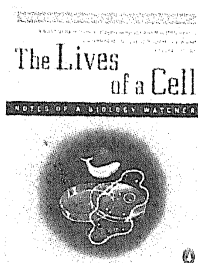


## The Lives of a Cell

*Harini Nagendra*



*The Lives of a Cell*  
Lewis Thomas  
Penguin Books, New York  
1978, ISBN 0-14-004743-3  
pp 153, \$10.95

Lewis Thomas has written a number of delightful books, essentially collections of essays on various aspects of biology. These make for a very unusual reading experience – at first ‘read’ they appear to be ‘random walks’ through various aspects of the natural sciences. On deeper reading, one discovers several common threads (some subtle, others even more so!) that weave together these seemingly disparate essays into a wondrous web of biology, approximating real life.

I came across my first Lewis Thomas book, *The Youngest Science* (about which I will be writing another review, later) soon after finishing my BSc – and reading it proved an unforgettable experience. Which is why, when I was asked to review four books of HIS for ‘Resonance’, I jumped at the idea! This is a review of his first book, actually a collection of essays which were first published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* between 1971-1973 – which went on to get the National Book Award in USA.

Born in 1913 in New York, Thomas went to medical school at Harvard in an era when

medicine was as much an art as a science. Following this, he had a varied career as a physician, researcher, teacher, and finally, hospital administration. He combined these varied experiences with a deep interest in the liberal arts including languages, history and literature – which is why you can never be sure what you will find in the next essay you read! This only makes reading him all the more fun...

To give you a flavour of how this book can open your mind to new ways of looking at things, let’s spend a little time on why a book on the nature and interconnections of life on earth, is called *The Lives of a Cell*. Thomas explains this in the introductory essay, where he says he found it very difficult to find the right analogy for the way the earth functions. The earth is often compared to an organism, with different parts such as animals, plants, the atmosphere, soil, etc., which interact with each other in a manner similar to that in which different parts of the body like the heart, kidney and lungs interact. However, while the parts of our body have rather obvious and defined connections with each other, often the relation between different ‘parts’ of the earth, for example between soil and animals is not very obvious. They cannot each be treated as separate organs, since they seem to have their own cycles of birth, life and death – while still interacting with each other in several, non-obvious ways.

Perhaps then, Thomas says, the earth is more like a cell – with its different parts comparable to the cell’s organelles such as the mitochon-