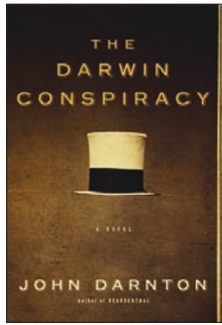


Evolution's secret



The Darwin Conspiracy

By John Darnton

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Reviewed by Michael A Goldman

If there is a moment for the timeless fascination with Darwin, it is now. Even as the American Museum of Natural History unveils its exhibit 'Darwin', strictures against the teaching of evolution are not just in Kansas and Chattanooga any more. 'Darwin's century' may have ended with 2001, but it remains to be seen whether or not intelligent design, a euphemism for special creation, will gain a stranglehold on twenty-first century science.

It is against this backdrop that talented writer-thinker John Darnton, cultural editor for the *New York Times*, turns his personal journey of discovery at Down House into a romp in Victorian intrigue. *The Darwin Conspiracy* is a marvelous tour of three different timelines—Darwin's voyage on the Beagle, his daughter Elizabeth's secret notes about her father and the attempt by two young scientist-historians to decipher a secret that I just cannot reveal here. That secret has nothing to do with what you will suspect most of the way through the book, at least if you read it with my brand of shrewdness, so you'll have two mysteries to ponder. Couple that with the sheer joy of walking about the Beagle with Darwin, the thrill of the Galapagos, the misery of seasickness or the romantic notion of sitting in Darwin's study, sipping brandy with the Wedgwoods, retching in a fine ceramic washbasin, and you've got a great way to pass the time.

Darnton treads the line between historian and novelist. He did his homework, bringing to life dozens of characters from Darwin's time, each based on careful research. Then Darnton asks his own questions, proposes a few whimsical answers and weaves those

characters into a consistent and enjoyable, although not thoroughly convincing, story. There is minimal didacticism about the science of evolution. Although this story is great fun, it is disappointing compared with two of Darnton's other novels, which I thought had important messages. *Neanderthal* was about the last encounter between modern humans and that subspecies to which most anthropologists refuse to entertain any hint of a parent-herir relationship. Darnton challenged the conventional wisdom with imaginative ideas about our coexistence, what made Neanderthals human, and why these physically robust creatures couldn't hold their own against the advance of Cro-Magnons. In *The Experiment*, Darnton spun a tale of reproductive technology and life extension, explaining the science but stretching it to its limits, and grappled with some of the key ethical issues of our time.

The battle between canonical neo-Darwinism and intelligent design (as advanced in Davis and Kenyon's textbook, *Of Pandas and People*) is really the battle between science and religion. Darnton highlights some of Darwin's own confusion over the issue. In *The Darwin Conspiracy*, you get a sense of the powerful conflict that must have raged in Darwin's mind over all those years. Darwin was, after all, from a religious family, and he sought to understand the workings of creation rather than to become the focal point of an alternative belief system in which science was the antithesis of religion. Says Darnton, in an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (25 September 2005, pg. C-3), to defenders of natural selection like Thomas Henry Huxley, "Darwin's cause became greater than that of the theory alone; its ultimate acceptance represented the apotheosis of science itself, what they thought of as the ultimate victory for rationality, logic and materialism." We could all stand some schooling in the peaceful coexistence of differing views, especially when they are in distinct domains of thinking (the nonoverlapping magisteria popularized by the late Stephen Jay Gould).

Darnton, a self-avowed proponent of evolution, doesn't for a moment dispute that Darwin's natural selection is one of the most powerful theories in science today, and no careful reader will accuse him of cracking the door open to intelligent design. Darnton's writing questions only every current notion about how Darwin came to think as he did, why it took him so long to publish and how a healthy young adventurer returned from the voyage of the Beagle but hardly ever left the confines of his home again. It's well worth the read, but it may be only a close second to Irving Stone's *The Origin*.

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