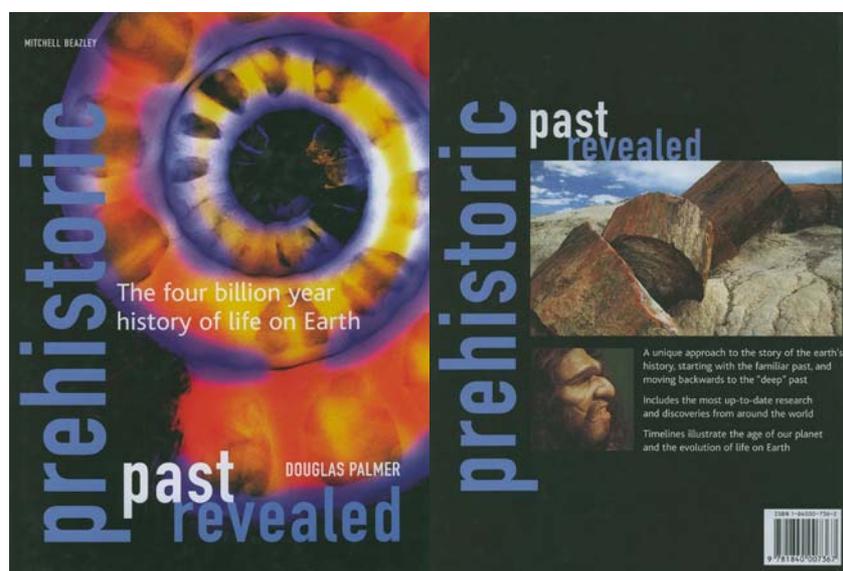


Palmer, D. 2003. Prehistoric past revealed. The four billion year history of life on earth. – London, Mitchell Beazley

Book review by A.S. Schulp



The average coffee table book about geology, evolution, or dinosaurs starts at the Big Bang, with primordial soup or a close encounter with the first dinosaur-like creature somewhere in the Early Triassic. From there, the story finds its way upwards through the stratigraphic column. The 'four billion year history of life on earth' however, is told by Douglas Palmer along a different route. The book 'Prehistoric past revealed' starts in the Holocene, and gradually digs deeper back in time. This, together with the very clever architecture of the topics covered, is one of the great strengths of this vividly written book. In compact chapters, Palmer presents a very wide but compact overview of earth sciences, the evolution of life, and the development of these sciences as we know them today.

Along the way down into the prehistoric past, more general topics are discussed. Catastrophes, for example, are dealt with in a more general sense at the end of the Cretaceous. Natural hazards, climate change, continental drift, fossilisation processes; Palmer discusses the evolution of life against the dynamic background of the ever-changing earth, not as an isolated freak show of strange creatures from the past.

Not only the evolution of life and the geologic background are discussed, but many scientists who discovered the concepts and developed the ideas, are briefly introduced, too. Unfortunately, the book is not entirely free of errors. Here too, Napoleon comes in to plunder Maastricht, an error repeated over and over again. Instead, it was the French revolutionary army that took the 'Grand Animal fossile des Carrières de Maestricht' to Paris. On some occasions, numbers appear obviously incorrect. For example on page 47, where a 7700 km² lake of 300 m deep is supposed to have contained 20.000.000 m³ of water only. Apart from these and other minor mistakes, the quality of some of the photographs leaves much space for improvement, too. Poor colour control, unsharp photographs, and even some photographs with obvious compression artefacts are just too common in this otherwise beautifully designed book. Regardless of these remarks, at £ 20,- the very readable, up-to-date, lavishly illustrated book is a bargain, and highly recommended.

Palmer, D. 2003. Prehistoric past revealed. The four billion year history of life on earth. – London, Mitchell Beazley. 176 pp. ISBN 1-84000-736-2. Price £ 20,00 (hardcover).