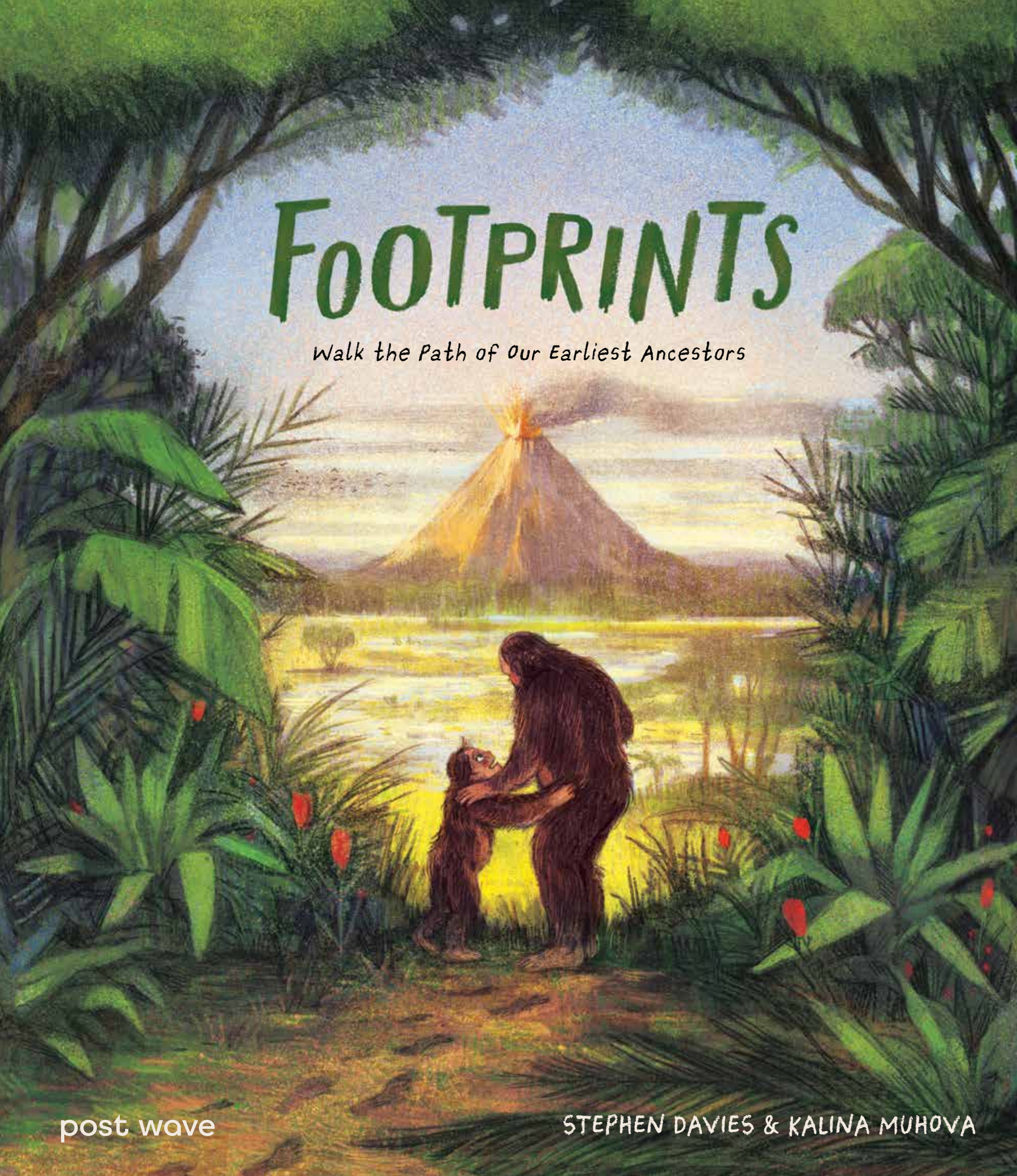

FOOTPRINTS
Walk the Path of Our Earliest Ancestors
post wave
STEPHEN DAVIES & KALINA MUHOVA

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Walk The Path Of Our Earliest Ancestors

'For Julia Churchill, who first told me about the Laetoli footprints' S.D

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Three hundred million years ago, the world looked nothing like it does today.
There were no countries, no borders, nor even separate continents –
just ONE colossal mass of land surrounded by ONE vast ocean.



As tens of millions of years rolled by, that land began to stretch and break apart.



North split noisily from South...

...and East from wild West.

The continent of Africa took shape – warm and wet and teeming with life.

And here in Africa, nearly four million years ago, our story begins...



Millions of joyful grasshoppers are buzzing in the undergrowth. A tree gecko clings to a jujube trunk, invisible against the mossy bark. It lifts its head to watch the peaceful scene below – three thirsty kudus tiptoeing toward a watering hole.

All of a sudden, the grasshoppers fall silent and the kudus halt, ears pricked, eyes wide. With mounting dread, they turn toward a mountain in the west.

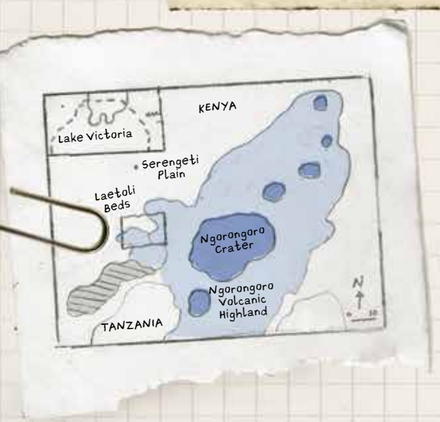
The mountain whispers, hisses, blows. It's not a mountain... it's a volcano!

KABOOM!

Fire and brimstone rage across the sky, monstrous in their power. Molten lava surges down the mountainside.

A crimson and yellow inferno dances in a startled gecko's eye.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: DISCOVERY



British fossil hunter Mary Leakey (1913–1996) led several expeditions to Laetoli in Tanzania, Africa.

One evening in 1976, three members of her team were messing around, throwing elephant dung at each other, when one of them spotted some animal prints in the volcanic rock right under his nose.





These footprints, scientists later agreed, were made between 3.6 and 3.8 million years ago, probably by a species called *Australopithecus afarensis*. The members of this species climbed like apes but walked upright on two legs, just like we do today.

That was just the beginning. There turned out to be tens of thousands of prints, taking Mary and her team years to uncover and study. And in July 1978, they stumbled on their most exciting discovery yet: a set of footprints that looked more human than ape.



The discovery was groundbreaking. It helped us piece together our human history, by proving that early human relatives walked upright much earlier than we previously thought they did. Walking upright is one of the key things that differentiates humans from other animals.





RESEARCH NEWS

Laetoli, Tanzania, 22 July 1978

Footprints from the past

Scientists have made a tremendous find in East Africa! Mary Leakey and her team uncovered footprints made over three million years ago. But these prints don't belong to animals – they look just like ours. Experts say early humans walked upright much earlier than anyone thought.



SCIENCE WEEKLY

Tanzania Discovery Sends Shock Waves Through Science



Artist impression

While tossing elephant dung in the sun, a team member spotted something strange – footprints preserved in volcanic rock. Mary Leakey's crew found tracks that may have been made by *Australopithecus afarensis*, a human-like creature who walked on two legs. This exciting find shows our ancient cousins were walking proud millions of years ago.

MYSTERY FEET



Mystery Footprints Found in African Ash!

Mary Leakey's fossil-hunting team have made a brilliant discovery: ancient footprints preserved in volcanic ash. They were left by an upright walker – not an ape, but not quite human either. Scientists now believe we've been walking on two legs much longer than they thought. History just took a giant leap!

MEET LUCY

We know about *Australopithecus afarensis* not just from footprints, but also from discoveries of fossilized bones. The most famous of these was discovered in Ethiopia – a half-complete skeleton which became known as "Lucy."

The locals called it Dink'inesh, which means "*You are amazing.*"

Even though Lucy was an adult, she was only 105 centimetres tall. That's about the height of a modern six-year-old human.

Lucy had long arms and curved finger bones, perfect for climbing trees.

LUCY'S SKELETON

Lucy's small brain cavity held an even smaller brain.

Lucy's skull, arms and hands were like those of a chimpanzee... but her neck, hips, knees and feet were much like ours!

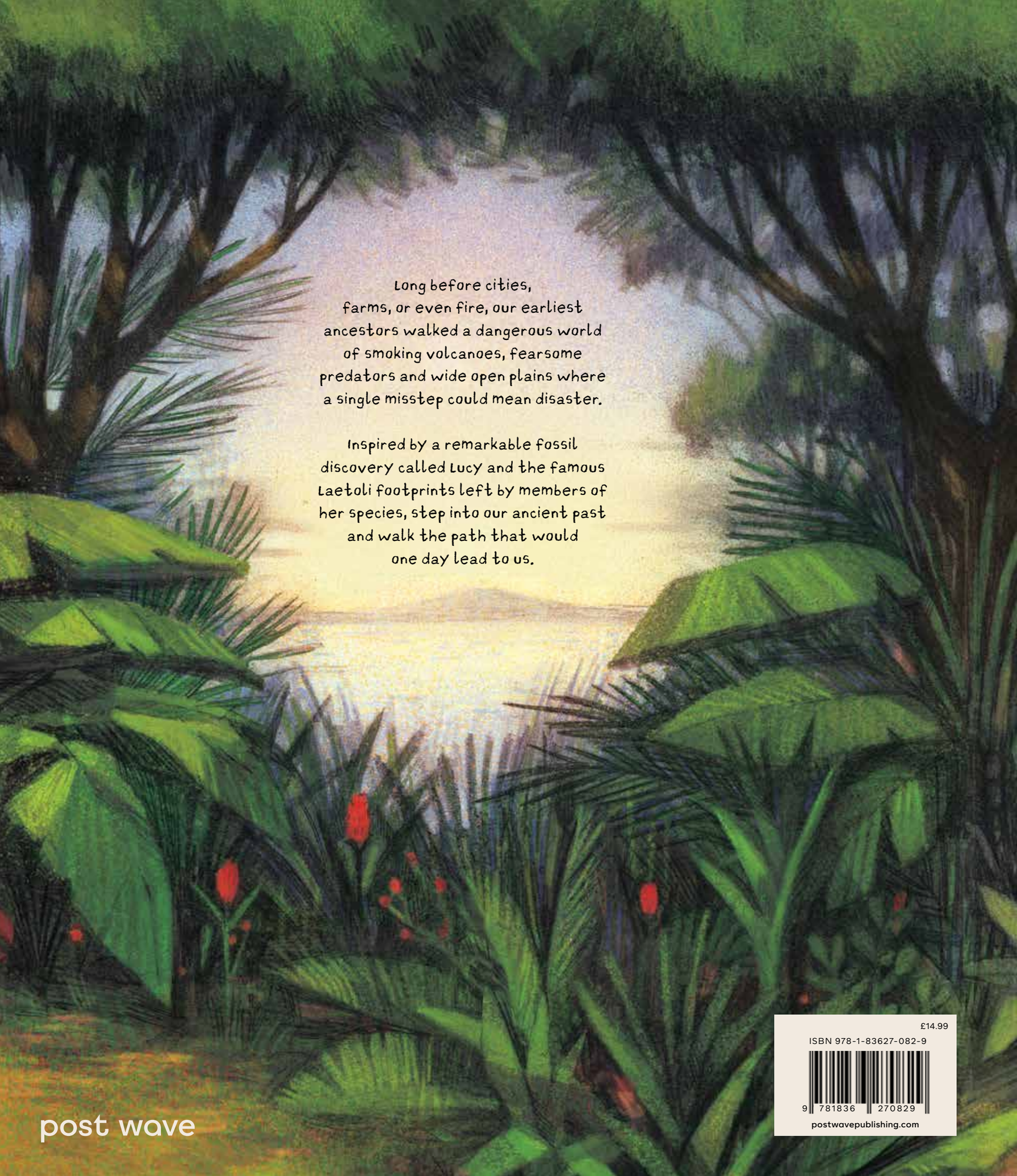


We know from other *Australopithecus* fossils that Lucy could hoot like a chimp and growl like a gorilla, but was not able to talk.

We can tell from Lucy's teeth that she mostly ate grass, seeds and roots. She would also have enjoyed small animals and bird eggs.

Lucy's foot and toe bones fitted perfectly into the Laetoli footprints. This suggests that the Walkers were members of Lucy's species.

When Lucy was discovered, newspaper headlines declared that she must be the 'missing link' between apes and humans. But today we understand that evolution is a complicated branching tree rather than a straightforward chain of links. Lucy was related to us in some way, but was not necessarily our direct ancestor.



Long before cities,
farms, or even fire, our earliest
ancestors walked a dangerous world
of smoking volcanoes, fearsome
predators and wide open plains where
a single misstep could mean disaster.

Inspired by a remarkable fossil
discovery called Lucy and the famous
Laetoli footprints left by members of
her species, step into our ancient past
and walk the path that would
one day lead to us.

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