The Strange Case of the Rickety Cossack: and Other Cautionary Tales from Human Evolution

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In his new book *The Strange Case of the Rickety Cossack*, human paleoanthropologist Ian Tattersall argues that a long tradition of "human exceptionalism" in paleoanthropology has distorted the picture of human evolution. Drawing partly on his own career—from young scientist in awe of his elders to crotchety elder statesman—Tattersall offers an idiosyncratic look at the competitive world of paleoanthropology, beginning with Charles Darwin 150 years ago, and continuing through the Leakey dynasty in Africa, and concluding with the latest astonishing findings in the Caucasus.

The book's title refers to the 1856 discovery of a clearly very old skull cap in Germany's Neander Valley. The possessor had a brain as large as a modern human, but a heavy low braincase with a prominent brow ridge. Scientists tried hard to explain away the inconvenient possibility that this was not actually our direct relative. One extreme interpretation suggested that the preserved leg bones were curved by both rickets, and by a life on horseback. The pain of the unfortunate individual's affliction had caused him to chronically furrow his brow in agony, leading to the excessive development of bone above the eye sockets.

The subsequent history of human evolutionary studies is full of similarly fanciful interpretations. With tact and humor, Tattersall concludes that we are not the perfected products of natural processes, but instead the result of substantial doses of random happenstance.

The Strange Case of the Rickety Cossack: and Other Cautionary Tales from Human Evolution Details

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From Reader Review The Strange Case of the Rickety Cossack: and Other Cautionary Tales from Human Evolution for online ebook

Captain Sir Roddy, R.N. (Ret.) says

Ian Tattersall has always been one of my "go-to" authors for the latest and greatest information in paleoanthropology, and this new volume is terrific. This is really more of a historical survey of scientific and philosophical thought associated with human origins over the past century or so, and it is quite fascinating. Dr. Tattersall uses the fossils to tell a compelling story about how we humans have viewed our ancestors, our own origins, and where we may be going as a species. It simply amazes me how current scientific advances are leading to a more complete understanding and reevaluation of the roles that climate change, geology, genetics, and ecology have had on the biological and evolutionary processes that has resulted in *Homo sapiens* being the only hominid species left on the planet. This book will appeal to all who are looking to better understand what it is that makes us human and how we got where we are today.

This book receives 4 of 5 stars from me.

Angie says

For the most part, this was an enjoyable and informative, though dry, read. His disdainful comments about colleagues in the field, both predecessors and contemporaries, amused me but didn't endear him to me. I did learn a lot, and and it was definitely worth reading.
He has a bit of a hominid family tree hidden in the last chapter, which would have been good to know about earlier in the book. I also would have appreciated some maps. I found that I had some trouble organizing all the information coming at me, and for a while in the middle I felt that each new discovery was resulting in a new species. I lost sight of the big picture more than a few times. That's the main reason I didn't give it more stars. But on the whole a good read.

Alger says

Better titled: **A Justification of my Personal Opinions in Paleoanthropology - Or - My Memoir of Why Everyone Who Disagrees with Me About Hominid Speciation is Wrong**.

Laughing at mistakenly held personal opinions posing as fact and the gradual debunking and replacement of outdated theories is the topic of this book, and as all of us academic types know, we actually need to have strongly some deeply held opinions to make sense of what we are observing. So that proposed title isn't intended as a slur. Instead it is intended as fair warning that Tattersall's purpose here is to compose a valedictory justification upon his admitted distinguished career. His opinions do mean something.

At the same time this is a beginner's book in a lot of ways. Tattelsall revisits the classic arguments over hominid speciation with a light touch, but enough detail to give a sense of why disagreements over the varieties of hominids has lasted so long and been so contentious. Tattersall's answer to this is short and repeated; the scarcity of fossil evidence combined with a biased viewpoint upon our own ancestry opened the door to personal opinions matters more than evidence. The first half of the book clicks along at a rapid pace, flying past all of the early landmark discoveries and debates to arrive at the really interesting stuff, namely

the debates in which Tattersall himself had a part. As soon as we arrive with Tattelsall at the American Museum of Natural History in the early 1970s, well the whole book changes into a campaign of personalities fighting over deeply held, but mistaken, convictions. That is except for the persons with whom Tattersall himself works or draws inspiration from; Richard Leakey was a crank, but Niles Eldridge (co-author) is a genius. For a book premised upon being "cautionary tales" about clinging too tightly to pet paradigms and allowing ego and professional pride to get in the way of objectivity, Tattersall does enough paradigm-clinging and poo-throwing here to place him comfortably on par with any of his discredited peers.

The book works best as a very high-level review of the crucial theoretical changes around human evolution with a particular emphasis upon the cladistics revolution of the 1970s-1990s rather than a reliable guide to the current state of the art. Tattersall has a fun way with describing what would otherwise be dry bones and tedious arguments, but he is highly selective with what he shows us. Neither is he entirely clear as to what makes his opinion more authoritative than anyone else's. A fun read rather than an informative one.

L.P. Coladangelo says

3/5

Not terribly engaging, except for the prologue, the last two chapters, and the epilogue, it reads as a cursory walk down memory lane for the field of paleoanthropologists, written for paleoanthropologists. The "case" mentioned in the title is barely mentioned in the text, and perhaps only serves as a "cautionary" tale about how messy the discipline has been in actually codifying hominid fossils into a taxonomic structure. This does not make for very interesting reading, unless you don't mind very minute but uncontextualized details about various digs finding a jawbone here and a canine tooth there. The text also suffered from a lack of extensive maps and diagrams to make sense of the plodding narrative.

Peter Geyer says

The title of this book refers to an early attempt to classify fossilised human remains as something mundane, in the present time, as opposed to something from the past, and to be honest it was a barrier to my purchase, perhaps being overly serious. The name of the author overcame this, but it was a close call.

From reading it, I can see an analogy to a Sherlock Holmes or similar story – a crime scene where what on the surface is one thing, turns out to be another, or perhaps still a mystery slowly being sorted out, partly because various investigators have differing views, or vested interests, mostly ideological. The author is both an observer and participant, familiar with the players of the last 50 years or so, and he reports sometimes wittily, occasionally trenchantly.

The book has a number of overlapping themes: firstly a history of paleoanthropology and what appear to be its two major perspectives. These are ideas around human evolution, whether it was slow and gradual or punctuated by times of rapid change. The definition of species, the labelling of fossils and its consequences, a kind of Whig history view about the supremacy of homo sapiens. Notions about human perfectibility/perfectness compared with adaptation to prevailing conditions and so on. Finally, the significant impact of scientific methods in dating fossils and their possibly ancestry, during which Tattersall takes a sideways swing at those websites and other places that charge money to individuals who want to know their origins via DNA analysis.

The author also discusses a personal interest in lemurs, which tops and tails the book and surfaces at various times in between. This is part of an overall discussion about apes of various kinds and what they can and cannot do, mostly in the context of when hominids came down from the trees and became bipedal. There's much about Neanderthals, starting with the "rickety cossack"

Tattersall's observations also demonstrate what can happen in a field of interest, academic and otherwise, where ideas and reputations are at stake and where some people don't appear to look at what's in front of them, or consider alternative ideas or perspectives. Some figures include the non-academic Richard Leakey, the evolutionary biologist Ernst Mayr, the multifaceted Stephen Jay Gould aa well as many unfamiliar but respected names. He recounts responses to his ideas including occasionally volatile ones. One might think of political or religious meetings where belief is king and reasoned debate out of the question.

The author writes well in a clear and friendly manner and at times there's the feeling that he's just sitting across the table to you, or in a congenial lounge-room environment. Having said that, I found the detail around 3/4 of the way through to be daunting and gave up reading for a couple of days. But this is a really good book where you can learn a lot about a topic as well as the experiences and knowledge of a significant person in the field

A si

Dana says

The strange case of the Rickety Cossack by Ian Tattersall

The life out exposed to the tropical sun shine was almost certainly associated with the loss of the thick coat of body hair that the apes still retain till now.
The beginning of thr body heat regulation by evaporative sweating. As long as they were able to find a supply of water. Hominids they were allowed to continue moving out in the tropical environment. This trick allowed our ancestors to hunt in such a heat and sunny place and running after the overheated animals.
One of the most significant trade-offs involved in adapting hominid bipedality in the first place had been the sacrifice of speed.

Isotope of carbon that reflect whether you are a browser or frugivore (eating the products of plants, such as most trees, bushes, and shrubs. That use what is known as C3
If you are a hominid and the isotopes indicate that you were a grazer, then the C4 that you possess will most likely have come from grazers you have eaten.

Al -khalili almost a thought years earlier than ninth century Arab scholar Utaman al Jahith.

Curtis says

Informative and somewhat interesting, but I found it ironic that the author was complaining about colleagues taking liberties on assumptions and conclusion, yet so often used words and phrases like "obviously," "certainly," "without a doubt," "indisputably," and more. He also held to the assumption (one which I believe most or all anthropologist, paleontologists, and similar scientists dealing with very sparse data employ) that the latest data or measurement tool (like Carbon Dating or Potassium-Argon Dating) automatically outweighs previous data and methods. I just do not see how they can work from this belief. It also seems that

all current scientists believe they are at the zenith of their field's understanding (while I bet their predecessors believed the same thing).

I did learn new things, and found some of the stories engaging.

Bruce Gargoyle says

3.5 stars

I received a digital copy of this title from the publisher via Netgalley.

Let me say straight off that I found this book to be informative, engaging and generally thought-provoking. I suspect, however, that I am not the target audience for this tome, given that the content seemed to be pitched at a reader with slightly more prior knowledge in this field than I currently possess. Don’t get me wrong, if you don’t know very much about the history of evolution and you think this book sounds interesting, I would DEFINITELY recommend that you pick it up, but I was mildly surprised to note how technical the content turned out to be. On the other hand, my Kindle dictionary feature got a cracking workout, which I always enjoy.

Essentially, after a short introduction featuring lemurs and an unexpected coup, Tattersall takes the reader from the early years of paleoanthropology, during which little was known and much was surmised (and just plain old made-up!) about discovered remains and what these remains meant for how modern humans came about, to current scientific practice in dating remains and hypothesising about evolutionary processes. For each historical period, Tattersall introduces the reader to the main players on the evolutionary scene and the theories that they endorsed, with detailed examination of their background to establish the context in which their theories were developed. Clearly, this is an author that knows his stuff and has put together a comprehensive critique of the assumptions that have historically influenced the way in which people think about human evolution.

Now, my next criticism is going to sound a akin to someone ordering sushi and complaining it doesn’t taste like pizza, but I expected this book to be funny. That might sound odd to those who regularly read such scientificky books, but I feel I was misled by the highly amusing “Rickety Cossack” theory and expected that the book would have a lighter tone. It doesn’t. And to me this was mildly disappointing. On the positive side though, I do feel like I gained a solid base of knowledge about human evolution and the current theories and pitfalls of assumption that I did not have prior to reading this book.

The other desire that made me feel a bit childish while reading this was that of wanting more illustrations. Throughout the book there are a few comparative drawings depicting various human fossils to which the book alludes, but given that I am a newbie in this subject area, I desperately wanted more visual information. A map, for instance, showing where each of the bits were discovered would have been incredibly helpful, as I did have a bit of trouble keeping the place names straight in relation to the fancy names that were given to different sets of remains. Again, I suspect Tattersall was aiming for a reader with slightly more knowledge in the area than I, but all the same, a bit of visual prompting would have enhanced my reading experience no end.

Overall, if not for the amusing title and blurb anecdote, I doubt I would have picked this book up. It didn’t turn out to be what I was expecting, but I still had an enjoyable, brain-stretching experience while reading it. I’m not sure whether someone more deeply versed in this particular subject area would feel the same, but if you are a paleoanthropogical novice with a desire to enrich your knowledge in this area, then I recommend

riding into battle with Tattersall and his rickety Cossack.

Maria says

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Jim says

I found this book to be fascinating from start to finish and I also appreciated the author relating his opinions and personal experiences as well.
Tattersall is Curator Emeritus in the Division of Anthropology of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. This book is his account of the history of human fossil discoveries and the various interpretations made of them. The title refers to the fossilized remains found near Dusseldorf, Germany, which were given the name "Neanderthal Man." One scientist insisted it was not a prehistoric human at all, but a Cossack horseman who had suffered from rickets. Tattersall shows that there has been a long history of misperception about human evolution and we are only beginning to understand the complexity of the development of humanity.
It is quite a story.

Jeffrey says

While this book repeats a lot of information from similar books - Neanderthal's Necklace, In Search of the Neanderthals, Bones Stones & Molecules, etc - but besides updating with the latest finds (which will be an ongoing issue for any book about the prehistoric past), Tattersall has summed things up in a pretty accessible, casually voiced fashion. It's probably better as one of the first few books to read on the subject than the fifty-first, so a good starting point.

Jessica says

An interesting look at how we know what we know about human evolution. (Also a great case study in making assessments while dealing with limited evidence and high uncertainty.) Some of Tattersall's assertions didn't seem sufficiently supported to justify the degree of confidence he seemed to have in them, and I'm sure other scholars would argue with a lot of this. Still, I enjoyed getting an update on the state of paleoanthropology (a lot has happened since my college anthropology courses!) and I've added some of Tattersall's other books on human evolution to my to-read list.

?Misericordia? ~ The Serendipity Aegis ~ ?????? ✺✲❤❣ says

So, how exactly did we come to happen, as a tribe? Was it some weird genetic vibe?
Are we the crown of lemurs evolution or merely cause of the wordly pollution?

Q:
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Austin says

Thanks to Bruce Chatwin I've always had a passing interest in the origins of man. It was nice to get an updated version of what some paleoanthropologists agree on currently. Like the Brothers Karamazov this book started out a little slow. However unlike the Brothers K. it got better. I was interested to learn that when Potassium Argon dating was first used in 1950 the age of hominids went from an estimate of 600,000 years to 1.75 million years. Other interesting facts included that fire domestication was estimated at 1 million years ago and 2.5 million years ago stone tools marked a significant cognitive leap. Also around 1.8 million years ago the modern body form appeared and brain size began its remarkable increase. And the current form of homo sapiens appears to be about 190,000 years old. I was reminded of Roger Water's concept album where the aliens come to earth and piece together what happened to us, "We watched the tragedy unfold. We did as we were told we bought and sold. It was the greatest show on earth. But then it was over. We oohed and aahed We drove our racing cars. We ate our last few jars of caviar. And somewhere out there in the stars A keen-eyed look-out Spied a flickering light Our last hurrah And when they found our shadows Grouped 'round the TV sets They ran down every lead They repeated every test They checked out all the data in their lists And then the alien anthropologists Admitted they were still perplexed But on eliminating every other reason For our sad demise They logged the only explanation left This species has amused itself to death."

Thomas Salerno says

Paleoanthropologist Ian Tattersall discusses the history of how we came to know what we know about human evolution in *The Strange Case of the Rickety Cossack*. The title is a reference to the first fossil bones of a human ancestor to be discovered: The original Neandertal specimens found in Germany in 1856. While explained away at the time as the remains of a Cossack with rickets, Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* a mere three years later, and the science of human origins was born. This volume is a fitting companion to Tattersall's previous book Masters of the Planet, which effectively summarized the current state of our knowledge of human evolution. Now Tattersall turns his sight on the history of paleoanthropology as a field, all the way from the 1850s up to the present day, and on the colorful and often combative cast of characters who made that history. And boy, he doesn't pull any punches.

With characteristic wit and bluntness, Tattersall chastises many of his peers for what he sees as the gross underestimation of the number of hominid species represented in the fossil record. He also argues that the field of human origins research has been held back since the 1950's by a near-dogmatic adherence to the tenants of the New Evolutionary Synthesis and phyletic gradualism. According to Tattersall, these errors have fostered an incorrect model of human evolution, that involves a single lineage leading directly to *Homo*

sapiens Arguing that it is long past due for a paradigm shift in the way paleoanthropoligists view the evolutionary process, Tattersall lays out the evidence for the existence of multiple parallel branches of the hominid family tree. Many were dead ends, with only one surviving branch today: Our own species, *H. sapiens*. He also argues effectively for the distinctness of the Neandertals as as their own species *H. neanderthalensis* rather than as a "subspecies" of modern humans. As for himself, Tattersall is a fervent disciple of Niles Eldredge and Steven Jay Gould's model of punctuated equilibrium, and evangelizes forcefully for that hypothesis throughout the book.

Whatever you may think of his blunt style, Tattersall makes many incisive points about the assumptions often made regarding extinct hominids and evolutionary theory in general, and about how those assumptions are all too often influenced by the preconceived notions and biases of individual paleontologists. Overall, *The Strange Case of the Rickety Cossack* is an informative, well-argued, and entertaining book. Ian Tattersall is always fun to read, not only for his clear prose, but also for his epic rants. If your looking for a good layman's introduction to the science of human evolution, I highly recommend both this book and *Masters of the Planet.*
