

# Darwin's 'The Origin of Species'

By Janet Browne

Reviewed by Dean Madden, National Centre for Biotechnology Education, UK

The choice of examples is quite successful as they bring evolution into our homes and lives. They show that evolution is not something from the distant past but an ongoing process which is closely related to human activity. Human fate is at least partly determined by evolution in other species; at the same time, humans actively determine the evolution of other species. The realisation that common human practices like hunting and fishing drive many species to extinction is especially shocking. This issue should be addressed in debates in science and non-science classrooms.

## Details

*Clockwork genes: Discoveries in Biological Time*

Publisher: Howard Hughes Medical Institute

Publication year: 2000

*Evolution: Constant Change and Common Threads*

Publisher: Howard Hughes Medical Institute

Publication year: 2005

## Ordering

These and other DVDs can be ordered free of charge from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute: [www.hhmi.org/biointeractive/](http://www.hhmi.org/biointeractive/)



This short book describes the development of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* and examines its wider impact.

Janet Browne is the author of a large and highly acclaimed two-volume biography of Charles Darwin. Her new volume is slightly different – it is a biography of Darwin's most famous book, rather than the story of Darwin's life or indeed the development of evolutionary ideas. At times, the distinction is blurred because to understand the genesis of *The Origin* it is necessary to understand Darwin's personal journey. The book therefore includes much of the material from Browne's earlier works, but in far less detail. Curiously, it does not mention the meticulous way in which Darwin promoted *The Origin*, by sending copies and carefully worded covering letters to influential people. Also missing is any mention of the purchase of a substantial proportion of the first edition by Mudie's Select Circulating Library, which did much to encourage readership of the (then expensive) book in Victorian England.

The final chapter deals with *The Origin's* fall from grace in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only to be revitalised in the 1940s by the modern synthesis of genetics and natural selection. It also describes the somewhat surprising resurgence of opposition to Darwinism by fundamentalist

religious groups in the United States. As Browne points out, although Darwin's ideas were hotly debated in Victorian England, organised opposition from fundamentalist religious groups is very much a late 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon.

This an enjoyable book which a teacher could read from cover to cover, but if you've read Janet Browne's biography of Darwin it might prove disappointing; I suspect that the format of this short book is more to blame than the author.

## Details

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