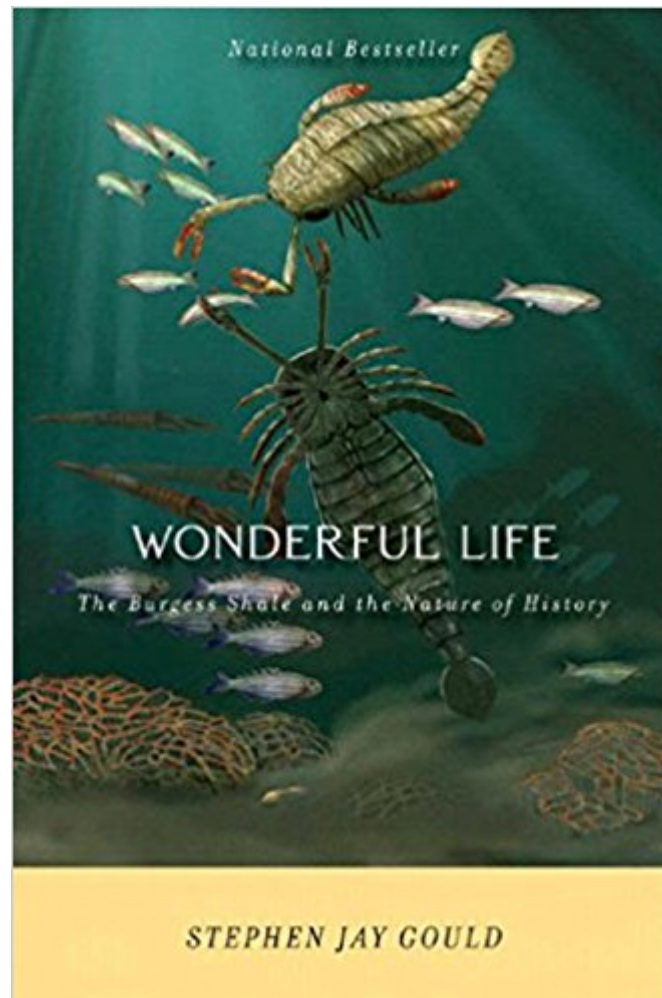




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# Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale And The Nature Of History



## Synopsis

"[An] extraordinary book. . . . Mr. Gould is an exceptional combination of scientist and science writer. . . . He is thus exceptionally well placed to tell these stories, and he tells them with fervor and intelligence." —James Gleick, New York Times Book Review

High in the Canadian Rockies is a small limestone quarry formed 530 million years ago called the Burgess Shale. It holds the remains of an ancient sea where dozens of strange creatures lived — a forgotten corner of evolution preserved in awesome detail. In this book Stephen Jay Gould explores what the Burgess Shale tells us about evolution and the nature of history.

## Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company (September 17, 1990)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 039330700X

ISBN-13: 978-0393307009

Product Dimensions: 6.2 x 0.9 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 117 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #76,608 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #8 in [Books > Science & Math >](#)

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## Customer Reviews

The Burgess Shale of British Columbia "is the most precious and important of all fossil localities," writes Stephen Jay Gould. These 600-million-year-old rocks preserve the soft parts of a collection of animals unlike any other. Just how unlike is the subject of Gould's book. Gould describes how the Burgess Shale fauna was discovered, reassembled, and analyzed in detail so clear that the reader actually gets some feeling for what paleobiologists do, in the field and in the lab. The many line drawings are unusually beautiful, and now can be compared to a wonderful collection of photographs in *Fossils of the Burgess Shale* by Derek Briggs, one of Gould's students. Burgess Shale animals have been called a "paleontological Rorschach test," and not every geologist by any means agrees with Gould's thesis that they represent a "road not taken" in the history of life. Simon Conway Morris, one of the subjects of *Wonderful Life*, has expressed his disagreement in *Crucible of Creation*. *Wonderful Life* was published in 1989, and there has been an explosion of scientific

interest in the pre-Cambrian and Cambrian periods, with radical new ideas fighting for dominance. But even though many scientists disagree with Gould about the radical oddity of the Burgess Shale animals, his argument that the history of life is profoundly contingent--as in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, from which this book takes its title--has become more accepted, in theories such as Ward and Brownlee's Rare Earth hypothesis. And Gould's loving, detailed exposition of the labor it took to understand the Burgess Shale remains one of the best explanations of scientific work around. --Mary Ellen Curtin

The Burgess Shale, a small quarry in the mountains of British Columbia, opened a window on the first multicellular animals. Gould, eminent life-historian and author, introduces us to the creatures of Burgess Shale and to those who have painstakingly examined them. "This is exciting and illuminating material on the beginnings of life," wrote PW. Illustrated. Copyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Definitely can't say that an incredible amount of thought and research went into this work. Equally, you can't deny that the author is a natural writer. Couldn't justify five stars because, quite frankly, the book is unnecessarily technical, in my opinion. Every once in a while you'll be thrown a bone and a vague, obviously jargonistic term will be defines for you, but most of the time you're on your own. Those who are well versed in evolutionary biology and marine paleontology will probably squirt a brief gust of air through their lips and think about how naive and uneducated I am, without considering the fact that earlier in this post I explicitly said that this view of mine was simply an opinion, and not a universal truth. Perhaps *Wonderful Life* is an "easy" read for those pseudo academics. Also, Stephen Jay Gould just needs to come out of the closet and admit that he's critical of more than just bits and pieces of the theory of evolution by natural selection. It shouldn't take three pages of what are essentially tautologies to say "this doesn't make sense within the accepted framework." It almost seems like he spent the first two-thirds of the book just listing off impressive facts, so that the reader wouldn't be too upset at the handful of opinions he expressed in the concluding chapters.

In British Columbia, Canada paleontologist Charles D Walcott made the discovery of a lifetime. The year was 1909 and Walcott's field season was just winding down when he and his team began finding fossils in the Burgess Shale formation of the Rocky Mountains. Over the next 15 years Walcott collected thousands of strange and unusual fossils that he considered to be ancestral to all

of our modern day phyla. In *Wonderful Life*, Stephen Jay Gould traces the history of this incredible find and comes to some controversial conclusions of his own. The book, published in 1989, was a best seller and won the Aventis prize for science books in 1991 and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in that same year. Some of Gould's colleagues agreed with his conclusions, some did not. The resulting debates went on for years and, on some points, continues to this day. Although some of his original examples were later invalidated by newer research, his main theme is still a matter of some contention. Anyone who has read Gould's monthly essays in *Natural History* magazine knows that he is an accomplished writer for the interested layperson and *Wonderful Life* is no exception to that rule. Some 50 years after Walcott's time, in the late '60s a team of modern scientist led by Harry Whittington did a extensive rework of Walcott's original study resulting in new insights on the biology of these long dead animals. Gould does a detailed accounting of the methodology and technics used in that study. Some of Whittington's findings agreed with Walcott's and some did not, but from this layman's point of view, it made for fascinating reading. A good part of the book addresses some long standing questions in paleontology. Multicellular animals make their first appearance in the fossil record with the Cambrian Explosion and with the Ediacara fauna. How did life get to that point? Did evolution proceed from a simple beginning that, over time, became more complex and diverse? Or did one-celled life first evolve, in a kind of explosion, into many varieties of multi-celled organisms, only a few of which survive today? Did Walcott "shoehorn" his fossils into modern phyla? Were some of the Burgess Shale animals just dead ends that were out competed in the race for survival? The answers to these questions depend on who is doing the analysis and who is doing the asking. In paleontology the study of fossils is like having an obscure, imperfect view of reality and it's only with time and further study that we can get closer to the truth. *Wonderful Life* is a great book that will give you one mans view on the nature of history and of life. LastRanger

Stephen Gould tells us how the correct interpretation of the Burgess Shale reveals the richness of life, in all it's forms. This is not a children's book but maybe it should be. The body types recorded in the Cambrian Explosion are incredible. These creepy, crawly, soft bodies creatures have been miraculously preserved, but with a flatness that makes careful observation and drafting a must, the 2 dimensional creatures as the fossil record portrays, are shown in 3d in Goulds wonderful life. His descriptions of how the preservation occurred seems pretty lucky. It is unlikely that billions of yours into the future that the human race will be preserved at all. Our planet gobbles up our remnants well enough that we can not hope to be as well preserved as the cambrian creatures. Read and enjoy.

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