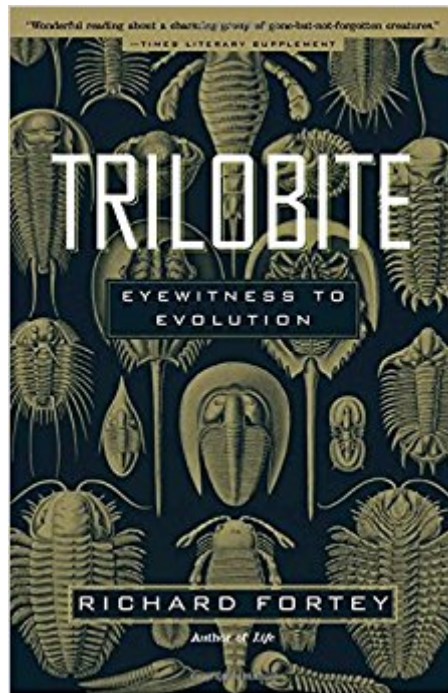




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Trilobite: Eyewitness To Evolution



Synopsis

With *Trilobite*, Richard Fortey, paleontologist and author of the acclaimed *Life*, offers a marvelously written, smart and compelling, accessible and witty scientific narrative of the most ubiquitous of fossil creatures. Trilobites were shelled animals that lived in the oceans over five hundred million years ago. As bewilderingly diverse then as the beetle is today, they survived in the arctic or the tropics, were spiky or smooth, were large as lobsters or small as fleas. And because they flourished for three hundred million years, they can be used to glimpse a less evolved world of ancient continents and vanished oceans. Erudite and entertaining, this book is a uniquely exuberant homage to a fabulously singular species.

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Customer Reviews

With his new book *Trilobite! Eyewitness to Evolution*, Richard Fortey confirms his status as one of the best communicators of science around today. His hugely enjoyable previous book, *Life: A Natural History of the First Four Billion Years of Life on Earth*, was shortlisted for the 1998 Rhone-Poulenc science book prize, but *Trilobite!* is sure to receive even greater acclaim. Whereas *Life* took the reader on a whistle-stop tour of evolution from start to present--a huge undertaking that necessarily granted little space to each time period or taxonomic group--*Trilobite!* sees Fortey indulging in a whole book about his overriding paleontological passion, the long extinct and enigmatic creatures of the title. The result is a joy. Trilobites--woodlicelike creatures that dominated the world's oceans long before the time of the dinosaurs--are, arguably, the most beautiful animals that have ever been chipped out of the fossil record. Fortey certainly seems to think so. His

enthusiastic, almost loving explanations of the anatomy, ecology, and long evolutionary history of these fascinating vanished creatures carry the reader on an inspirational journey into the Earth's distant past. But the book is much more than a technical treatise on trilobites. We learn about Fortey himself, his formative years as an amateur then professional paleontologist, about his much-loved teachers and colleagues, and above all, about that strange but addictive pastime known as science. You may not find arthropods as charming as Fortey does, but you will not fail to be charmed by the author. A delightful read. --Chris Lavers, .co.uk --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Since the age of 14, Fortey, now a paleontologist and author (*Life: A Natural History of the First Four Billion Years of Life on Earth*), has been obsessed with trilobites, which survived for a total of three hundred million years, almost the whole duration of the Palaeozoic era. "Who are we johnny-come-latelies," he asks, "to label them as either 'primitive' or 'unsuccessful? I want to invest the trilobite with all the glamour of the dinosaur and twice its endurance." That's a tall order, since the curiously shelled arthropod, whose closest living relative is the horseshoe crab, is quite disadvantaged in popular appeal when compared to that of your typical 80-ton brontosaurus and company. Although trilobites hold some fascinationDthey lived symbiotically, came in various morphologies and bore crystal eyes and segmented shells that let them roll up like armadillosDthey are very hard to warm up to (one look at the cover of this book will prove the point). More problematic, however, is that Fortey seems unsure how to structure the book. He rhapsodizes at length about the biology of trilobites, but as if to soften the presentation for the general reader, he frequently digresses to more narrative elements. He tells personal stories, relates anecdotes about important trilobite researchers and offers his opinion on numerous related topics, such as why the Cambrian explosion wasn't an explosion at all. Ultimately, these elements cohere more into a patchwork of facts and concerns rather than a crisp narrative of scientific wonder and discovery. Readers may be drawn by the popularity of Fortey's *Life* but they will be disappointed by this latest effort. 40 illus. (Nov. 6) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book is arranged a bit like a memoir written by the author of his many years studying trilobites. This seems to be one of the main styles, which for lack of a better definition, I call the "personal theme" method of writing. The author walks along ancient shale cliffs reflecting on both literature about the cliffs and the existence of ancient life fossilized & buried in the shale of the cliffs. While the

style leads to a nice narrative, it just misses that 'je ne sais quoi' of the theme: TRILOBITES! It gets close, but is a bit of a mishmash in working through both the evolution of those most durable & long lasting families of creatures the world has ever seen. He then continues with a narrative of his introduction to trilobites at a young age through his many years of study in academia. Some highlights: The development of the three parts (as in the tri) of the animal & the fact that it is also split three ways symmetrically on its vertical axis are explained in detail. The absolute wonder of the "crystal" eyes. (Yes, the trilobites that could see had eyes of solid crystal!) This method of sight died out with the last of the trilobites. The specialization & fusing of the segments (as in a segmented animal we see today like the centipede) into groups. Ex. The front most segments group together & form a head. One segment sends out a pair of antennae (segments further down in the animal's torso create legs instead). The research of Prof. Harry Whittington & some of his very special methods of analyzing the animals. Note that Prof. Whittington actually dissected some of his samples & also X-Rayed them to identify structures hitherto undiscovered. For further reading: Steven J Gould, "Wonderful Life"; Harry Whittington, "The Burgess Shale" A final note: Once nature figures out a method, or structure, that works, it repeats it through its descendants. Think not? Just look at your fingernails. They are made of chitin. This is basically the same material used by a shrimp, or a lobster, to create its exoskeleton! The next time you have a shrimp cocktail, examine the shell on the shrimp tail. Then be amazed at the beauty of nature to produce a material some time in the Precambrian era that is used both by mammals and crustaceans! Ancestors of the modern shrimp lived hundreds of millions of years ago and were present when trilobites were present and living in the world, long, long before man arrived on the scene.

I am going to have trouble adequately describing this book, which I have read many times. I am not a scientist, I am an attorney, but for recreation I have read many popular science books. (My complete inability to understand mathematics shut me out of the sciences.) Of all the popular science books I have read, and there are perhaps 100, this is the best, by which I mean, the most interesting and enjoyable for someone with no formal background in the sciences. (I was even motivated by this book to do a little amateur poking around in the California desert and I scored my own (very unimpressive, but for real!) trilobite fossil! These little beings from long ago were exceedingly common, so their fossils are not in any sense rare if you know where to look.) Professor Fortey, as other reviewers have observed, does not bore the novice by leading the reader through dry charts and learned explanations. The book sparkles with anecdotes, personal diversions, and fascinating insights into these ancient life forms. He really brings them alive! As the title tells us,

trilobites were among the first life forms with complex eyes, a particularly interesting form of eyes utilizing mineral crystals. This type of eye died with the trilobites, so we have no modern examples. Fortey takes us through the entire story in his charming way, from the genetic basis of "eye" all the way through to dedicated people taking photographs through fossil trilobite eyes in an effort to understand how the world looked to a trilobite. Then there are legs, and the work that was done to figure out first, that they HAD legs, and second, what these difficult to fossilize legs looked like. It reads like a little detective novel. The whole book sparkles with little gems of this kind. Obviously this book is not for everyone, but if this kind of thing appeals to you, buy this book and read it, you are in for a treat!

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