



Why Did the Chicken Cross the World?: The Epic Saga of the Bird that Powers Civilization

Andrew Lawler

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From ancient empires to modern economics, veteran journalist Andrew Lawler delivers a sweeping history of the animal that has been most crucial to the spread of civilization across the globe—the chicken.

Queen Victoria was obsessed with it. Socrates' last words were about it. Charles Darwin and Louis Pasteur made their scientific breakthroughs using it. Catholic popes, African shamans, Chinese philosophers, and Muslim mystics praised it. Throughout the history of civilization, humans have embraced it in every form imaginable—as a messenger of the gods, powerful sex symbol, gambling aid, emblem of resurrection, all-purpose medicine, handy research tool, inspiration for bravery, epitome of evil, and, of course, as the star of the world's most famous joke.

In *Why Did the Chicken Cross the World?*, science writer Andrew Lawler takes us on an adventure from prehistory to the modern era with a fascinating account of the partnership between human and chicken (the most successful of all cross-species relationships). Beginning with the recent discovery in Montana that the chicken's unlikely ancestor is *T. rex*, this book builds on Lawler's popular *Smithsonian* cover article, "How the Chicken Conquered the World" to track the chicken from its original domestication in the jungles of Southeast Asia some 10,000 years ago to postwar America, where it became the most engineered of animals, to the uncertain future of what is now humanity's single most important source of protein.

In a masterful combination of historical sleuthing and journalistic exploration on four continents, Lawler reframes the way we feel and think about our most important animal partner—and, by extension, all domesticated animals, and even nature itself.

Lawler's narrative reveals the secrets behind the chicken's transformation from a shy jungle bird into an animal of astonishing versatility, capable of serving our species' changing needs. For no other siren has called humans to rise, shine, and prosper quite like the rooster's cry: "cock-a-doodle-doo!"

Why Did the Chicken Cross the World?: The Epic Saga of the Bird that Powers Civilization Details

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From Reader Review Why Did the Chicken Cross the World?: The Epic Saga of the Bird that Powers Civilization for online ebook

Anders Rasmussen says

This is a book about chicken. One would think that it is hard to write a book entirely about chicken. And one would think it is impossible to write such a book that is also interesting. Wrong, and wrong again. This book takes you on an unexpected, occasionally thrilling journey.

The reader will learn about:

- The number of chicken in the world: More than twice as many chickens as humans
- The ancestry of chicken: They are related to dinosaurs and have been a part of our diet since at least 1500bc
- The use of chicken in medicine: Squeezing it and drinking the resulting fluids cures a fever (or so people thought)
- The morphology of chickens penises (or lack thereof)
- The role of chicken in ancient Greece: Socrates last words were about penises
- Cockfighting: Still a very big sport in some countries
- The intelligence of chicken (they are smarter than you think)
- And how much chicken we eat (crazy amounts).

If you are at all into chicken then this book is certain to be a smash hit. If you eat chicken occasionally and think chickens are 'fine', then this book will still be a hit. Even the reader who has never thought about this bird is likely to enjoy this book.

Heather&Lia Breslin says

For those of us who have given in fully to the affliction known as "Crazy Chicken Lady" disease, this is a wonderful book. Lawler has covered the history, science and current state of chicken rearing in a very comprehensive novel. I read and enjoyed his article and was happy to have even more info. The bibliography is longer than the actual book, something else I appreciate, because if it isn't documented I get suspicious that it may be fictional. I mostly read on a Kindle but if I were to buy a hardback copy of the book I would want photos. I'd love to see an update in ten years talking about how the industrial chicken has changed.

K says

I was saving this review to get a quote, but... it's an audiobook, and it's been a month, so I don't think I'm ever going to get it.

Anyway! A fun blog-style book, I remember it dragging along the way with all the evolution and breed talk, and some very depressing bits toward the end about industrial farming, but... overall fun.

Elentarri says

An interesting and well written book that looks at the origins of chicken and their journey around the world. I would have liked more details and some pictures/ photographs would have been nice.

Jeremy says

An interesting account of everything to do with chickens. Lots of information

TR Peterson says

Consider the chicken. No really. Lawler's fascinating book takes us through the history of the world through the feathery lens of one of humanities most important fellow creatures. From cock fights to breakfast tables to traditions of Southern cooking and a symbol of human virility, this bird has been with us through it all. The chicken has at once mystical and practical uses across the modern world and yet for all it has given us, Lawler reminds us of the sad fate of too many of the birds, bred in terrible factory farm conditions to bizarre proportions causing them maladies and deformities in the search for the perfect chicken breast to put on our dinner plates. It's this ability to fascinate and move us about something we may have given little thought to that makes Lawler's writing so enjoyable and this book a must read for every reader who is simply curious about the world around them.

Sarah says

2.5*s Unfortunately it was not for me.

This took me forever and a day. I was really excited about this one and unfortunately it didn't quite pull itself off enough to work (or to even keep me awake most days).

The whole first third of the book seemed like a very dull, long winded explanation for 'we just can't track where and when it came from exactly'. There were tidbits and sections I enjoyed mostly in the second third, such as look as it's religious impact and how the eggs are used to study evolution. And at the same time portions I was really interested in were skimmed over. For example, the change of the chicken from a common religious icon to a 'demonic' one was perhaps a page, maybe two. But there was nearly an entire chapter looking at early cultures with touches of 'and this is why they had a chicken'. The last chapter moved back into tedium with looks at companies like Tyson and how chickens are basically just commercialized. There were a few more interesting bits here, such as the woman who worked to save chickens from meat farms. But by this time I was so ready to be finished I struggled connecting.

YHC says

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what I learned with shock in this book is male chickens have no penis.

Angie says

The introduction was interesting. Occasionally other parts were interesting. However, the flow was very jumpy and contained way too much information to keep my interest. I scanned most of it.

The book was recommended by Bitsy and my mom, so I felt obligated to get through it.

Infamous Sphere says

A lot of splendid information in here about the history and cultural context of that delicious and loveable bird, the chicken. At times I felt the writing style was a bit lumpy and I felt my interest waning, but each chapter discusses a different aspect of chickens, and so if you aren't interested in the history of chicken sacrifice or various bits of chicken-related legislation or chickens in the bible, you might be interested in the rise of poultry keeping by poor women and enslaved people in America, or the story of the Poulet de Bresse or the search for the red jungle fowl. The stuff about industrialised chickens made me think again how four of my own five hens are Hy-Line Browns, from an industrial laying bird producer that gives most of its chicken hybrids model numbers and provides productivity stats, and how difficult it is to find non-industrial live chickens outside of the show poultry circuit, let alone how hard it is to find rarer breeds prepared for consumption. I've thought about raising fancier chickens - I have a faverolles bantam as well as the four hy-lines - but they're very hard to buy without driving 2 hrs to a rural farm, and I don't have an incubator, so I can't raise eggs.

Andy Morgan says

Very deep dive into chickens, from SE Asian jungle fowl to industrial farming. Not always riveting, and the book stops short of any heavy philosophical lifting. But overall I enjoyed learning about this underappreciated bird!

Mark Hartzler says

I have a new found respect for this humble bird. I didn't realize that they have been around people as long as they have. What is new, is that people (at least here in the US) no longer think of them as animals, but rather just another form of food. The good news is that humane treatment of our farm animals is becoming more common. The bad news is that 'industrial chickens' as the French term them, are going international. In other words, millions more birds are destined to be raised in factory farms, never to see the sun or even the dark in the short 45 days they will live. They are much more intelligent than commonly known, and the term 'chicken' is not at all like their normal behavior.

Anyway, I can't give this book 5 stars because it neglects 2 important (in my opinion) things: 1.) how many

varieties are out there? and 2.) what do they look like? Could it have killed the publisher to include a single photo? What's the difference between a leghorn and a foghorn? Beats me. Seriously though, just a couple of photos would have been of immense help.

Brendan Coster says

This had top notch writing, was extremely informative, and did everything I would expect or want from a commodity history. I've already recommended this and will continue to do so. Up till now, "Salt", by Kurlansky, was my favorite commodity history, but this gives it a run for it money.

Lawler runs the gambit of history, biology, pathology, chemistry, religion, social in regards to mainstream, taboo, and shades between, and just straight up history. Some of the figures and information he investigated were almost unbelievable, so I went and did some of my own fact checking just because some of the information seemed pretty arcane, but the history and the population numbers all came out looking about right.

Anyways, I should probably not pump it up too much. If I have any issue with this it's because it was too Journalistic, he didn't so much have a point of view to express as a really really big story he needed to report. That kind of thing always leaves me feeling a work is a little bland, or too careful, and wants to be available for the maximum audience. But, that's just personal, and really, in this case, wasn't enough to detract from the awesomeness.

Baglady says

Some interesting research touching only slightly on today's industrial chicken business, sometimes long winded and repeated information in more than one chapter. Usually I can find themes in narratives based on research, but it was difficult in the middle of the book. On the other hand there were some parts that were riveting, perhaps different editing would have helped. Worth the read, though, and helps explain the phenomenon of tasty chicken being found elsewhere than the US

Paula says

While I liked the concept of this book, the storytelling seemed erratic. There were chapters that were extremely interesting and they flew by. But then there were quite a few chapters that were very dry and dull. Some chapters were quite long, which had me wondering where the chapter was actually going to end.
