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Creation as a ripping good tale

It's summer-reading time and if your tastes lean toward light fiction, so be it. But if you'd like to delve into eternal questions, served in the form of a jaunty and highly readable stroll through the history of the universe from the beginning of time until now, then I have the book for you.

It's *Let There Be Light: A Scientific and Poetic Retelling of the Genesis Creation Story* (Hidden Spring, an imprint of Paulist Press, 2001, \$28.95). The author is Robert Fripp, a graduate in Earth sciences and a former producer of CBC's *the fifth estate*.

In a brief 190 pages, he skims from Creation's Big Bang about 15 billion years ago to today's perplexities of dark matter, chaos theory, quantum mechanics, the Gaia theory, nanobacteria, the possibility of a parallel universe and the eternal question of God's existence.

He has taken the first two chapters of Genesis and rewritten them into 62 verses, interspersed with commentary. It's the commentary that I find interesting.

In his retelling, the first day lasted about 10.4 billion of our years. The second day took about 4 billion, the third about 175 million, the fourth about 115 million and the fifth about 277.5 million. The sixth day, in which humans were created, began about 3 million years ago.

One of the shortcomings of the book is that it doesn't contain a chart of geological time and, as Fripp points out, estimates of when evolutionary events occurred keep changing as knowledge keeps expanding. So, I'm not sure my time calculations jibe exactly with his. But even if they vary, they wouldn't distort the general pattern he presents.

In any event, if you decide to read the book, keep an encyclopedia opened to a chart of geological periods at your elbow, because Fripp constantly refers to them.

The first day ends with the formation of the Earth's crust, which at that point was under water. The second day closes with the appearance of

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living cells. On the third day, dry land appears, scorpions emerge from the sea, coral reefs grow and "biology's big bang" occurs. To put it in Fripp's words: "Nature devised and came close to perfecting each and every body plan that has been successful to this day."

On the fourth day, the first amphibians came ashore and horsetail plants towered 18 metres high. It also was the time when primitive insects formed and the first reptiles evolved from amphibians.

On the fifth day, reptiles, as dinosaurs, ruled the world, and then disappeared. Birds evolved. Flowering plants appeared, as did mammals and modern insects. At this point, the stage was set for humans and, about 3 million years ago, Lucy (*Australopithecus afarensis*) appeared in what is now Ethiopia.

Fripp emphasizes that *Let There Be Light* is not an attempt to reach a compromise between a liberal interpretation of the Genesis Creation story and evolutionary theory. Instead, "It is an attempt, in allegorical form, to combine the spirit and sense of Genesis with the conventional wisdom of current scientific thought."

In Fripp's verses, God still gives man dominion over all things, and the conceit is maintained that God created man in His own likeness. The verses end with God waiting to see whether man will magnify or destroy Creation.

In the commentaries, however, Fripp doesn't have God creating species or even the universe. They develop in evolutionary sequence. But, Fripp notes, all developments obey basic laws of physics and chemistry and where did they come from?

And how is it, he asks, that for certain governing processes, such as photosynthesis, the elements that govern them seem to have come together out of nowhere?

He doesn't attempt answers; he simply leaves the unexplained unexplained. And for all the rest, he offers the intricacies of science as a ripping good tale.

I read the book while watching dragonflies and trying to imagine them 300 million years ago when they had metre-long wingspans. It was great fun.

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