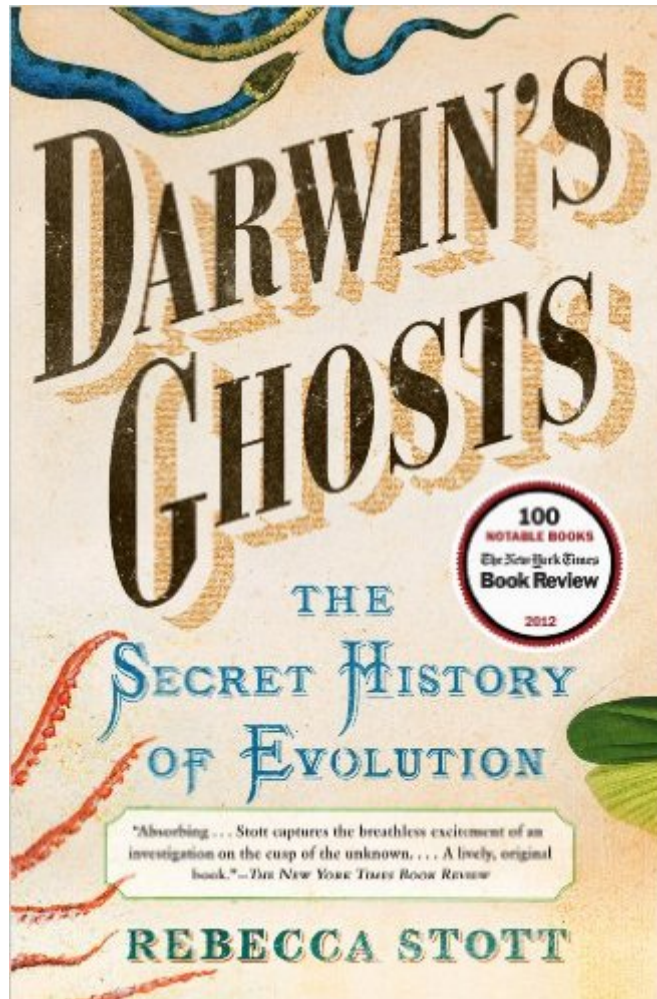


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Darwin's Ghosts: The Secret History Of Evolution



Synopsis

A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK [An] extraordinarily wide-ranging and engaging book [about] the men who shaped the work of Charles Darwin . . . a book that enriches our understanding of how the struggle to think new thoughts is shared across time and space and people. •â” The Sunday Telegraph (London) Christmas, 1859. Just one month after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin received an unsettling letter. He had expected criticism; in fact, letters were arriving daily, most expressing outrage and accusations of heresy. But this letter was different. It accused him of failing to acknowledge his predecessors, of taking credit for a theory that had already been discovered by others. Darwin realized that he had made an error in omitting from *Origin of Species* any mention of his intellectual forebears. Yet when he tried to trace all of the natural philosophers who had laid the groundwork for his theory, he found that history had already forgotten many of them. • Darwin’s *Ghosts* tells the story of the collective discovery of evolution, from Aristotle, walking the shores of Lesbos with his pupils, to Al-Jahiz, an Arab writer in the first century, from Leonardo da Vinci, searching for fossils in the mine shafts of the Tuscan hills, to Denis Diderot in Paris, exploring the origins of species while under the surveillance of the secret police, and the brilliant naturalists of the Jardin de Plantes, finding evidence for evolutionary change in the natural history collections stolen during the Napoleonic wars. Evolution was not discovered single-handedly, Rebecca Stott argues, contrary to what has become standard lore, but is an idea that emerged over many centuries, advanced by daring individuals across the globe who had the imagination to speculate on nature’s extraordinary ways, and who had the courage to articulate such speculations at a time when to do so was often considered heresy. With each chapter focusing on an early evolutionary thinker, *Darwin’s Ghosts* is a fascinating account of a diverse group of individuals who, despite the very real dangers of challenging a system in which everything was presumed to have been created perfectly by God, felt compelled to understand where we came from. Ultimately, Stott demonstrates, ideas—including evolution itself—evolve just as animals and plants do, by intermingling, toppling weaker notions, and developing over stretches of time. *Darwin’s Ghosts* presents a groundbreaking new theory of an idea that has changed our very understanding of who we are. Praise for *Darwin’s Ghosts* • Absorbing . . . Stott captures the breathless excitement of an investigation on the cusp of the unknown. . . . A lively, original book. •â” The New York Times Book Review • Stott’s research is broad and unerring; her book is wonderful. . . . An exhilarating romp through 2,000 years of fascinating scientific history. •â” Nature • Stott brings Darwin himself to life. . . . [She] writes with a novelist’s flair. . . Darwin and the “ghosts” so richly described in Ms. Stott’s enjoyable book are the

descendants of Aristotle and Bacon and the ancestors of today's scientists. "The Wall Street Journal" Riveting . . . Stott has done a wonderful job in showing just how many extraordinary people had speculated on where we came from before the great theorist dispelled all doubts. "The Guardian (U.K.)" From the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Rebecca Stott's "Darwin's Ghosts: The Secret History of Evolution" is a masterful overview of the history of science leading up to Darwin's discovery of Natural Selection as a primary mechanism for biological evolution. Hers is an especially important account, since she places the work of Darwin and his intellectual forebears within the context of the societies and cultures they inhabited, stretching across a vast gulf of time that begins with the ancient Classical Greeks. It is also an extremely lucid account replete with Stott's vivid, quite descriptive, prose; an account that should captivate and intrigue readers, including those who are unfamiliar with Darwin's life and work or that others, most notably, Lamarck, had proposed evolutionary theories decades before Darwin and Wallace had stumbled upon Natural Selection independently of each other. Stott begins in earnest describing how Aristotle became an extraordinary field naturalist on the Aegean island of Lesbos,

carefully studying the behavior of fishes and marine invertebrates, devoting two years toward trying to understand reproductive behavior of the marine animals he observed, using the insights he gleaned for the rest of his life in shaping his philosophy, while also working on three books, "Parts of Animals", "The History of Animals" and "On the Generation of Animals"; the very first works in zoology and biology ever written.

There have been a number of books on the historical context of the Origin of Species. Some, like Mayr's 'Growth of Biological Thought' and a number of Gould's volumes, focus closely on variations of the scientific and philosophical approaches of eminent scientists, why these were in error and Darwin, finally, correct. Darwin himself had not acknowledged these forebears as in expected in the scientific literature and was sufficiently motivated by this criticism to add an 'Historical sketch' (included as an appendix) to subsequent editions. This book takes a somewhat different approach to the thinking leading up to the Origin of Species. It looks at a number of scientific events and people that were influential in the history of thought, and, most importantly, how these ideas rippled through society at the time. It starts with coverage of Greek (Aristotle) and Persian (al-Jahiz) thinking about the diversity of biological organisms. Neither of these authors come close to an understanding of what we now call evolution, but had some surprising insights about the similarities among the various organisms they were familiar with. What makes this book so unique is that it goes well beyond specific scientists and explores the thinking of contemporaries and how their ideas spread throughout the world. As explorations of the world uncovered new and wildly different organisms, questions of their relatedness grew even more demanding on science. (Darwin, Huxley, Hooker, and Russell were all on such voyages of discovery.) But what sets this book apart from others is the superb coverage of social and religious responses to natural philosophy. Many political leaders invested in museums and science research; there was competitiveness to be the best.

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