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The Firmament Of Time



Synopsis

Loren Eiseley examines what we as a species have become in the late twentieth century. His illuminating and accessible discussion is a characteristically skillful and compelling synthesis of hard scientific theory, factual evidence, personal anecdotes, haunting reflection, and poetic prose.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The quest to understand humankind's place in the universe is an old one, perhaps as old as the human species itself. That quest is tinged with science, but also with magic, for, writes the paleontologist Loren Eiseley (1907-1977), a human being "is both pragmatist and mystic. He has been so since the beginning, and it may well be that the quality of his inquiring and perceptive intellect will cause him to remain so till the end." In this lively, literate set of essays, originally delivered in 1959 as a lecture series at the University of Cincinnati, Eiseley traces the history of science, giving special attention to the 18th and 19th centuries, which witnessed the rise of a kind of scientific inquiry that crossed narrow disciplines. Building on the ideas of Newton and Laplace, for instance, the Scottish scientist James Hutton developed the foundations of historical geology; Hutton's doctoral work had not been in physics but physiology, and his dissertation concerned the circulation of the blood, from which he evidently hit on the idea of considering the earth as a living organism. Eiseley moves on to discuss trends in evolutionary thought, putting in good words for such neglected figures as Jean Lamarck, a "much maligned thinker [who] glimpsed ecological change and adjustment before Darwin." Eiseley's explorations end with an admonition that our

scientific understanding may well have outpaced our moral evolution, leading to the danger that "we have created an unbearable last idol for our worship"--namely, ourselves. His wise words remain compelling reading today. --Gregory McNamee

"Dr. Eiseley describes with zest and admiration the giant steps that have led man, in a scant three hundred years, to grasp the nature of his extraordinary past and to substitute a natural world for a world of divine creation and intervention. . . . An irresistible inducement to partake of the almost forgotten excitements of reflection." --New Yorker (New Yorker)"[This book] has a warm feeling for all natural phenomena; it has a rapport with man and his world and his problems; it has appraisal, and even blame and condemnation; but, above all, it has hope and belief. And it has the beauty of prose that characterizes Eiseley's philosophical moods." --Chicago Sunday Tribune (Chicago Sunday Tribune)"There can be no question that Loren Eiseley maintains a place of eminence among nature writers. His extended explorations of human life and mind, set against the backdrop of our own and other universes are like those to be found in every book of nature writing currently available. . . . We now routinely expect our nature writers to leap across the chasm between science, natural history, and poetry with grace and ease. Eiseley made the leap at a time when science was science, and literature was, well, literature. . . . His writing delivered science to nonscientists in the lyrical language of earthly metaphor, irony, simile, and narrative, all paced like a good mystery." --Bloomsbury Review (Bloomsbury Review)

This is not your typical history of organic evolution. Eiseley ruminates on the philosophical character and consequences of the various theories that lead to and culminated in evolution. Moreover he does not take an academic, historical approach; rather he uses a poetic one: he employs metaphors, imagery, allusions, and other tools more typical of a poem. The first four chapters detail how each of the world, death, life, and man became natural. In other words, how each became governed according to universal laws, gleaned by reason, without the intervention of a Divine Maker in earthly matters. "God, who had set the clocks ticking, was now an anomaly in his own universe." (p. 15). James Hutton's historical geology, Charles Lyell's mass historical extinctions, Darwin's evolutionism as applied to non-human species, and finally evolution as applied to humans - each find their poetic explication in these first four chapters. In Chapter Five, he discusses the consequences of making man natural on his psyche: "How Human is Man". "Man did something which at the same time revealed his continued need of the stability which had preserved his ancestors. Scarcely had he stepped across the border of the old instinctive world when he began to

create the world of custom" (p. 124). Man, by using his newfound capacity of reason, created a new unnatural world, one outside his old instinctive nature. But reason created a short-lived security as it developed and is always developing new tools, for either beneficence or destruction, which threaten man's future. These tools do not have an end; they are means which presume a worthwhile purpose will be found. Now, always gazing outwards at these new tools, man has forgotten about his history and himself: he is on the verge of not being to be human (p. 135). Eiseley has grasped the paradox that by making man natural, by separating him from other men and the infinite, he has threatened his own humanity. Admittedly I found the last chapter to be difficult to understand and appreciate: I had to read it several times before it sank in. Here Eiseley fully engages in a poetic-philosophic narrative to discuss time and evolution. The gist is that man now can create the natural as he quotes Pascal: "There is nothing which we cannot make natural ... there is nothing natural which we cannot destroy," (p. 159). Like the physicist who was afraid to fall through the vast molecular spaces (p. 153), man can generate his own view of what the world is, one that affects how he thinks and behaves to the point that what is natural is questioned. Ultimately, therefore, man should look inside himself rather than comb the depths of space, beyond the planets or between molecules. If you'd like to approach evolution from a different angle, this is it.

Another wonderful book by Eiseley! This should be required reading in every high school science course in the country. Throughout history, our vision has been narrowed due to the constriction of our tiny individual lifespan - 50 to 100 years at best. So we tend to see grandiose (often religious) motivations behind everything we observe in that tiny time-slice. But Nature is ever so slow, counting out the beat of time in eons, building the world in ways that are - though majestic - far simpler to understand. Here, the brilliant Eiseley poetically traces the path science has taken to lead us to our understanding of the ages that glaciers know.

Good

Outstanding

Expert condensation of much of the material in Darwin's Century by one of our best nature writers

I received my book way before the due date. I am replacing my paperbacks of this author so it was very nice to find a hardback that was not a rip off. It was received just as described on the JSL

website. Thank you JSL Books.

This work is a profound retelling of Mankind's changed understanding not only of the natural world, but of the nature of human nature. Eiseley in his poetic and contemplative prose traces Modern Science's transformation of the picture of Nature Mankind long held. This relates not simply to extending the time- frame of cosmic and terrestrial happening, but to rereading the very nature of human nature. But Eiseley does not simply describe the movement from a static world- view of permanent unchangeable species to an evolutionary one of emerging Life, he makes a penetrating critique of certain aspects of Scientific Culture upon human life and Nature itself. And while doing he insists on our holding open an understanding of the Nature which may yet emerge, and the mystery which remains within and perhaps beyond the Universe despite all our progress in understanding. This is a profound poetic meditation on Nature and Human Nature, and one which however strongly based in fact leaves us with a feeling of question and wonder at what we are and will become.

Loren Eiseley remains one of the most articulate of Twentieth Century naturalists, who approaches anthropology from the perspective that human beings belong to nature and approaches evolutionary and other natural sciences from the perspective of a humanist. He aims to bring to life the way of thinking according to which everything is natural, without diminishing the sense of wonder at nature and humanity that would result from a crass materialism. This book, in my humble view, is one of his best and was the most profound for me. It gave me the tools and the words to consider events on a different time scale than the one we normally associate with history. He suggests for example, that you consider a slow sequence of water droplets, continued and magnified over centuries, and get a sense for the wonder and force of time. What was a trickle is now a flood, and the process of erosion and geological transformation can come to life in your mind's eye. It is this kind of imagination, that can grasp the firmament of time on an other than merely human historical scale, that is required to really come to grips with anything like the general process of evolution. We begin to see, not sudden and chance emergence of freaks, but dynamic reproductive flows, channelled by selective pressures, gradually altering the ecotopology. I don't believe I could have written that sentence had I never read Loren Eiseley -- but of course I can't claim to approximate in any of these sentences the marvelous economy with which Mr. Eiseley wields his pen.

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