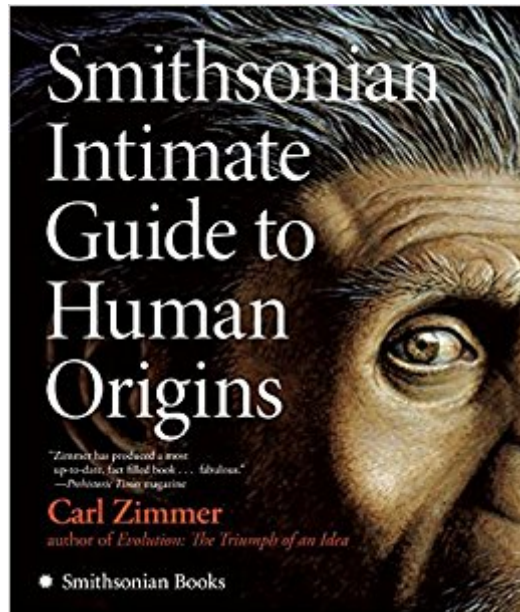




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# Smithsonian Intimate Guide To Human Origins



## Synopsis

From the savannas of Africa to modern-day labs for biomechanical analysis and molecular genetics, Smithsonian Intimate Guide to Human Origins reveals how anthropologists are furiously redrawing the human family tree. Their discoveries have spawned a host of new questions: Should chimpanzees be included as a human species? Was it the physical difficulty of human childbirth that encouraged the development of social groups in early human species? Did humans and Neanderthals interbreed? Why did humans supplant Neanderthals in the end? In answering such questions, Smithsonian Intimate Guide to Human Origins sheds new light on one of the most important questions of all: What makes us human?

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Carl Zimmer is the author of three well-received books on evolution. A Guggenheim fellow in 2002, he writes regularly for magazines, including National Geographic, Science, Newsweek, and Natural History.

About the AuthorCarl is a notable science journalist and author (12 books [focusing on evolution, the brain and micro-organisms](#)). and articles spanning that go beyond human origins / evolution writing a broad swath of related (biological) science subjects in a very skillful way for National Geographic, Science, the New York Times, Natural History, Wired and Newsweek.He has a National Geographic blog [called The Loom](#) [span\(http://phenomena.nationalgeographic.com/blog/the-loom\)](http://phenomena.nationalgeographic.com/blog/the-loom) and is reported to be a good

lecturer. This book often shows up in "Additional Reading" lists of other popular books on Human Origins, for good reasons: It is well written, the material is usually balanced, it is succinct and briefly (sometimes too briefly) covering a wide range of basic subjects and has outstanding illustrations. Finally the Quality of the book is high (paper and photos) and very attractive, as other reviewers state it feels like a small coffee-table book.

**Literary Quality and Organization.** His credentials show he is truly a skillful wordsmith and essayist. His sentences are written in clear English free of technical jargon and interesting. He does not over-qualify or equivocate (all too rare qualities in anthropology). Carl is a talented writer who knows how to make reading this subject a very enjoyable experience. The book is a quick and easy read.

**Reading Level** This is a popular introductory level book intended to give the lay reader an overview. It is a good book for those just getting into the subject. Some reviewers mentioned they read the book along with their course materials for introductory courses in high school or college and found the quick overview helpful. (Supplementing any course readings is always a good idea). In reviewing more advanced books I usually recommend to novice readers to read a book like this first.

Others mentioned the book was useful for bringing them up to date. When they wrote this, that was true, but the book is becoming dated. The basics are here but he simplified and leaves a lot of detail out. Standard for most introductory texts, but hopeful the reader will read more on the subject. This book is likely to inspire such an interest in you, and they will now have the advantage gained from the book of a broad perspective.

For the more advanced reader this book would repeat a lot of what you likely know but maybe provide you with a more entertaining review and maybe a different perspective on some subjects. I found a couple of items that sent me off to other sources for additional reading. And because of the way the book was written and its high quality illustrations, you may find it worthwhile for that alone. May also be useful in showing students or other less informed acquaintances basic concepts.

As a science reporter rather than a field or research anthropologist he is not trying to promote a particular position. Speculation is more limited, and importantly, usually identified as such. However his paragraphs and book organization could still be improved. IMHO he jumps around too much, going from one item to a tangential one, which may be addressed again in the book's later section. An easy read but not coherently organized. While the book is essentially historical this is only a vague framework. The structure is based more on the appearance of the general evolutionary traits of humans. This book is more about Human evolution than Human origins. The publisher also used "sidebars" as is used in introductory textbooks - to cover

specific important subjects (e.g. some fossils dating methods.) The material is often necessary to understand the main part of the text. Typically they are introduced when needed but are not clearly identified and I found their formatting and placement often disruptive and even annoying.

**More room for improvement here.** Illustrations Other reviewers used terms to describe its graphics like; awesome, outstanding, excellent, but I agree the book's greatest asset is its full color photographs, charts, illustrations and diagrams. These alone make the book worth its current price. It has 164 illustrations making up 60+ equivalent pages of graphics and the majority of these support and supplement the text rather than just be filler/fluff seen in some books for the public. These allow the reader to make his own comparisons with the side by side fossil, adding to their understanding. Some reviewers lament the book diminutive size and large, full page photographs and illustrations but I think this is brilliant move by the publisher. Along with the high quality of many of the photos and the heavy glossy paper stock this gives the book that mini-coffee-table quality that adds to its value, market and appreciation by readers.

**Book Size** This is a very brief book with relatively small pages. While it appears to have 164 pages of "meat", its generous illustrations and wide margins reduce it down to less than 100 equivalent pages of text. It has a third less material than another beginning book I recommend. The small text content means the book has to be selective in what is presented. I already mentioned that the text is brief and simplistic sometimes to a fault. Carl also focuses on the subjects he writes about. There is very little about Physical Anthropology (field collecting methods etc), anthropologists, scientist's controversies which are mostly conjecture anyway, personal experiences, fossil sites, the history of fossil discoveries or the discoverers or theorists. The exception is Darwin, which I believe he spends too much time on for the size of his book. (Darwin whose ability to outline evolution with very little information is formidable. But the field of evolution has evolved well beyond his time and the book is supposed to be more about Human origins, than evolution in general.)

**Recommendation to the Reader:** a good value: If this book was up to date I would have rated it a five. For a beginner, that still might be a fair rating. The book you are getting is worth its price, for the illustrations alone.

**Content** He covers most of the species and major developments in Human evolution that were known by 2005. The material on the earliest Hominids is too brief, except for one species. But he deals with the major classes of Hominin fossils from *Australopithecus afarensis* (Lucy) to modern *Homo sapiens sapiens* better. Gives some fossil descriptions, but tends to present on what there is about the fossils that explains Human evolution. He briefly covers; brain development, symbolic reasoning, language, art,

technology / tool making (he could have done more here) social aspects that added to modern humans capabilities, comparison of Homo sapiens to Homo neanderthals and the factors in extinction of Neanderthals versus Modern Homo sapien survival. His writing about genetics is well written but very brief, and a great deal more has been developed in the field since the book was written. And if you haven't read anything about human variation (race) by an anthropologist it's very much worth reading. Problems The biggest problem is that the information is becoming dated. One trait of this field is it becomes dated rapidly because of new fossil finds, interpretations, sources of information (like genetics), technology to assist in interpretation (e.g. computer modeling, data bank, microscopic and chemical analysis,) improvements in dating and evaluating paleoclimates/habitats and theories put forward to explain all this. Five years is about the viable lifetime of a book. 10 years is getting "long in the tooth" for many of them especially the summary books.. However, I don't know of another book at this level that is more current. (There are more recent books, but they tend to be a bit more advanced and more technical).

Here's the abbreviated version: The earliest hominids evolved from a primate in the Rift Valley in East Africa almost 7 mya (million years ago). The early group became extinct, but their descendents became australopithecus, represented best by the 3 foot tall 3.5 mya Lucy, also in the Rift Valley. Australopithecus became extinct about 2.2 mya. Descending from them before their demise were the Paranthropus group and the Homo group about 2.7 mya, again in the Rift Valley. The Paranthropus group, best known by P. robustus, became extinct by 1.2 mya. Homo habilis was the first of the homo species, giving rise to H. ergaster (a dead end), H. erectus, and H. heidelbergensis. H. erectus (fossils found from 1.9 mya to 30 kya) is thought to be the immediate ancestor of H. floresiensis, whose remains were discovered in 2004 and lived only 18,000 kya (thousand years ago). H. heidelbergensis gave rise to H. neanderthalensis and H. sapiens. H. erectus wandered out of Africa 1.8 mya. Fossils have been found as far west as Italy and as far east as China and Indonesia. A group of H. heidelbergensis migrated from Africa about 600 kya and their fossils have been found from Spain to China. The European descendants of H. heidelbergensis evolved into Neanderthals (fossils found from 135 kya to 27 kya). African H. heidelbergensis is believed to have given rise to our own species 200 kya. H. sapiens migrated from the Rift Valley, throughout mid and southern Africa 150 kya. Some occupied part of the Levant from 130 kya to 80 kya. Another group headed east and by 50 kya had arrived in Australia and east Asia. Members of this group crossed the Bering Strait to the Americas about 20 kya. A fourth group headed northeast to Europe and

northwest to all of Asia by 40 kya. Members of this group crossed the Bering strait again, this time 12 kya. This book from the Smithsonian is fantastic. They drafted celebrated Science journalist Carl Zimmer for the text and selected a whole field of supportive talent for the book's accessories. There are 164 high quality photographs, diagrams, and other visual aids out of 164 pages. Special one to two page synopses facilitate certain chapters on the subjects of: Fossil Evidence, Fossil Dating, DNA, The Chimpanzee Genome Project, Myth of the Missing Link, Orangutans and Upright Walking, Reconstructions of Specimens, Language, and Genetic Engineering. Of special interest to me is the explanation of how facial and bodily reconstruction is done - complete with beautiful reconstructive pictures of a Neanderthal mother and infant, a Neanderthal young girl, Lucy, *H. floresiensis*, and *H. erectus*. "Smithsonian Guide to Intimate Human Origins" is simple enough for any layman but concise enough for any scientist wanting a synopsis of the latest knowledge in human origins and paleontology. Complete with the DNA genealogies that have clarified so many questions in this field of study, this book is simply outstanding.

This is one of the best books on paleoanthropology on the market today. You might call it a coffee table book if it weren't for its diminutive size of 7 by 8 inches. But don't let the size fool you, it is chock full of information and full color photos and reconstructions of our hominid ancestors all packed into 176 pages. Written by Carl Zimmer, the author takes us on a tour of our ancestral world beginning when hominids first began to walk upright. There is a chapter on stone tools and tool making. There is a photo of the oldest wooden spear found in Germany, dating to 400,000 BP. There are photos of cave art, pierced snail shells and stone etchings dating to 77,000 BP. The next chapter deals with becoming human and what that means. He explains how hominids spread throughout the Old World and their possible routes of migration 1.8 million to 600,000 years BP. The Neanderthal is discussed and how he compares with modern humans. There are reconstructive photographs depicting the fleshed out features of those ancient men and women. A second migrational wave of modern humans took place 40,000 to 150,000 years ago that deposited mankind to all corners of the Old World and beyond. The last chapter deals with the future of mankind and where do we go from here. Evolution has not stopped. We are continuing to evolve. We do not yet know our ultimate future. I loved reading this book. It's not too technical and was written for the layman. The paper is glossy heavy stock. The full color photos, reconstructions and charts are realistic and very well done. It's a very nice book.

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