



Extinction: Bad Genes or Bad Luck?

By David M. Raup

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This is the first major book to present a comprehensive overview of the current state of extinction studies. At the end of the journey, Raup has put forward the best science of the day to answer the question posed by the title: Bad genes or bad luck?

In the geological record, there are five major mass extinctions?the "Big Five." The most famous happened at the end of the Cretaceous Period, when the dinosaurs and two-thirds of all marine animal species were wiped out, opening the door for the age of mammals and the rise of *Homo Sapiens*. Using this example as a springboard, David M. Raup leaps into an engaging discussion of the theories, assumptions, and difficulties associated with the science of species extinction. Woven in along the way are stories of the trilobite eye, tropical reefs, flying reptiles, and the fate of the heath hen on Martha's Vineyard, a very modern extinction.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Raup takes up a cocktail-party science topic--Why do entire branches of life "suddenly" (in geologic time) disappear?--and gives it weight and validity. Despite the catchy title, Raup's presentation is plenty rigorous, drawing in just enough geology, anthropology, biostatistics and yes, even the Alvarez meteor/earth cataclysm, to send readers looking for additional reading on current evolutionary theory. Fans of Stephen Jay Gould will find a similarly fluent and friendly lecture style here. University of Chicago professor Raup is coauthor of several standard graduate-level texts on paleontology and evolution. Illustrations not seen by PW.

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From Library Journal

Scientists have directed a good deal of attention to the topic of extinction in recent years. In this book, Raup, a mathematically oriented paleontologist, discusses the role of extinction in evolution, attempting to differentiate the effects of natural selection ("bad genes") and extraterrestrial causes ("bad luck"). It is a nicely done work written for the layperson, much in the vein of his previous book, *The Nemesis Affair* (LJ 8/86), which covers some of the same territory and which also favors extraterrestrial causes. This book should serve as a complement to the relatively few other recent works on extinction for the nonspecialist, notably Steven M. Stanley's *Extinction* (Scientific American Lib., 1987), which offers an alternative viewpoint.

-*Joseph Hannibal, Cleveland Museum of Natural History*

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From Kirkus Reviews

A remarkably candid book on what we know and (mostly) what we don't know about evolution and extinction. Raup, a "statistical" paleontologist at the Univ. of Chicago, is best known for his popular exposition of a theory that extinctions come in 25-million-year cycles, an idea that spawned the notion that the sun had a dark companion ("Nemesis") that periodically triggered cometary showers that wrecked havoc on earth. Maybe not Nemesis, Raup says, but he still holds out for periodicity and mass killing via meteor impact. Before reviewing theories of extinction, Raup provides useful insights and details on evolution and a number of tables illustrating time scales, percentages of organisms dying, etc., as well as a philosophical discussion of the value of extinction. He argues that an extinction-free world might not lead to as much diversity as the world has enjoyed. We can't be sure, but would birds or whales or humans have evolved in the absence of the terrain created after mass killings of other species? Everywhere, he urges caution--the data are not available; people are distressingly anthropomorphic as well as suspicious of unearthly theories of extinction. In a wonderful tour de force, he lays out the arguments and counterarguments for the theory that large impact craters are the cause for mass extinctions. Both sides are convincing. In the end, Raup makes a strong case that extinction is necessary for evolution and largely blind to the fitness of organisms. A first strike, such as human intervention or an epidemic disease, may trigger the beginning of extinction. So may bad genes. But, overall, bad luck is more likely. While the book is important for what it has to say about life on earth, it is also a marvelous exposition of think and double-think in science. -- *Copyright ©1991, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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