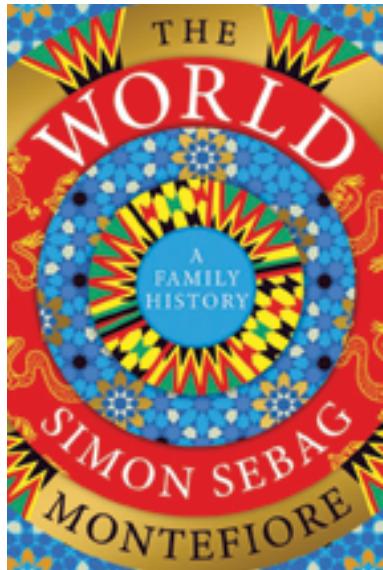


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The World: A Family History

By Simon Sebag Montefiore

Weidenfeld and Nicolson (London)

October 2022

Hardback, ebook, audiobook

ISBN: 9780297869672

RRP: \$69.99

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Given this text has 1304 pages covering the history of the world as if it is a family, it presents both a challenge and options for how to utilise it. Montefiore references primary sources as the base material for his work. Helpfully for those of us who teach History, he lists the main works for each section in the Bibliography so we can investigate in more depth. The endpapers summarise the content, the front showing a simplified map of human migration from 70,000 BCE to 1300 CE and the last showing the world's countries in 2022.

The material commences with Act One: The Houses of Sargon and

Ahmose: Ziggurats and Pyramids, and finishes in the present with Act 23 covering the Trumps, Xis, Sauds, Assads and Kims. Some acts focus on one area; for example, Act Four covers the Houses of Constantine, Sasan and Spearthrower Owl. Others acts, such as Act Twenty-One, have four different segments ranging from Nehru in India, the Kennedys in America, Bourbon, Pahlavi and Castro.

Throughout the chapters Montefiore has chosen people and their relics from many locations to tell the history of humans on this planet. For instance, the Introduction describes five sets of footsteps walking along an English beach 950,000–850,000 years ago. These are the first traces of a family, and they inspired the writing of this book.

Montefiore has consciously included content about women and children, noting that the contributions of women to our history is different from the historical texts we use in teaching our curriculum. For instance, Act One describes a woman who was taken from her temple 4000 years ago, raped by a man who wanted to establish a dynasty, rescued by her family and reinstated as a high priestess. Enheduanna wrote of her capture and her strength (p. 4):

Let me speak to you! My prayer,
my tears flowing like some
sweet intoxicant... we know she
existed, and we know her words...
her survival as a woman.

This is ideal for use in Year 7 Ancient History within the introduction of what history is and the primary sources on which it is based.

The story moves to the Euphrates from 5400 BCE, where inventions focused on feeding and housing people, and societies began to formalise royal-like frameworks for ruling and

worshipping based on priest-kings. The next woman introduced is Kuba of Kish, who was 'the world's first female potentate ... known' in about 2500 BC (p. 11). Her son succeeded her, followed by her grandson.

Teachers of secondary History will find segments from this text on palaces, temples, organised fighting and slavery from this early era of humanity right through to the present within the covers. Interconnections between ancient ruins, religious beliefs and royal families within the pages of each chapter are explained.

This text covers content in a way not found in textbooks or commonly used websites. While Wikipedia has a lengthy entry on Ptolemy VIII, it is far less interesting than the one-and-a-bit pages describing 'King Fatso (Physcon)... was effete, obese and sadistic, thriving in an era of mob violence', who also arranged to have his son 'strangled in front of him before cutting off his head, legs and hands, which he then sent to the boy's mother... the night before her birthday' (p. 117).

Given the length of this book and the depth of the content, I will be reading it over time and digesting it in segments. As a teacher of Years 8–10 I can see potential uses for segments in my classes this year. A senior History student would be able to find relevant material, and academics will enjoy the unusual way in which Montefiore explains our planet's people and places across the broad spectrum of world History.

While there are elements of this text that make it difficult to use with ease, it has inspired me to look forward to challenging my students to explore more deeply and engage with the worlds of the people whose journey we encounter along the way.