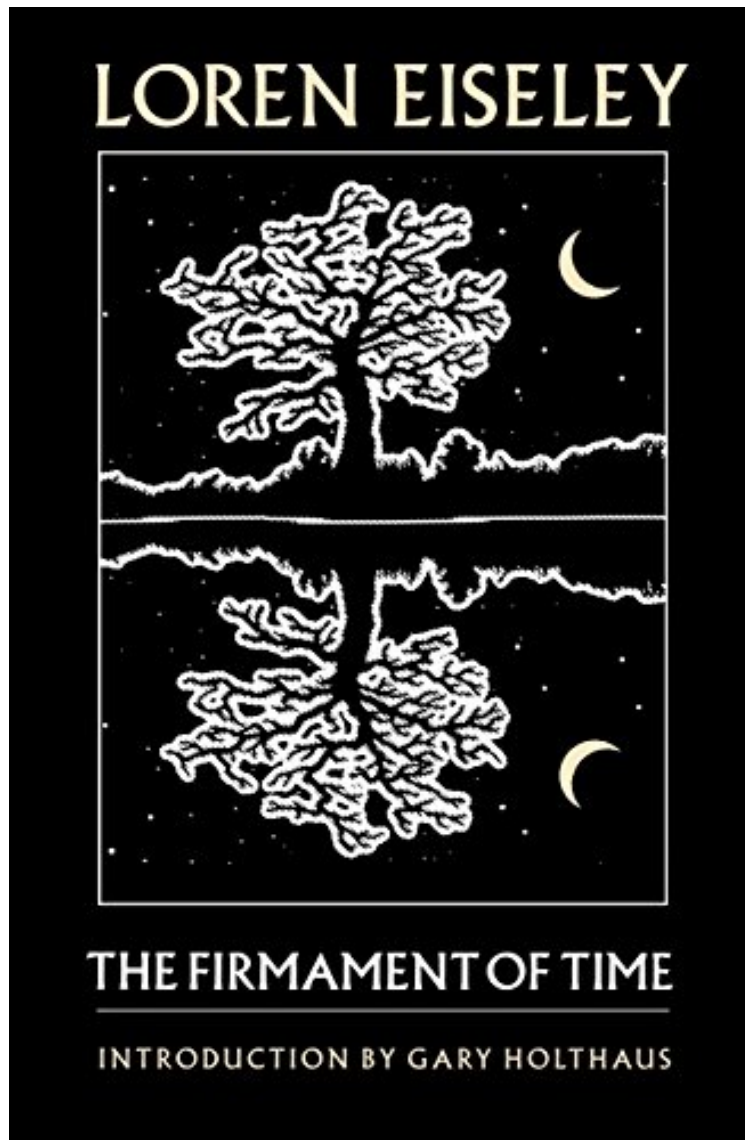


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The Firmament of Time

Loren Eiseley

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Loren Eiseley examines what we as a species have become in the late twentieth century. His illuminating and accessible discussion is a characteristically skillful and compelling synthesis of hard scientific theory, factual evidence, personal anecdotes, haunting reflection, and poetic prose.

.com The quest to understand humankind's place in the universe is an old one, perhaps as old as the human species itself. That quest is tinged with science, but also with magic, for, writes the paleontologist Loren Eiseley (1907-1977), a human being "is both pragmatist and mystic. He has been so since the beginning, and it may well be that the quality of his inquiring and perceptive intellect will cause him to remain so till the end." In this lively, literate set of essays, originally delivered in 1959 as a lecture series at the University of Cincinnati, Eiseley traces the history of science, giving special attention to the 18th and 19th centuries, which witnessed the rise of a kind of scientific inquiry that crossed narrow disciplines. Building on the ideas of Newton and Laplace, for instance, the Scottish scientist James Hutton developed the foundations of historical geology; Hutton's doctoral work had not been in physics but physiology, and his dissertation concerned the circulation of the blood, from which he evidently hit on the idea of considering the earth as a living organism. Eiseley moves on to discuss trends in evolutionary thought, putting in good words for such neglected figures as Jean Lamarck, a "much maligned thinker [who] glimpsed ecological change and adjustment before Darwin." Eiseley's explorations end with an admonition that our scientific understanding may well have outpaced our moral evolution, leading to the danger that "we have created an unbearable last idol for our worship"--namely, ourselves. His wise words remain compelling reading today. --Gregory McNamee "Dr. Eiseley describes with zest and admiration the giant steps that have led man, in a scant three hundred years, to grasp the nature of his extraordinary past and to substitute a natural world for a world of divine creation and intervention. . . . An irresistible inducement to partake of the almost forgotten excitements of reflection."—New Yorker