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Switek, Brian. Written in Stone: evolution, the fossil record, and our place in nature

Early proponents of evolution by natural selection were hampered by their inability to provide ?transitional? fossils demonstrating the stages of change from one species to another. Darwin theorized that human ancestors would be found in Africa?rightly, as it turned out?but none had yet been discovered. In many other species lineages, similar gaps in the fossil record led to misunderstandings of those species? histories and the connections between species. Switek ably and clearly traces what I might call ?the evolution of evolution? in this popular-science work. Each chapter focuses on a particular type of animal?horses, whales, reptiles, etc?tracing a path from scientists? early understanding of that species and its place in nature through to our current views, explaining the importance of the transitional fossils that have been discovered while never losing sight of areas in which science?s understanding is still limited.

Written for the layperson, the book nevertheless does not ?dumb down? the science, instead laying out the facts clearly and allowing the careful reader to see the connections for him or herself. Fascinating portraits of some of the early naturalists and evolutionary theorists, including Darwin; Cuvier; Lamarck; and Lyell fill out this able survey of the history of evolution and natural science.

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