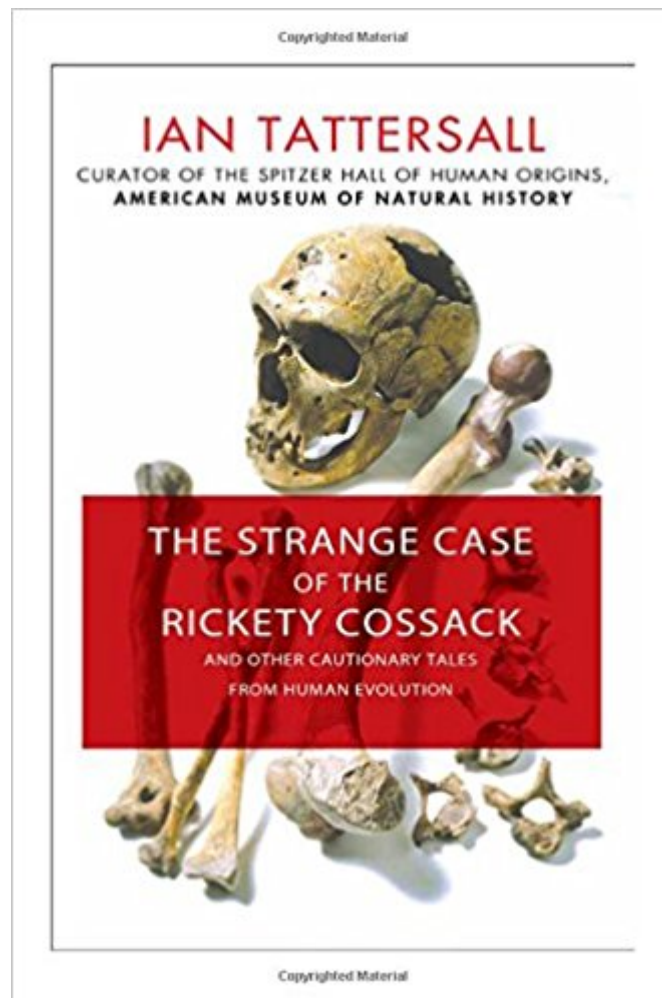




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The Strange Case Of The Rickety Cossack: And Other Cautionary Tales From Human Evolution



Synopsis

In his new book *The Strange Case of the Rickety Cossack*, human paleoanthropologist Ian Tattersall argues that a long tradition of "human exceptionalism" in paleoanthropology has distorted the picture of human evolution. Drawing partly on his own career—from young scientist in awe of his elders to crotchety elder statesman—Tattersall offers an idiosyncratic look at the competitive world of paleoanthropology, beginning with Charles Darwin 150 years ago, and continuing through the Leakey dynasty in Africa, and concluding with the latest astonishing findings in the Caucasus. The book's title refers to the 1856 discovery of a clearly very old skull cap in Germany's Neander Valley. The possessor had a brain as large as a modern human, but a heavy low braincase with a prominent brow ridge. Scientists tried hard to explain away the inconvenient possibility that this was not actually our direct relative. One extreme interpretation suggested that the preserved leg bones were curved by both rickets, and by a life on horseback. The pain of the unfortunate individual's affliction had caused him to chronically furrow his brow in agony, leading to the excessive development of bone above the eye sockets. The subsequent history of human evolutionary studies is full of similarly fanciful interpretations. With tact and humor, Tattersall concludes that we are not the perfected products of natural processes, but instead the result of substantial doses of random happenstance.

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“An opinionated, authoritative, and delightfully provocative account of efforts to make sense of human fossil discoveries.”
—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)
“Though "a

very personal account," this is superb science history. [Booklist](#) (starred review) ["Highlights the controversial ideas and colorful personalities that have shaped paleoanthropology and given rise to our current understanding of how we became human."](#) [Scientific American](#) ["Outlines the history of thought on human evolution clearly and insightfully...an interesting critical evaluation of how palaeoanthropology has developed."](#) [Nature](#) ["Traces the contingencies, false starts, and diversity of opinions that have characterized the intellectual history of paleoanthropology from Darwin to today...History, Tattersall reminds us, defines who we think we are."](#) [Science](#) ["One of the most engaging and thought-provoking books on human evolution of recent times."](#) [Simon Underdown, Times Higher Education](#)

IAN TATTERSALL is Curator Emeritus in the Division of Anthropology of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. The author of many books, including the widely praised *Masters of the Planet*, he is often interviewed about human evolution in the media and speaks around the world. He is the winner of numerous awards, and lives in Greenwich Village.

I've always had an interest in paleoanthropology and am old enough to have seen many of the breakthroughs of the last century and this. There are a finite number of books I'll be reading before I go to sleep for good and so I try not to waste my time with the genre of science/biographies. But I heard Tattersall interviewed last Friday on the PBS program *Science Friday* and was interested enough to order this book, especially as he advertised himself as a bit of a rebel and was plugging the idea of *Homo* as a varied genus, sadly now represented by only one species, and not a natural progression to modern wo/man. It's amazing how much of that medieval teleology still exists, maybe not in academic papers but in the general discourse, including that of science practitioners. Well, this is sure a book loaded with personal recollections and private thoughts and details, but it wasn't two pages in that I was hooked. Tattersall has a great style and a sharp and laconic wit. We meet guntoting teeniebop revolutionaries, claptrap airplanes and running out of beer in a hot climate before we're on page five! Continuing in that vein would have made a great book. But although this is a first person account of pale anthropology of the last 60 or so years, it does not rely only on colorful episodes. Tattersall has been at the heart of this discipline and his account is an account of how personalities and default assumptions have colored the field. If you're going to read this, you need a basic acquaintance with the recent (ca. 50

yrs.) players. I have that, but I was still hard put to put it all together into a coherent narrative: who said what in 1972 and what another riposte was in 1999, etc. etc. Let's cut to the chase. Tattersall is very interested in the internecine wars about whether Homo is a large category or whether there are many species denied by the Unifiers. He thinks paleontologists are naïve in the systematic of cladistics in general. If you don't get what I'm saying, better think about buying this book twice. He works this book around this theme. It is only 200 pages long and I read in two days and so can you if you are interested in the subject. There is a positive side to taking a huge mass of data and reducing it to "this or that", and I very much appreciated Tattersall's reduction. It made a lot of sense of what to me was perhaps unsorted information from many sources in the last half century. On the negative side, though, there was so much history presented in a pretty scanty way that it often seemed like reading a list. That's why I'm taking a star off the review. I think that perhaps Tattersall could have presented his belief that not making hard and serious differentiations among the species of Homo and other hominids leads to Exceptionalist thinking about human beings could have been more sharply presented. Why exceptionalist thinking? Because looking at evolution working on just Homo in general suggests that this outcome (us) was a refinement rather than one outcome among many other possibilities. I'm pretty much on the author's side when it comes to the hard reality of species (in this context, anyhow). But even he admits at the end that species are "leaky". When I was a boy I read that Plato thought that for every noun (Horse, Table, Neanderthal) there was an object. His friend Aristotle brought this down to earth opining that the world is arranged into Natural Kinds (horses, tables, Neanderthals) Couple of millenia later, William James suggested that our categories are something WE bring to our world to suit our purposes. I'm kind of with James here if I had to choose. About Tattersall's thinking that blurring the lines leads to exceptionalist, teleological mindset, I'd have to remark that this book is larded with references to the special and amazing character of human beings. Really? If ants could talk, they'd no doubt be talking about their own special and amazing qualities. But ants can't talk, you say. No but humans can't carry a hundred times their own weight and forming living bridges over rivers with their own bodies. Q.E.D.

I read many books on the subject of evolution, and now I add this book by Ian Tattersall who is

professor emeritus curator of anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Interestingly, the title appears to refer to the belief that some in the past had attributed the Neanderthal characteristics to a Cossack horseman who apparently had a painful condition of rickets that caused him to furrow his brow. This seems quite funny now, but as the author delves into the study of evolution in the early years, we can see how human biases at the time shaped evolutionary thought. He begins with the work of Darwin and Wallace and segues into the work of many paleoanthropologists and others as they try to make sense of the fossil findings of their time. It is interesting to see the train of thought through the early years knowing what we know now. The author has provided an in-depth history of the paleoanthropological process throughout the many decades of discovery in the field of hominid fossils. It seems that the characteristic mind-set was "dominated by the notion that human evolution was no more than a simple linear struggle from primitiveness to perfection by a hugely variable and constantly changing species," according to Tattersall. Ideas changed over time as more fossils were discovered. The "single species hypothesis eventually became the "multiregional model," and eventually you have some scientist touting the "single African origin model." And, course, no history of evolution is complete without a discussion of the Neanderthals and the Homo floresiensis, of which the author devotes ample time. So Tattersall provides us here with "a very personal account of how Paleoanthropology came by its received wisdoms." This "highly idiosyncratic history of Paleoanthropology has deeply affected how we perceive our origins today," according to the author.

Very entertaining and informative book. He makes a lot of good points, mostly about how preconceived notions of what must be true colors the evaluation of the fossil record. I am not sure how he really stands on the recently-out-of-Africa versus multiregional evolution with gene flow. He gives many arguments both ways. But in this the confusion, I think, comes from the recent claims of Neanderthal/Denisovan DNA within modern non-Africal peoples, which does argue for some multiregionalism. It was a very intriguing discussion.

Ian Tattersall has been at the forefront of the understanding of human origins for decades, as well as being a prominent writer in the field, and this is his opportunity to look back, from the twilight of his career, at the development of the field. While this book covers the history of the field it is, by the author's intent and admission, a personal view, not a not an attempt to be comprehensive or balanced. Tattersall spends a lot of his narrative on misinterpretations, closed mindedness, dead ends, quirks of personality, feuds, and the like. This helps to elucidate the rocky path

paleoanthropology has followed to get us to our current, and still disputed, understanding of our ancestry. He provides a good discussion of what molecular and DNA testing have told us, and also why it has sometimes met opposition from cladists when molecules have seemed to tell a different story than bones, or at least how one person or another has evaluated bones. This is a short and easy to read book that contains a lot of information, history, and authorial insight. I highly recommend it to anyone interested the question of where we came from.

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