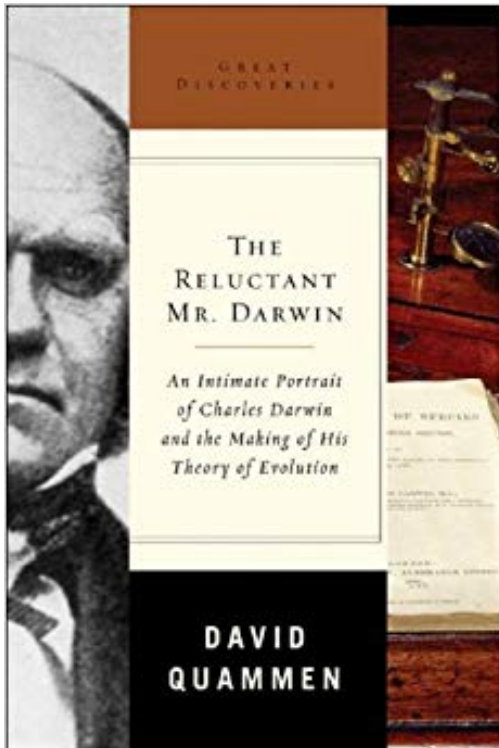


The Reluctant Mr. Darwin: An Intimate Portrait of Charles Darwin and the Making of His Theory of Evolution (Great Discoveries) by David Quammen



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A fresh look at Darwin's most radical idea, and the mysteriously slow process by which he revealed it. Evolution, during the early nineteenth century, was an idea in the air. Other thinkers had suggested it, but no one had proposed a cogent explanation for how evolution occurs. Then, in September 1838, a young Englishman named Charles Darwin hit upon the idea that "natural selection" among competing individuals would lead to wondrous adaptations and species diversity. Twenty-one years passed between that epiphany and publication of *On the Origin of Species*. The human drama and scientific basis of Darwin's twenty-one-year delay constitute a fascinating, tangled tale that elucidates the character of a cautious naturalist who initiated an intellectual revolution. *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin* is a book for everyone who has ever wondered about who this man was and what he said. Drawing from Darwin's secret "transmutation" notebooks and his personal letters, David Quammen has sketched a vivid life portrait of the man whose work never ceases to be controversial.



Reviews of the **The Reluctant Mr. Darwin: An Intimate Portrait of Charles Darwin and the Making of His Theory of Evolution (Great Discoveries)** by David Quammen

Shazel

This is more than simply "another look at Darwin". The author attempts to transmit the Darwin's personal evolution on the subject of Evolution. In doing that he begins his tale after the Beagle. Few realize that Darwin was recognized as a great scientist in his own day. They do not know that he conducted exhaustive experiments and study of organisms as divergent as pigeons, barnacles, worms and finches. He published seven books on plants ranging from insectivorous to orchids.

The author insists that true discovery is an incremental process - one thought leads to another and then to another, etc. Darwin (and others) had glimpses of the truth but it was decades before he felt the evidence was solid enough to publish - and even that was due to a race against a rival. The author points out that the term "Darwinist" is misleading. He did not start a religion, found a movement or train a bevy of disciples. Perhaps the biggest surprise was that despite its "hit status", ORIGINS did not quickly change minds. Acceptance of the theory came years later after other sources had not only verified but built upon his work.

I must add that the writing was beautiful, literary and almost poetic at times. The oft-stated complaints of religious prejudice is just only if one accepts that Creationism is valid. Darwin's own path toward unbelief was documented as was the long, loving marriage to his pious wife. The book succeeds because it balances science, history and biography. My Grade - A-

Xangeo

Darwin started writing his Beagle Journal in 1837 in "notebook A." He simultaneously started "notebook B," dedicated to his idea that species were perhaps not so immutable. Then came C, D, & E as he developed and organized his evidence. Midway through notebook C, he noted, "But Man, wonderful Man, is an exception." Three lines later, he recanted "...no, he is no exception." Hidden away in notebook N were metaphysical implications of his theory: Does a bee have a sense of communal responsibility? Do animals have a conscience? Is the human conscience an instinct or a human adaptation for social behavior? Does the idea of God arise naturally from the human mind? Is the human mind just a function of the human body? Might the "love of a deity" simply result from brain structure?

In Victorian England, these were not ideas to discuss in polite company, despite the fairly recent period of the Enlightenment - hence a 20-year procrastination before he published his terrible thoughts. Quammen rhetorically asks why Darwin had to be threatened with being scooped before he finally published. Was he afraid of offending his wife, afraid of estranging himself from pious former teachers and friends, afraid he would be thrown in jail...did he want more evidence so as to make his theory more airtight, was he too busy with other chores, and several other suggestions - and to all the suggested questions, Quammen opines, "The answers to each of these questions, I think, is yes."

All the pertinent data about the making of "Origin of the Species" is here:

1. Timeline of formation and development of the theory.
2. Marriage to his beloved Emma and how she supported his work, despite her theological opposition.
3. Portrait of his meticulous methods of observation, experimentation, thinking, and recording.
4. The Alfred Wallace bombshell and how Darwin's friends worked out a shared credit solution.
5. The writing and publishing of "Origin of the Species," the five revisions, and a brilliant chapter by chapter synopsis by Quammen.
6. The shaky reception of his book - for 50 years - and eventual vindication.

There are some books on Darwin more scholarly and longer, but you won't find one more likely to hold the attention of the general interest reader - complete with an outstanding explanation of his theory of evolution by natural selection. Hopefully high school science teachers will discover this book and add it to their student reading lists. The scientific literacy of our children (and our general population) could stand a little enhancement.

Marilbine

David Quammen is a writer who can pick out details that illuminate the entire subject. In *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin* he brings an icon to life and makes him accessible and vulnerable as a human being. I have read every biography of Charles Darwin I could get my hands on and every book written by Charles Darwin. This book is indeed "An Intimate Portrait" that catches the emotional and intellectual journey required to bring biology out of the realm of natural theology and into the scientific arena as a study unified by natural selection.

How did we get here? It's a question each thinker asks at some (or several) points along our path of growing up in the universe. Knowing how Charles Darwin answered that question makes all the difference.

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