

INNER LIFE

Life By Lennart Nilsson

Harry N. Abrams; 304 pages; 150 photos; \$45

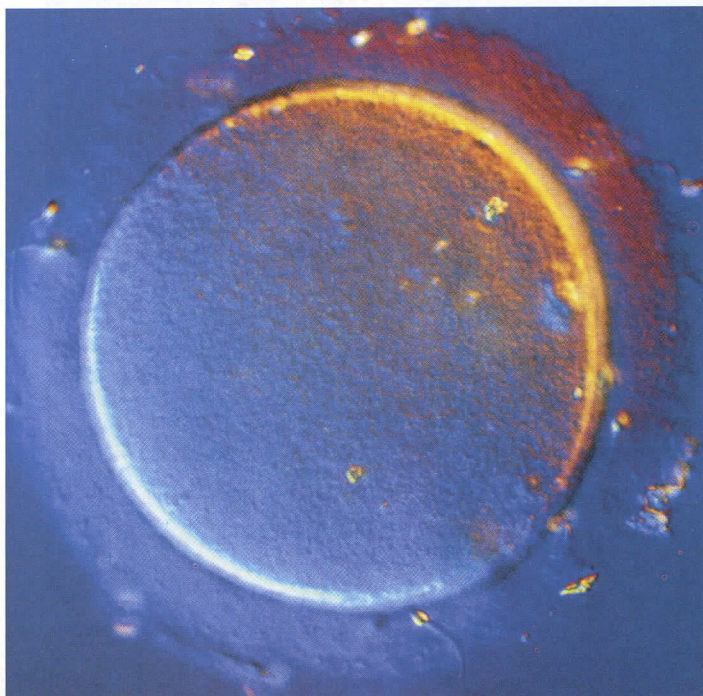
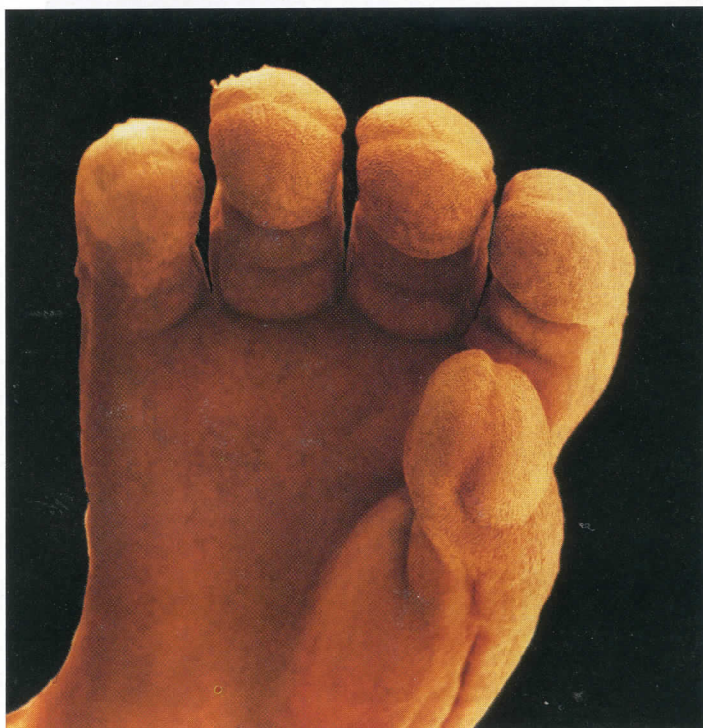
Some of us are old enough to remember the landmark cover of *Life* magazine's April 30, 1965 issue. "Drama of Life Before Birth," it blurbed. "Unprecedented photographic feat in color: Living 18-week-old fetus shown inside its amniotic sac." The cover image, taken by the Swedish scientific photographer Lennart Nilsson, showed a full-length fetus pushing at the walls of its protective bubble, which floated against a dark, protein-flecked background that could have been a starry sky. It seems highly likely that the image inspired the star-child scene in Stanley Kubrick's groundbreaking 1968 film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Nilsson's prenatal view was no less mind-blowing, penetrating inner space as never before.

Taken with an endoscope-mounted camera less than a millimeter in diameter fitted with a lens having a focal length of just one-tenth of a millimeter, Nilsson's photograph was the big bang of a career that included seven years of contract work for *Life* and decades of pushing our medium's limit in its exploration of the human body. *Life*, the book, is a gorgeous testament to Nilsson's lifetime of work.

Nilsson was a photojournalist before he ventured into scientific photography, so it's no surprise that the book has a narrative form. It starts with conception, one extraordinary image catching a fish-size sperm wriggling its way through a hole in the ovum wall. It moves on to show embryonic parts so crudely formed you'd think their sculptor had abandoned them—a hand without nails or fingerprints, an unseeing 10-week-old eye.

Then *Life* proceeds to explore the inner architecture of the mature body, from vatlike fat cells to a view straight up the spinal cord and into the brain. The book ends up back at the cellular level, as nerve fibers coil through muscle tissue and, in a particularly chilling electron micrograph, HIV viruses swarm over the surface of a white blood cell. Life goes on, and Lennart Nilsson is its modern-day Leonardo.

—RUSSELL HART



Clockwise from top left: A sperm penetrating an egg; a fetus at six months; several sperm approaching an egg; a human hand at 11 weeks.

