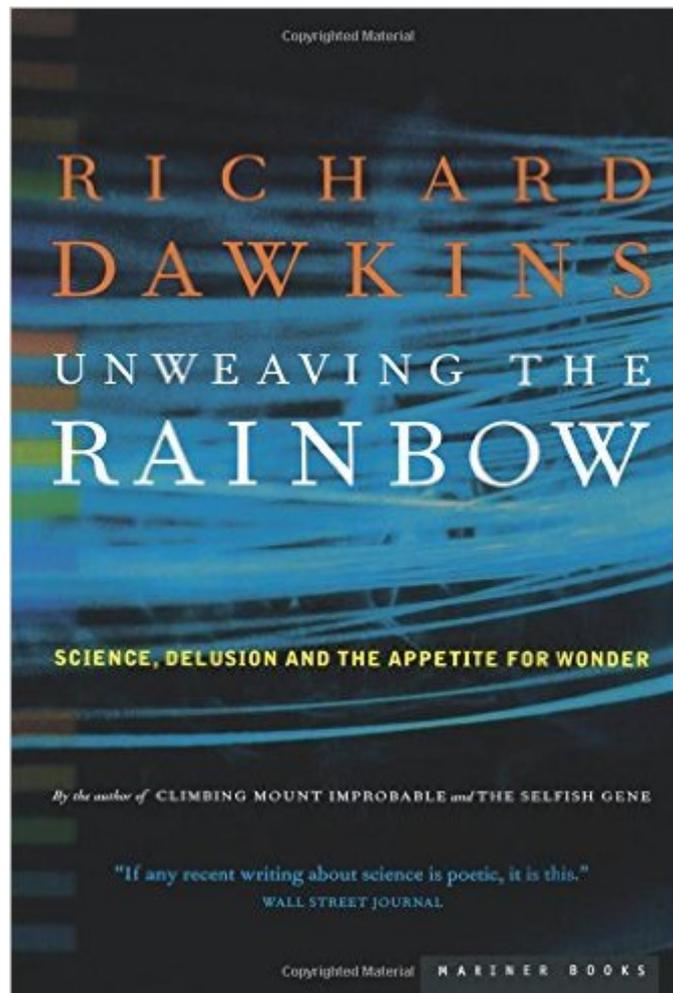


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Unweaving The Rainbow: Science, Delusion And The Appetite For Wonder



Synopsis

Did Newton "unweave the rainbow" by reducing it to its prismatic colors, as Keats contended? Did he, in other words, diminish beauty? Far from it, says acclaimed scientist Richard Dawkins; Newton's unweaving is the key to much of modern astronomy and to the breathtaking poetry of modern cosmology. Mysteries don't lose their poetry because they are solved: the solution often is more beautiful than the puzzle, uncovering deeper mysteries. With the wit, insight, and spellbinding prose that have made him a best-selling author, Dawkins takes up the most important and compelling topics in modern science, from astronomy and genetics to language and virtual reality, combining them in a landmark statement of the human appetite for wonder. This is the book Richard Dawkins was meant to write: a brilliant assessment of what science is (and isn't), a tribute to science not because it is useful but because it is uplifting.

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Customer Reviews

Not many people have the gift of taking some common event and deconstructing it to the nth degree, while making it all seem quite normal. As in his other books (Blind Watchmaker, Climbing Mount Improbable, etc.) Mr. Dawkins makes your mind boggle at the way nature use very simple (?) building blocks to fashion something extraordinary ... like us. You are set back on your heels when you realise that your body is largely composed of modified bacteria, without which we could not exist. He goes on to expound on how we see and from there how our brain interprets the world, comparing it to Virtual Reality (no comparison!) - anyone who has experienced any form of VR will understand the immense computing power it takes to present even a half-decent rendition, but the

brain does this continuously AND has time to dream, imagine, remember past events and places all in real-time - I doubt if enough teraflops of computer power exist in the world even now to do that. The main thrust of the book is the poetry of science; how, by understanding more about the way the universe works, we can appreciate the wonder of it all the better - open our minds to something more beautiful than just the outward appearance of a beautiful object - even make us see the beauty in some not-so-pleasant sights! In this book he uses well thought-out, easy-to-grasp concepts to explode myths, de-bunk charlatans, and de-mystify magic (a little TOO vitriolic at times, I fear!) - all with the intention of opening our minds to the concept of evolution (specifically Darwinism). He takes us from rainbows to barcodes to DNA in easy stages, explaining in graphic (but never tedious) detail just how nature can (and will) evolve all its wonders.

As a geology student I mainly use to read Dawkins' books out of curiosity for evolutionary biology and appreciation for his debating skills, not because they've got anything to do with my field. This one was different though, as I knew it would be about scientific thought in general, so possibly of more interest to anyone into science, no matter what their specific expertise..... I have to say now, after reading it not once but twice, I am glad I have to disagree with nearly all the negative critics I read on this book, and there seem to have appeared lots, both on websites and on various magazines and journals. Which was, incidentally, one more reason for me to grow curious about this essay.... "Unweaving The Rainbow" is a collection of informal personal reflections on what science is all about, what it means to some of us from an emotional viewpoint, and how it fares when compared to other cultural orientations that seem to be more widespread, like arts and humanities, or (in stark contrast to science!) superstition, pseudo-science and metaphysical spiritualism. There's no technical discussion of any topics in the philosophy of science, just the knowledgeable digressions of someone with something to say. My only quibble is that the last four chapters seem to stray somewhat far out of the book's main purpose, delving deeper and more exclusively into the realm of "extended" biology, following an evolutionary thread that starts with Dawkins' typical metaphors on the role of genes in the game of life and ends with a touch of cultural anthropology and psychology.... But then again, it's just one more example of how science can be beautiful and fulfilling, though still lacking answers to some of our questions (but working on it, and you never know....

Dawkins the old Master is at his best and worst in this book. The premise of the book is arranged around the idea that Poetry and Art are sometimes in fundamental opposition to science. But why

should they be Dawkins asks? It is a fair question and one must make allowances for some bad scientific allegories as well as plain bad poetry. Dawkins has started out with a wonderful idea and he develops it very nicely for about half of the book. Then the book begins to degenerate into something of a jumbled criticism of Steven J. Gould (nothing new there) and the wanderings and adapted characteristics of hedge sparrows and --- no surprise --- a defence of the selfish-gene theory. In final analysis Dawkins starts out with one of the those cosmic-wonder-of-science books, and then it degenerates into borderline pedantry, with interesting bits of science thrown in around the sides. Dawkins is not the populariser that is Carl Sagan and his writing in this book shows it. Dawkins is at his best when he has a specific point to prove in an area that he knows well. "The Blind Watchmaker" and "The Extended Phenotype" and the "Selfish Gene" are all par excellence when it comes to him arguing from a first premise in his area of expertise. Dawkins is also an old crusty Oxbridge lecturer and it comes across in this book. I like that a lot! I think that some readers may be a little bit perturbed to be told what to think. But let's get it straight here. This man has one of the greatest minds in Modern Zoology -- it behooves us to listen to him. We have a lot to learn from him.

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