

PREFACE

Some years ago I was responsible for a series of television programs called *Dinosaur!* in which Walter Cronkite told the story of the most successful creatures which have ever walked the earth. In four hours, we covered about 150 million years of history, and when the Arts & Entertainment channel in the US and ITV in the UK broadcast the programs, they seemed to touch a nerve.

It would be good, if optimistic, to think that *Jurassic Park* followed our lead. In fact it was nothing but coincidence and luck that our series was seen at a time when the whole world was caught up with the fascination of the dinosaurs.

The distant past is a wonderful subject. People seem to have a limitless appetite for learning about it, possibly because of the insecurities of the present. It may be that one of the magnetic qualities of the story of the dinosaurs, apart from the fact that the creatures themselves are so extraordinary, is that it puts our own existence as humans into clear perspective. By any measure, there have been humans on this planet for only a maximum of seven million years – and this in the context of a history of life of all kinds which stretches back more than three billion years.

After the dinosaurs, what next? When they became extinct, somewhere around sixty million years ago, they left behind their successor class of creatures, the mammals. And from among the mammals emerged, by some remarkable process of change, the first upright-walking apes, the distant ancestors of today's humans.

At its simplest, this is the story of who we are. Why do humans exist? Why are we the way we are? What was life like for our earliest ancestors? What may the future hold for us?

Life for humans, as we approach the end of the twentieth century, is not easy. The world is a troubled place. What messages can the past offer us about the present?

Our new television series, again with Walter Cronkite as guide and story-teller, tries to answer some of these questions, and this book offers an opportunity to be more expansive in exploring them.

It is a book about ideas. In the past twenty-five years, a good deal of the factual framework of human evolution has been established with a greater degree of certainty than ever before, and today's evolutionary scientists are increasingly preoccupied with seeking explanations as well as with adding to the known facts of our history.

There have been some great scientific advances in recent times. Gone are the days when whole theories about the past were constructed on the basis of a single fossil fragment. Now the continued search for actual human remains, and for the rubbish early humans left behind, takes its place alongside the complementary study of genetics, the climate, the environment and other animals in building up a picture of the past.

Gone are the days, too, when the history of humanity was seen as an upward march from the primitive to the civilized, when the past was peopled with creatures whose only virtue was that one day they would learn to be proper humans.

Ape Man



*Walter Cronkite on location
in Kenya for the filming of
Ape Man in the summer of
1993.*

Modern science explores why and when humans and our ancestors acquired the characteristics which we like to think make us so special – upright walking, the use of tools and technology, language, imagination and creativity – and sets them in the context of time. Without giving away too much of the underlying story at this early stage, it is worth just pausing to think over the idea that the time we are living in now is very probably the first period during which there has been only one species of humans alive. And the idea that extinction is an iron rule of biology.

This book follows a thematic approach. It tries to pick apart the species of *Homo sapiens* and to explain why the search for the origins of humanity will never come up with a single answer. As one scientist says: "It all depends what you mean by human." It tries to disentangle the fact that we think of ourselves as unique from the fact that all species of life are unique; what is it about us that makes us think we are even more special?

This is a layman's book. I am not a scientist, and I have therefore relied on the unstinting help given while we were making the programs by academics all over the world. Without their generosity with their time and their ideas, the programs and the book would have been impossible. Many of them are directly quoted in the book, from interviews they gave members of the production team when we were filming. I would like to take this opportunity to thank each of them, most sincerely, for their willingness and patience.

In particular I would like to thank Robert Foley of Cambridge University, who acted as scientific consultant on both the television programs and this book. He has been endlessly calm and tolerant in explaining facts and ideas which to him are utterly elementary, and in answering questions which even I can see, after a year's exposure to the subject, have occasionally been hopelessly naive. His contribution, on and off the screen, has been indispensable.

I also want to thank Stephen Gooder, who made sure that all Christa Hook's fine illustrations in the program and the book were scientifically sound, and who has himself designed many of the illustrations and graphics in the book. Susanna Wadeson at Boxtree Ltd has been an extremely patient editor and an invaluable critic and supporter.

Television programs are a collaborative effort, and the book would not have happened without the huge contribution of research and ideas from the entire production team on the series. My special thanks are therefore due to Jim Black and Peter Nicholson (directors), Jemma Jupp (associate producer), Becky Jones (researcher), Andrea Sprunt (line producer) and Samantha Stuart (production secretary), without any one of whom none of this would have been possible. The programs were also very fortunate to benefit from the creative skills of Peter Terry and Matt Howarth (graphics), Roger Bolton (music) and Kim Horton and Tony Cranstoun (editors). Michael Katz at the Arts & Entertainment Network had what I hope will turn out to be the foresight to commission a series of programs on a subject which by definition is not there to be filmed, and his nerve has never failed.

Responsibility for what follows, however, is mine.

ROD CAIRD
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