

## BOOK REVIEW

### Evolution for beginners

#### Evolution: A Very Short Introduction

B Charlesworth and D Charlesworth  
Oxford University Press, New York; 2003. 145 pp. £6.99,  
paperback. ISBN 0-19-2802518

*Heredity* (2005) 94, 457. doi:10.1038/sj.hdy.6800631

Reviewed by Mark R Macnair

Those who also subscribe to the Times Higher Education Supplement will have received free copies of a 'Very short introduction to Machiavelli', a 'Very short introduction to Maths' and a 'Very Short Introduction to Islam' from the same publishers as this little book. This one, the 100th of the series, does what it says on the tin: it gives a very short introduction to Evolution. The Charlesworths gallop through Natural Selection and Drift, the evidence for evolution from the patterns of extant forms and from history and paleontology, adaptation and speciation.

The book is well written, and makes good use of old and new examples. There is no mathematics, which will entice some readers, but does pose problems in explaining some difficult concepts. The figures are all black and white line drawings, and of variable quality; I am not sure that all would be comprehensible to those who did not already understand them.

So who is this book aimed at, and how well does it serve them? The blurb on the cover says that this series, Very Short Introductions, provides 'stimulating ways into new subjects'. In the further reading section, they give a list of general books, such as *The Blind Watchmaker* and *The Selfish Gene*, and also a list of more advanced ones (such as Maynard Smiths *Evolutionary Genetics*)

'which assume A level Biology'. Thus the book appears to be aiming at the intelligent layman, perhaps the arts or physics graduate, wanting to know more about Darwin's dangerous idea, while travelling or whiling away a wet weekend.

They will certainly get a stimulating read; I enjoyed reading it, and found the mix of concept and example generally good. They will get a good picture of the orthodox Darwinian view, although a few topics (eg Genetic Drift and Speciation) are treated so sketchily that I doubt that a newcomer would understand the issues or see why they are difficult and important.

I have recently read the introduction to Islam so kindly provided by the THES. It explained carefully the difference between Shia and Sunni Muslims, and the relative status of the Quran and the Hadiths, but it did not satisfy my desire to know more about how Islam can inspire teenagers to become suicide bombers, or how we can reconcile basic human rights with traditional ideas of Islam. Similarly, I fear that this book may leave some readers wanting more. The Charlesworths do not confront explicitly the challenges to Darwinism, either from without the mainstream (eg Intelligent Design theory) or within (eg the Gould/Lewontin critique of Adaptationism). Thus the well-read layman who has been exposed to some of these ideas might reject it as just another Darwinian polemic, which would be a pity. On the other hand, if you are looking for a stocking filler next Christmas for a relative to explain what we are about, you could do worse than give them this!

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