



The Hidden Life of Life: A Walk through the Reaches of Time

Elizabeth Marshall Thomas

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Quick—what came first, plants or animals? Plants, the common answer once taught as truth, is wrong. Animal life came first, and this is just one of the food-for-thought facts revealed in Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's *The Hidden Life of Life*.

Beginning with single-celled aquatic creatures, the book presents a chronological biography of life on Earth, from its first stirrings to the complex creatures of today's world. One of the refreshing things about the work is that humans are not set apart. Our crowd is not seen as either godlike or as destroyers of the natural world. Rather, humans are put in their natural context, as the "tag end" of a stream that has included numerous species better suited for long-term survival than we are. Humbling and awe-inspiring appreciation for the unique attributes of myriad species shines through.

A highly engaging writing style is one of the book's key charms. Though the book is informed by science and anthropology, the prose is conversational, well crafted, and jargon-free. It's especially successful at making information interesting and relevant.

Rather than attempt a comprehensive overview, chapters zero in on high-interest species like dinosaurs, pterosaurs, and crocodiles. Equally interesting are chapters on Neandertals and *Homo sapiens*. A chapter on the modern San tribe—formerly known as Bushmen—is a particular standout, pointing out that prior to contact with modernity, they maintained their culture for nearly a hundred thousand years, putting them far ahead of the Greeks, Romans, or any other civilization in terms of longevity.

Woven into the text are the kind of facts and musings that provide food for thought, including the daunting fact that humans appeared far too recently to be anywhere near as long-lived a species as the dinosaurs, who were around for 145 million years. Our reign, Thomas reminds, is limited by the sun that we revolve around.

The Hidden Life of Life is a skillfully written, well-informed, and accessible reverie on the nature of life on Earth, both fascinating and highly recommended.

SUSAN WAGGONER (March/April 2018)

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