superb job of describing the nuts-and-bolts of field research, the meaning of the often headline-producing findings and the ever-changing variety of species who split off from the common ancestors of chimpanzees and hominids. —

Martin Meredith is a journalist, biographer, and historian who has written extensively on Africa and

its recent history. He is the author of many books including *The Fate of Africa* and *Diamonds, Gold, and War*. He lives near Oxford, England.

I have been interested in this topic off and on for fifty years. First studied "missing link" in college. Every few years I revisit the topic to see what has changed. The author provided a nice chronology of discoveries and changes in opinion as time passed. It is a difficult science, underfunded and not much fun when fossils are hard to find. I looked for a table or chart at the end that would summarize the findings and be an easy reference to return to. The book just sort of dropped off, like the end to a poorly divided serial. And I suppose that's what it is. Unfinished business.

Author Martin Meredith wrote in the Preface to this 2011 book, "This book follows the endeavors of scientists striving to uncover the mysteries of human origins over the past 100 years.,, The route back to this ancient world has been marked by misfortune, false hopes, fraud and extraordinary feats of skill and endurance. The early stages of the quest were dominated by a handful of ambitious individuals, obsessed by their work and driven by hopes of fame and glory. Their goal was to find the oldest human ancestor... the science of paleoanthropology has been renowned not just for the exploits of researchers in the field but for their intense rivalry, personal feuds and fierce controversies. One field scientist observed ruefully in his memoirs how the profession was plagued by 'treachery, cutthroat competition and backstabbing.' ... The results of the quest have been momentous. Scientists have identified over twenty species of extinct humans. They have firmly established Africa as the birthplace not only of humankind but also of modern humans... We have all inherited an African past." (Pg. xiii-xiv) Of Richard Leakey's 1470 skull discovery, he notes, "Alan Walker observed that apart from its large brain, it differed little from *Australopithecus africanus*. Leakey disagreed. He was convinced that it was a species of *Homo*---and therefore represented the world's 'earliest known man.' ... In jubilant mood, Leakey took the skull to Nairobi to show his father, knowing how pleased he would be to see such evidence supporting his long-cherished belief in human antiquity... 'It's marvelous,' [Louis] remarked, adding with a laugh, 'but they won't believe you.'" (Pg. 79-80) He recounts the rivalry between Richard Leakey and Donald Johanson: "Johanson wanted to more than to match Leakey; he was determined to surpass him and establish himself as pre-eminent in the field. So often did Johanson talk of his ambition that several of his colleagues thought he had become obsessed with the idea... Johanson had often be scathing about Richard Leakey's lack of academic credentials. The two fossil-hunters had nevertheless developed what appeared to be a firm friendship... in 1973, Leakey had gone out of his way to encourage him,

making introductions, taking him into the field, offering advice... But after finding Lucy, Johanson's ambition soared further... 'He wants everything for himself... and it was all because he wanted to pass Richard.'" (Pg. 90) Later, he states, "Johanson... had endured a lean period. He had not made a fossil discovery since 1977. His hopes of resuming his expedition to Hadar had been thwarted by a moratorium imposed by the Ethiopian authorities in 1982 on foreigners wanting to undertake paleoanthropological research. One of the reasons for the ban had been Johanson's admission in his book 'Lucy' of his grave-robbing exploit in Hadar. When Johanson subsequently asked Leakey for permission to study new fossils in Kenya, Leakey had rebuffed him. 'I consider you a scoundrel,' Leakey told him by letter." (Pg. 118) He summarizes, "the fossil evidence was beginning to indicate to paleoanthropologists that in the million years after 2.5 million years ago, there had been no simple linear transition from one species of Australopithecus to a successor species of Homo but rather a period of wild evolutionary experimentation." (Pg. 120) Later, he adds, "The threshold between australopithecines and the first species of Homo is little more than a blur. The fossil record between 2.5 and 2.0 million years ago is so sparse that paleoanthropologists have yet to determine which species of Homo came first and when it emerged from the ranks of australopithecines. What appears certain is that Homo arrived at a time when the world was experiencing another dramatic change in climate... wild swings from wet to dry conditions followed by droughts---which put enormous pressure on hominids to adapt." (Pg. 163) This is an excellent and very informative (not to mention UP-TO-DATE!) book on the quest for human evolution, that will be of great value to anyone seeking such a survey overview.

A very interesting read into the origins of hominids. A fascinating journey into the world of paleontology and the politics of science. A must read for biology teachers.

Very informative. Good Product that served my purpose.

GOOD UPDATE ON THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF MAN!

Very good read!

Fun book about some of the history of paleoanthropology and the discovery of several of the first major hallmark fossils.

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