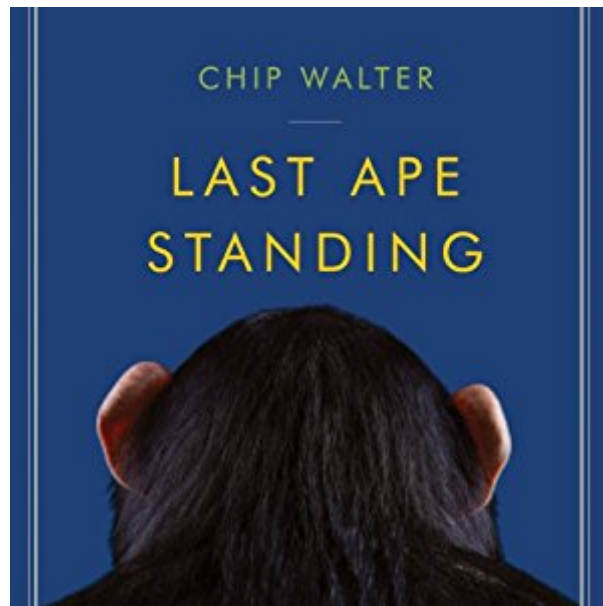


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Last Ape Standing: The Seven Million-Year Story Of How And Why We Survived



Synopsis

Over the past 150 years scientists have discovered evidence that at least 27 species of humans evolved on planet Earth. These weren't simply variations on apes, but upright-walking humans who lived side by side, competing, cooperating, sometimes even mating with our direct ancestors. Why did the line of ancient humans who eventually evolved into us survive when the others were shown the evolutionary door? Chip Walter draws on new scientific discoveries to tell the fascinating tale of how our survival was linked to our ancestors being born more prematurely than others, having uniquely long and rich childhoods, evolving a new kind of mind that made us resourceful and emotionally complex; how our highly social nature increased our odds of survival; and why we became self aware in ways that no other animal seems to be. Last Ape Standing also profiles the mysterious "others" who evolved with us - the Neanderthals of Europe, the "Hobbits" of Indonesia, the Denisovans of Siberia and the just-discovered Red Deer Cave people of China who died off a mere 11,000 years ago. Last Ape Standing is evocative science writing at its best - a witty, engaging and accessible story that explores the evolutionary events that molded us into the remarkably unique creatures we are; an investigation of why we do, feel, and think the things we do as a species, and as people - good and bad, ingenious and cunning, heroic and conflicted.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I don't normally write reviews (in fact this is my first one), but the errors in this book irritated me. It's an interesting book, but the errors were significant enough to make me wonder about the veracity of the rest of it. For example, the author goes through the human delivery process in order to illustrate

one of his precepts. However, he mistakenly says that babies are born facing up, because if they were born facing down their necks would snap. In fact, most babies are born face down (referred to as 'occiput anterior'), not face up (which is referred to as 'occiput posterior', and does happen sometimes). Moreover, there is little that could possibly happen during a natural delivery that would cause the baby's neck to snap. I have to say I couldn't finish reading this book because the errors like this made me question everything the author was saying.

Chip Walters offers speculation about human origins. He has no credentials in this field that I can find. I looked for reviews by researchers in the field, and could only find the blurb by Donald Johanson, who calls it "an intriguing scenario", but that comment offers no insight into whether it has any validity. If it is of real worth, I would expect to be able to find more comments by real authorities in the field. Much of Walter's book consists of looking at traits such as morality, etc. and research that has been done in that field. Many, many books look at that topic; again, quite a few written by respected researchers. OK, you say. Then what should I read instead to learn about this fascinating subject? I would suggest *Lone Survivors: How We Came to Be the Only Humans on Earth*, by Chris Stringer instead. Stringer is a Research Leader in Human Origins at the Natural History Museum, according to Wikipedia and several other sources, as well as being a Fellow of the Royal Society. Much more reassuring credentials than Walter's. Also Stringer's book has good reviews from respected researchers in the field and top science magazines, such as this review quote from the magazine *Nature*, "Combining the thrill of a novel with a remarkable depth of perspective, the book offers a panorama of recent developments in paleoanthropology . . . refreshingly politically incorrect.", by Jean-Jacques Hublin.

This book on paleo-anthropology is written so that the average person can understand it all. i.e. There is a MINIMUM of long-winded scientific terms used. The author presents the material in a manner so that you want to continue from one chapter to the next to find out what happens next. Sure we know that humans are here today, but the why and how is what the author explains. The author points out that of the 27 documented hominid [human] species, 26 died out and we are the only ones left. The why part is most interesting since we certainly weren't the strongest and we don't even have the largest brains. Now that was a shocker. The book is well researched with a nice index, a more than adequate bibliography [always appreciated in scientific type books], and more than abundant footnotes given at the end of the book listed by chapter. I prefer that rather than at the bottom of each page, which I find is more distracting, especially since most people are NOT

going to care about the footnotes. The author drifts somewhat into the socioeconomic realm when mentioning that approximately 4 out of the 7 billion people presently inhabiting the earth live on the equivalent of two dollars or less per day. He also notes that our species and for all races seems to prefer neoteny or babyfied faces [a trait mentioned by numerous other authors and scientists]. The reasons why and how this came about is the enlightening part of the equation. Along with that, the author presents a nice discourse on why human babies are born as early and undeveloped compared to other mammals. It has to do with female anatomy and walking upright, but the ramifications of what such a lengthy childhood entails is what is most intriguing, as I personally had never given the many aspects of that much thought before. We learn that babies at 18 months of age learn the equivalent of one new word for each two hours they are awake. [p40] And a "thirty six month old child's brain is twice as active as a normal adult." [p43] While a growing child's brain uses up 85% of all the energy his/her little body consumes each day. [p50] One of the neatest scientific who-done-it moments comes when the author explains how we once thought that each species devolved from the previous one simply as an improved version and that they didn't coexist together. Well, it turns out that the DNA from long dead head lice proved that wrong. As every parent of school age children knows today, you don't get head lice from a distance or by merely shaking hands. You must be a little more intimate. :-) [p94-95] I found that revelation one of the high points of the book, as I would never have thought to study such a thing. There was a long section on the Neanderthals, who lived for about 200k years but never reached a population of more than 70k at any one time. The language, and other social, economic, and technological ramifications of a limited population living in small family groups was simply fascinating. The few facts listed above are but a small sample of the myriad of things the author enumerates about the homo sapien species, and how we got to be who we are today. A highly recommended enjoyable read with the introduction and main text only a little over 190pp of the book.

In a way, I compare "Last Ape Standing" to a fighter, who upon realizing he is winning the match handily, coasts for the last two rounds. "Last Ape Standing" is one of the best writings I have ever seen which deal with the evolution and speciation of Homo Sapiens Sapiens. Walter is careful not to make the blunder frequently seen in looks at the fossil record: he recognizes the diversity in the human line, and sets the record straight on how Ardepithecus or Ramapithecus were very close to our ancestry; why words like "gracile" and "robust" are important in human evolution. I was especially cheered to see someone -finally- recognize that various human species coexisted for many millennia, even relatively close to modern times. However, rather than go into more explicit

coverage of the Neanderthals, Denisovans, Red Deer Cave and Floriensis branches, Walter wasted the last two stanzas on human psychiatry issues and future evolution. It was that last chapter which truly exasperated me, as the author seemed to have no clear ideas on the subject and threw his hands up. Still, the rest of this writing is well worth your time, attention, and purchase. Kudos to Chip Walter for a job -almost- well done!

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