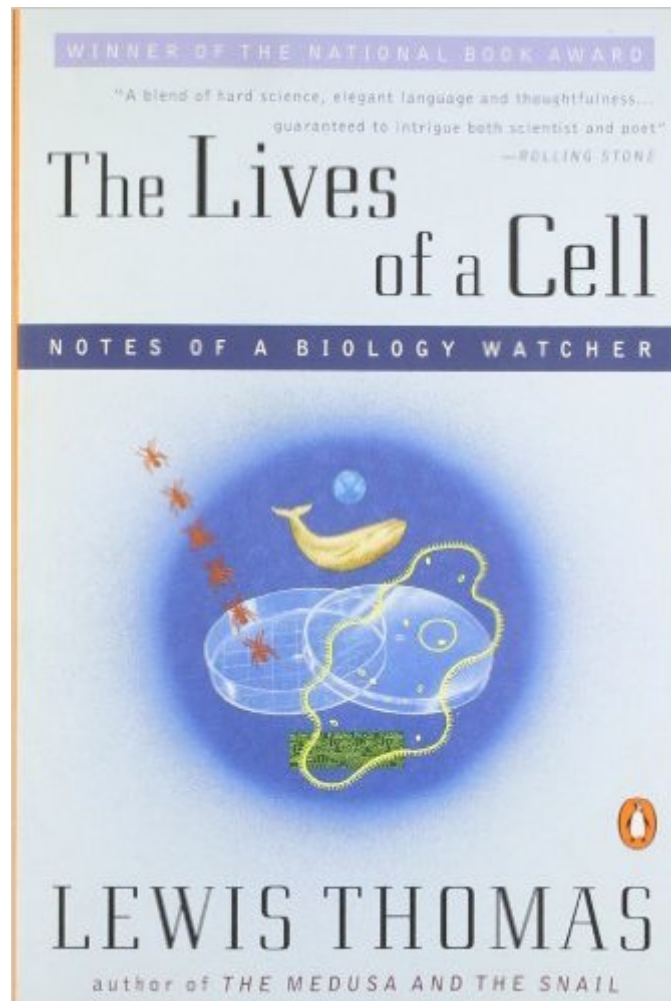


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Lives Of A Cell: Notes Of A Biology Watcher



Synopsis

Elegant, suggestive, and clarifying, Lewis Thomas's profoundly humane vision explores the world around us and examines the complex interdependence of all things.Â Extending beyond the usual limitations of biological science and into a vast and wondrous world of hidden relationships, this provocative book explores in personal, poetic essays to topics such as computers, germs, language, music, death, insects, and medicine.Â Lewis Thomas writes, "Once you have become permanently startled, as I am, by the realization that we are a social species, you tend to keep an eye out for the pieces of evidence that this is, by and large, good for us."

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Customer Reviews

A group of students and I just finished reading THE LIVES OF A CELL as part of a readings in biology seminar this spring. Once you read the first 3-4 chapters it becomes obvious that there is not a central theme (or is there) for the book. Contents of this book are a compilation of reflective articles originally published in a medical journal. Chapter topics range all over the place, but they present many topics drawn from biological thought prominent through the mid-1970s -- everything from molecular biology to Gaia to sociobiology. There is a wealth of material here appropriate for discussion among undergraduate students, professionals, and perhaps even science-directed high school students. Each of the 29 chapters are about 3-5 pages long, can be easily digested, and beg to be reflected upon and discussed. As for the writing, other reviewers have referred to the writing in this book as being poetic. While I didn't see so much of that, I was struck by Thomas' ability to turn a phrase, make a point, and discuss complex biological ideas in a manner that is easily understood.

The writing in the book is a definite plus. There are also times in the book where I can imagine Thomas grinning as he wrote, or, perhaps giving the occasional wink! He must have had a wonderful sense of humor. OK, back to the theme...if there is one...it seems to me that one common theme of several of the chapters has to do with communication -- oral, chemical, behavioral, and genetic. Other possible themes include the fact that humans are "not all that." That we are part of the global system, not running it. Another possibility includes the idea that everything can be an analogy of the way that a cell works -- organelles, membranes, cellular processes, products, and so forth. This is excellent reading for anyone interested in ideas about life and living. Well written, occasionally humorous, and intriguing. 5 stars!

What can one say if you believe to have found the 'John Steinbeck' of science! I totally enjoyed his descriptive readings and perspectives of our magnificent world! Lewis Thomas has done an excellent job interpreting his thoughts on life through the language of science. He blends the two so delicately and precisely, that one starts to forget where the line between real life and scientific theory is drawn. Lewis Thomas found joy in science and it is illustrated in his essays. He manages to show the reader a peek at how a scientist like himself looks at the world. I have chosen this book as one for all of my ninth grade Honors Biology students to read and report about. The book definitely makes the reader 'think'...you will not be able to just read one page after the other..one will need to keep a dictionary close by. Thomas uses quite a lot of scientific terminology. It is definitely not for the lazy reader. It is for those individuals who read to learn more and enjoy the challenge of new vocabulary to broaden their own horizons in science or language itself. I enjoy giving my students a challenge and that is exactly what this book offers to the young mind.

Lewis Thomas is who I want to be when I grow up - his writing is intelligent, witty, highly personable, full of fresh insights and passion for his subject matter: man and his home in the universe. *Lives of a Cell* is the book that jumpstarted my interest in biology over twenty years ago. "Viewed from the distance of the moon, the astonishing thing about the earth, catching the breath, is that it is alive." - so begins the essay "The World's Biggest Membrane", in which he likens the earth with its atmosphere to a cell with its membrane. "The photographs show the dry, pounded surface of the moon in the foreground, dead as an old bone. Aloft, floating free beneath the moist, gleaming membrane of bright blue sky, is the rising earth, the only exuberant thing in this part of the cosmos. [...] It has the organized, self-contained look of a live creature, full of information, marvelously skilled in handling the sun." What other science writer manages to surprise and delight you at every turn of

a phrase? What other poet brings the incredible precise detail and the easy authority of a practising scientist? What other essayist ranges from the smallest part of a cell to the solar system with equal curiosity and interest and yet always manages to keep man in focus? Lewis Thomas opened up a whole niche of science writing by showing its immense appeal, which is yet not mass appeal. Writers and thinkers as highly talented and diverse as Natalie Angier and Diane Ackerman have settled in this niche, and have prospered there.

Lewis Thomas' book is a beautifully written collection of essays. He writes much in the style of the 13th century author Frederick Montaigne, whom he later writes an essay about in another book. The essays, combine to bring a truly penultimate view of biological life. His observations, more than conclusions, bring one very close to a belief that in some way, all life is connected. In a particularly interesting essay on "organelles" Thomas points out that mitochondria, the engines of the cell in every animal, do not exchange DNA like every other part of the body in sexual procreation, but in fact, are passed directly from the ovum to the zygote in the cytoplasm, and never change or recombine their DNA. This apparently being a protective mechanism developed over 100's of thousands of years because the preservation of the exact mitochondrial DNA sequence is so important, that it could not be left to chance, as are most every other characteristic of the animal. Throughout the book, Thomas reveals truly extraordinary facts about biology and microbiology that tend to leave the reader in actual awe. For an incredibly interesting and fast education about cellular biology this National Book Award Winning collection is truly a fascinating read.

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