

Problems in the narrative representation of evolutionary history

Robert J. O'Hara

American Zoologist, 28(4): 144A, 1988

PROBLEMS IN THE NARRATIVE REPRESENTATION OF EVOLUTIONARY HISTORY. Robert J. O'Hara, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138.

Prose accounts of the evolutionary past are as much works of narrative history as they are works of science. Awareness of the narrative aspects of evolutionary writing leads to the discovery of a host of fascinating and hitherto unrecognized problems in the representation of evolutionary history, problems associated with the writing of narrative. These problems include closure, privilege, sequencing, foregrounding and backgrounding, and the selection of events. Paraphyletic groups, for example, may be seen as devices which promote narrative sequencing and closure, and which uphold a particular canon of evolutionary events. Narrative writing may impose its own structure upon a real historical subject until the distinction is blurred between the structure imposed by the narrative and the structure inherent in the subject itself. If we are conscious of the ways in which narrative writing imposes upon us particular ways of looking at history, we will be better able to decide whether such impositions should be permitted. It may be necessary for evolutionary historians to develop new and creative ways of representing *natural* history in prose.

Reprinted from AMERICAN ZOOLOGIST
Vol. 28, No. 4, p. 144A, 1988