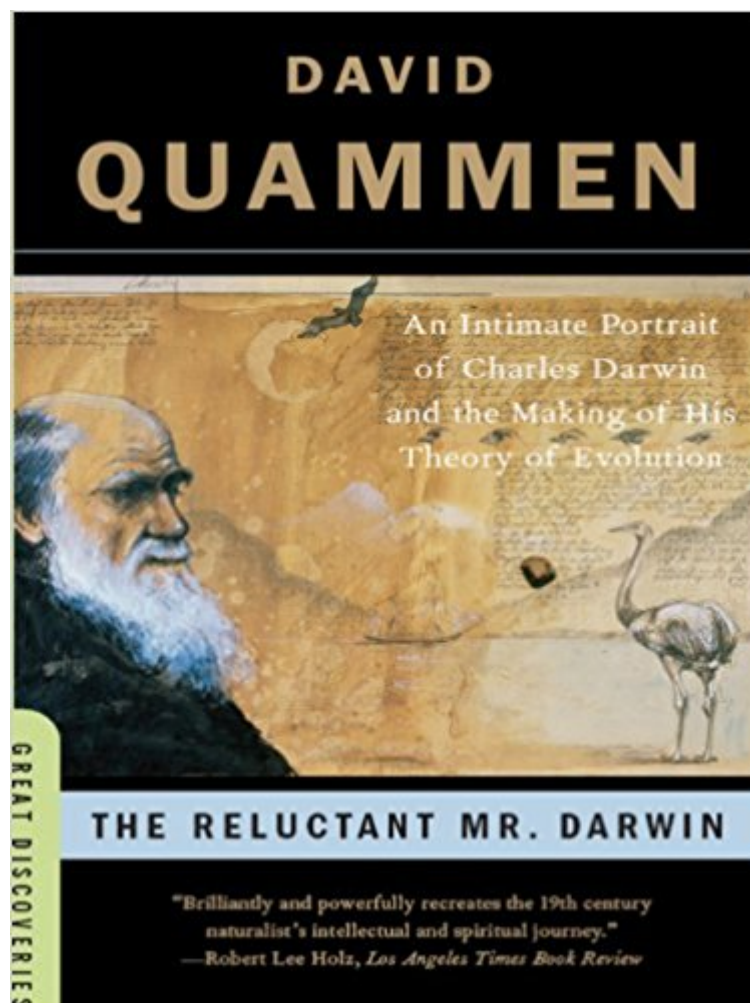




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The Reluctant Mr. Darwin: An Intimate Portrait Of Charles Darwin And The Making Of His Theory Of Evolution (Great Discoveries)



Synopsis

"Quammen brilliantly and powerfully re-creates the 19th century naturalist's intellectual and spiritual journey."--Los Angeles Times Book Review
Twenty-one years passed between Charles Darwin's epiphany that "natural selection" formed the basis of evolution and the scientist's publication of *On the Origin of Species*. Why did Darwin delay, and what happened during the course of those two decades? The human drama and scientific basis of these years constitute a fascinating, tangled tale that elucidates the character of a cautious naturalist who initiated an intellectual revolution.

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Customer Reviews

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.

I read this book before we went to the Galapagos Islands. The book is written in third-person, so you never actually feel as if events are unfolding in real time, but it's well-written and kept my attention. It greatly helped my understanding of how Darwin developed his theory of evolution and natural selection, which in turn made our trip much more enjoyable. I enjoyed reading about Darwin's childhood, marriage and children, and the story of his race to publish at the end was especially riveting.

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.

This is an entertaining and informative biography on the development and continual reworking and modifying of the Theory of Evolution as put down by Charles Darwin, and other tidbits of information regarding Darwin's personal life and habits and behaviors. The author, David Quammen, also touches on the work of Alfred Russel Wallace and his parallel development of his own Theory of Evolution. Other acquaintances of Darwin, many of them prominent men of science, are also mentioned and elaborated on. Quammen is a very capable and talented story teller who brings a wry sense of humor and keen insight to a subject that could very easily spiral into a morass of boredom in less capable hands. Charles Darwin is brought to life as not only an assiduous workaholic prober of the natural world, but as the very human, gentle, and compassionate husband and father that he was. My only complaint is that this wonderful little nugget is too short. I would have preferred a volume twice as long but no longer. And Quammen also comments on the book's brevity. I recommend this work. It is not as thorough as Quammen's "Song of the Dodo," but it is a good read and can be knocked off in an afternoon; plus you may learn things you may not have known about one of the great scientific theorists of the nineteenth century. One final note: there is a funny bit regarding the human genome vis a vis that of the mouse that made me laugh out loud for several minutes. Who knew that science could be so funny. This pithy remark alone is worth the price of this modest little book.

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