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[Home](#) > Eric Davidson dies

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[Glenn Branch](#) [2]

09.04.2015

[Eric Davidson dies](#) [3]



Eric Davidson

The eminent developmental biologist Eric Davidson died on September 1, 2015, at the age of 78, [according](#) [4] to a September 2, 2015, notice from Caltech. Davidson was famous for his work on the role of gene regulation in evolution, helping to launch the idea of gene regulatory networks, which control the development of organisms from embryos to adults, and for leading the drive to sequence the genome of the purple sea urchin (*Strongylocentrotus purpuratus*), a significant model organism in developmental biology. His books included *Gene Activity in Early Development* (1968, second edition 1976, third edition 1986), *The Regulatory Genome: Gene Regulatory Networks In Development and Evolution* (2006), and, with Isabelle S. Peter, *Genomic Control Process: Development and Evolution* (2015).

Sadly, Davidson's pioneering work was routinely mischaracterized by creationists. In 2012, he [told](#) [5] Jerry Coyne, "I admire your willingness to take on creationists in public; I find their views so antediluvian that I can only ignore them." Thirteen years earlier, however, he was not able to do so. He attended a 1999 conference in China, on "The Origins of Animal Body Plans and Their Fossil Records," which,

unknown to the scientists in attendance, was organized in part in order to promote "intelligent design" creationism. According to Barbara Forrest and Paul R. Gross's *Creationism's Trojan Horse* (2004), "Eric Davidson dissected [Jonathan] Wells's and [Paul] Nelson's presentations during the sessions, identifying their errors"; Nigel C. Hughes, who was in attendance, referred to the "egregious errors" of Wells, Nelson, and Michael Denton, which were "candidly dispatched by Eric Davidson." After a misleading report about the conference appeared in the *Boston Globe*, quoting Davidson as saying, "Neo-Darwinism is dead," Davidson and the paleontologist David J. Bottjer wrote to the newspaper to protest that the report was "strewn with fabrication and fabricated comments and [was] written by a biblical creationist posing as a science writer who has nothing more than an axe to grind." The *Globe* declined to print their letter, which was later published in *Reports of the National Center for Science Education*.

Davidson was born on April 13, 1937, in New York City. As a teenager, he conducted research at the Marine Biological Laboratory, publishing his first paper at the age of 16. He earned his B.A. in biology at the University of Pennsylvania in 1958 and his Ph.D. at Rockefeller University in 1963. He stayed at Rockefeller University as a research associate and then an assistant professor until 1971, when he moved to the California Institute of Technology, where he spent the rest of his career, as the Norman Chandler Professor of Cell Biology from 1981 onward. He was elected as a member of the National Academy of Sciences and as a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and he received the Society for Developmental Biology's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2007.

[General](#) [6]

[2015](#) [7]

[+ read](#) [3]

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[3] <https://ncse.com/news/2015/09/eric-davidson-dies-0016626>

[4] <http://www.caltech.edu/news/eric-h-davidson-1937-2015-47765>

[5] <https://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2012/12/11/a-marshall-mcluhan-moment-with-creationist-paul-nelson/>

[6] <https://ncse.com/general>

[7] <https://ncse.com/news/2015>