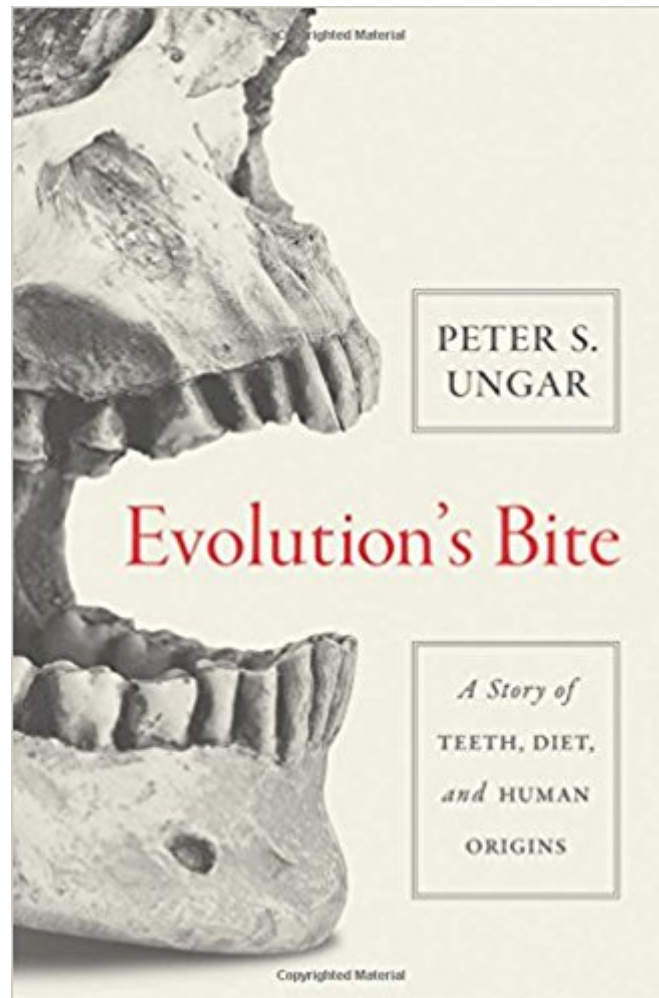




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# Evolution's Bite: A Story Of Teeth, Diet, And Human Origins



## Synopsis

What teeth can teach us about the evolution of the human species Whether we realize it or not, we carry in our mouths the legacy of our evolution. Our teeth are like living fossils that can be studied and compared to those of our ancestors to teach us how we became human. In *Evolution's Bite*, noted paleoanthropologist Peter Ungar brings together for the first time cutting-edge advances in understanding human evolution and climate change with new approaches to uncovering dietary clues from fossil teeth to present a remarkable investigation into the ways that teeth— their shape, chemistry, and wear— reveal how we came to be. Ungar describes how a tooth's "foodprints"— distinctive patterns of microscopic wear and tear— provide telltale details about what an animal actually ate in the past. These clues, combined with groundbreaking research in paleoclimatology, demonstrate how a changing climate altered the food options available to our ancestors, what Ungar calls the biospheric buffet. When diets change, species change, and Ungar traces how diet and an unpredictable climate determined who among our ancestors was winnowed out and who survived, as well as why we transitioned from the role of forager to farmer. By sifting through the evidence— and the scars on our teeth— Ungar makes the important case for what might or might not be the most natural diet for humans. Traveling the four corners of the globe and combining scientific breakthroughs with vivid narrative, *Evolution's Bite* presents a unique dental perspective on our astonishing human development.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"From the start, Mr. Ungar places the evolutionary changes of teeth within the history of scientific discovery. Researchers and their methods have as much presence as the facts they discovered and the hypotheses they developed, providing readers with a short course on the deep science of dental anatomy."--Brian Switek, Wall Street Journal

"In *Evolution's Bite*, palaeoanthropologist Peter Ungar offers a compelling account of how the interaction of teeth, diet and environment has shaped human evolution."--Louise Humphrey, Nature

"*Evolution's Bite* combines personal anecdotes from Ungar's own career with vivid historical accounts of the work of some of the pioneers in the fields of paleoanthropology, primatology, dental functional anatomy, and paleoclimatology. . . . [W]ritten in an easy-to-read style."--K. Christopher Beard, Science

"I dug [*Evolution's Bite*]. Sink your teeth into it."--Steve Mirsky, Scientific American

"[A] fascinating exploration of the world of teeth and what they have to teach us about the evolution of modern humans and the environments that shaped that process. . . . Ungar's book is about as close to a tour de force as a science book is likely to get. The writing is accessible, often witty, and the balance between discussion of what the empirical data has to show us and the history of the field of paleoarchaeology itself creates a narrative of the lives of both the discovered and the discoverers that is hard to put down. . . . I recommend this book with my highest praise."--David Brock, NSTA Recommends

"Ungar has spent his career studying the evolution of teeth. [*Evolution's Bite*] blends the results of his work with new research from many other disciplines. . . . An excellent book for those with a serious interest in anthropology."--Library Journal

"Fascinating."--Engineering & Technology

"The revelation of not only how the science is done, but also what a huge difference a tangential idea such as Ungar's topographic analysis can make, is one of the great delights and strengths of the book. Our mouths are full of history. *Evolution's Bite* will change forever how you see your early morning smile."--Adrian Barnett, New Scientist

"A challenging and fascinating book . . . With three decades of experience traveling around the world to observe animals and view fossils and conducting research in his lab, Ungar displays much wisdom, humor and cutting-edge scientific knowledge . . . The Arkansas scholar definitely gives his readers plenty of food for thought."--Judy Siegel-Itzkovich, The Jerusalem Post

"A book that traverses Indonesian monkey-filled jungles to Tanzanian villages, *Evolution's Bite* is the sort of science book you'll want to chew on."--Inverse Magazine

"The story of how we became human is recorded in our teeth. With wit and expertise, Peter Ungar shows us how scientists use clues in ancient teeth to reveal what our ancestors ate, how they

looked, and how they adapted to climate change, hunting, cooking, and lousy paleodiets. Anyone who wants to know where we came from and how we ended up with such messed up teeth and jaws should read *Evolution's Bite*."--Ann Gibbons, author of *The First Human: The Race to Discover Our Earliest Ancestors*"With grace and clarity, Peter Ungar leads us through the complex world of discovering fossil and modern teeth and the clues they reveal to our evolutionary history. In the process, he teaches us much about the mechanisms of evolution itself. I highly recommend this book not only to those in the field but also to those who want to understand how we know what we know."--Pat Shipman, author of *The Invaders: How Humans and Their Dogs Drove Neanderthals to Extinction*"A compelling tale, *Evolution's Bite* highlights the ways our teeth work and the clues they preserve about our evolutionary origin. Serving as an eloquent guide to fossil teeth, past environments, and archeological finds, Peter Ungar shows how the union of scientific fields shapes the profound story of food, diet, and evolution."--Rick Potts, director of the Human Origins Program, Smithsonian Institution"This impressive book serves as a window into human history through the lens of teeth and diet. Ungar's seamless narrative brings bits of bone and teeth to life, and does so against a vivid backdrop in which paleoanthropologists arrive at their conclusions about why, how, and what we eat. This book is a pleasure to read--Ungar has that rare gift of engaging us through personal insight while simultaneously explaining complex scientific principles."Joanna E. Lambert, University of Colorado, Boulder"*Evolution's Bite* is not simply about teeth--it brings together evidence from geology, paleontology, biology, climatology, and even materials science in order to show how our dynamic relationship with the environment shaped who we are today. An enjoyable read."Shara Bailey, New York University

When one studies medicine one covers almost all the body functions, except the teeth. That is the role of the dentist. But teeth have a tremendous role in human adaptation and evolution and this book is an exceptionally good entry way to understanding the issues. It covers the development of teeth in primitive animals, discusses form and function, and goes back and forth on how various evolving species adapt and prosper or die off often from how their teeth function. It does beg the question of evolutionary adaptation. For example as human teeth evolved, opening the size of the skull and expanding on a more diverse diet, then was this a result or a cause. Namely, did teeth evolve to meet the demands of the available resources or did the available resources become more common as the teeth evolved. This is an interesting real that allows one to consider such a question. Overall it is written quite well. It is a bit turgid at times and the amount spent on human teeth should be a bit more extensive. But the critical importance of teeth and the particular

evolutionary role they play in the hominid is quite enlightening. Very well worth the read.

I expected more on teeth function in an evolutionary environment but got more an historical account of climate changes and hominin evolution with little tooth discussion thrown in on occasion.

Evolution's Bite is a fascinating and fun book to read. The book has given me a whole new perspective on how the interplay among diet, teeth, and our changing world environment effected our evolution, effected what makes us the humans we are today. I am not an anthropologist, but I am very interested in evolution and of course diet is a big thing for me. This combination of interests is what drew me to the book. But, it is Dr. Ungar's style of writing that kept me reading. Of course, he writes about early hominid diet, he writes about availability of different kinds of foods at different times. But, when discussing diet, he let me see it from the point of view of a Woody Allen movie where a character says of nature "It's like an enormous restaurant the way I see it." The way that Dr. Ungar sees it is as a "biospheric buffet". I immediately saw and understood that these changes in the "biospheric buffet" had profound effects. The book discusses the effects of swings in the Earth's climate and environment changes on the "biospheric buffer", foods available to our human ancestors and the versatility that the evolutionary changes in teeth provided for our lineage. The discussion in Chapter 4, Our Changing World, was so clear and cogent that for the first time I could really understand the "elaborate dance between the Earth and Sun" that has such a profound effect on the climate of our planet. The book not only gives us the scientific story of how teeth (and we) evolved and the forces that worked on that evolution, but also adds a special dimension by telling the stories of the researchers who have done the work to tell that story. He writes about how serendipity played its part in many of the discoveries, large and small, that moved the field forward. The stories bring humanity to the researchers and their research, and bring us with them into their laboratories. I learned a lot and really enjoyed reading this book.

This book is a thorough, perhaps too thorough, look at human evolution through the study of food and teeth. While I found the book informative, author Peter Ungar did not communicate to me the excitement that I think he feels about the subject. I felt no sense of wonder, discovery or humor. I recently read "Built on Bones" by Brenna Hassett and found that

book amazing and hard to put down, because Hassett put so much of herself into the book. I can only recommend *Evolution's Bite* to readers who are very interested in the fine details of evolution. Disclosure: I received a complimentary copy of this book via Netgalley for review purposes.

This is a superb book by the expert in the field. *Evolution's Bite* is about how changing climate triggered human evolution, told from the perspective of a researcher who has studied fossil teeth for the past thirty years. The book takes us through millions of years of evolution, and ties together key concepts in ecology and environmental sciences to make the points. The author, Professor Peter Ungar, brings the story to life by telling the tales of the individual scientists who have made the discoveries described in the book. However, this is not a text book, the reader really gets a sense of being involved and the layman can easily follow the concepts. I am an engineer, familiar with the author's technical research on tooth wear, but less so with its implications for human evolution. I found the book to be an enjoyable read as it is really well written and accessible to a general, popular science audience. I can see how it would be of value to any student of human evolution, but also to anyone interested in science in general, and how we came to be as a species in particular. A thoroughly good work. Highly recommended.

Interesting personal stories and research about evolution in human diet. Well written and an enjoyable read. I have a better understanding of human evolution now.

The book is mainly about the kinetics and kinematics of human tooth evolution, which is done well. Diet is only used in the broadest sense and does not drill down to who ate what and when. So if you want to learn about a Paleolithic diet don't go here. Unger doesn't get into vitamins or minerals or nutrition very much. His dietary advice is chew chewy foods growing up and don't eat too much sugar.

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