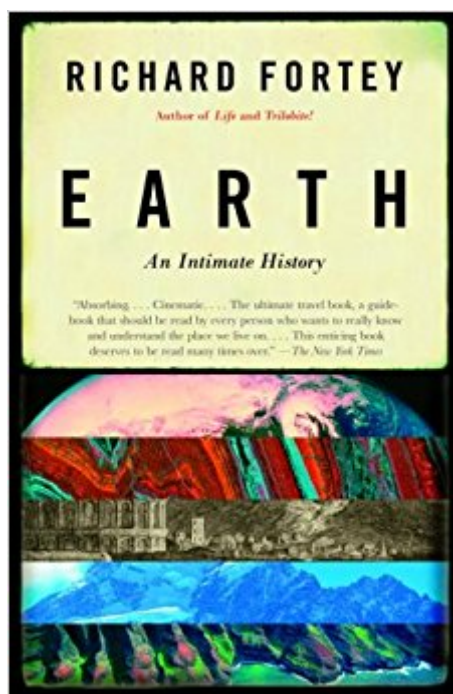


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Earth: An Intimate History



Synopsis

In *Earth*, the acclaimed author of *Trilobite!* and *Life* takes us on a grand tour of the earth's physical past, showing how the history of plate tectonics is etched in the landscape around us. Beginning with Mt. Vesuvius, whose eruption in Roman times helped spark the science of geology, and ending in a lab in the West of England where mathematical models and lab experiments replace direct observation, Richard Fortey tells us what the present says about ancient geologic processes. He shows how plate tectonics came to rule the geophysical landscape and how the evidence is written in the hills and in the stones. And in the process, he takes us on a wonderful journey around the globe to visit some of the most fascinating and intriguing spots on the planet.

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Customer Reviews

"This is where things get really interesting." This sentiment, from a chapter on the Alps in *Earth: An Intimate History* (Knopf) by Richard Fortey, describes how geological layers, normally oldest at the bottom and newest at the top, can get flipped by one mass of rock being thrust upon another. It might just as well apply to hundreds of ideas in these pages. The book is a fascinating summary of where geology stands now, as a relatively new science which has been completely remade on the foundation of plate tectonics, just as biology has only recently been founded on evolution. "It is not faith that moves mountains; it is tectonics," Fortey insists. He does not directly confront those who would misuse science to "prove" an Earth less than 10,000 years old; the real science from real geologists, of course, overwhelmingly indicates an age of billions, not thousands, of years. But he

understands the impulse: "Let the time go into the millions, and beyond, and the insignificance of our own sector becomes patent." Somehow, this is an insignificant insignificance. Billions of years of continental plates shoving each other around on our planet did eventually bring forth a creature that could understand that process. The history of how that understanding came about, as told here, is a proud one, full of human errors and pride, but powered by that admirable human trait of curiosity. "Rocks do not lie," Fortey tells us. "They do, however, dissemble as to their true meaning." Demonstrating the meaning, and clearing away the dissembling, is what this book expertly accomplishes. One of the sacred locales of the science of geology mentioned here is the Temple of Serapis near Naples. It now consists of three huge columns, each composed of one single piece of marble.

Studying geology can be fun. Trips across the world, meeting new people, sharing insights and resolving mysteries of Earth's processes. There is, of course, the downside. Lava flows that shred boots, impossibly complex rock formations and bays that simply disappear during a seven-year interval between visits. If you have a writing gift, as Richard Fortey does, you can impart all these aspects of the science to a wide audience. This book does that admirably - and Fortey's not even a geologist! Fortey's study of fossil trilobites has led him far afield. Since those bizarre creatures persisted for over three hundred million years, their remains are well distributed in both time and space. In studying them, Fortey has made the entire planet his backyard. That intimacy and his wide vision combine to produce this matchless work. From the opening pages he combines human history and the Earth's antics in an evocative theme. Vesuvius, that town killer, becomes a symbol of the dynamics of the world beneath our feet. Volcanoes also produce rich soils, luring humans up their slopes to plant crops. That juxtaposition typifies how geology has driven human society. Geology, Fortey reminds us, is a young science, as active as the world it studies. He traces the thoughts of investigators over the past centuries. Through that time, two aspects of the Earth's dynamics eluded them. How fast was the planet cooling and what caused the bizarre formations they studied? It took physics, not geology, to solve the first - radioactive elements kept the interior hot. The second, plate tectonics, resolved most of the second. The notion that the crust "floats" on a sea of magma led to better understanding of deep processes.

In answer to a time-related statement from another, such as "I turn 57 next month", have you ever answered, "Rocks don't live that long"? In *EARTH*, British paleontologist-author Richard Fortey reminds the reader that the globe is theorized to be 4.5 billion years young, and the oldest rock

datable by current technology, a zircon crystal from Australia, registers at 4.4 billion years. Is your mother-in-law that old? I've always been fascinated, when flying over or driving through the deserts of the western U.S., by the myriad of different rock formations unclothed by vegetation and naked for all to see. I've wished that I had a geologist by my side to explain how they came to be. Fortey may be the next best thing. In *EARTH*, the theme is "plate tectonics", and it's a tribute to the author's writing talent that he can make so esoteric a subject supremely interesting. The book is, at times, hard to put down. To illustrate the observable effects of past movements of the Earth's crust - movement that will continue long past the habitation of the Earth by the human species, Fortey has selected several spots on our world as exhibits: Pompei, Hawaii, the Swiss Alps, Newfoundland, Scotland, India, Kenya, California, and the Grand Canyon. The narrative is, of course, about the evolution of tectonic plate theory, but also about proto-continent, lost oceans, volcanoes, mountain ranges, upthrusts, downthrusts, subduction zones, deep ocean trenches, mid-ocean ridges, lava, basalt, granite, gneisses, fossils, fault lines, schists, nappes, magnetic fields, limestone, ice sheets, diamonds, gold, coral reefs, green sand, "hot spots", tin mines, magma, marble, polar wandering, rubies, tors, and a mule named "Buttercup".

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