

A Christian Physicist's Dispatch from the Evolution Wars

GLENN BRANCH

Saving Darwin: How to Be a Christian and Believe in Evolution. By Karl W. Giberson. HarperOne, 2008. ISBN 978-06-122878-0. 248 pp. Paperback, \$24.95.

Saving Darwin is the latest dispatch from the evolution wars, offering, in the words of its author, “a tour of this troubled battlefield.” Karl Giberson, a professor of physics at Eastern Nazarene University, is a veteran cicerone, having presented a useful introduction to the controversy in a previous book, *Species of Origin: America's Search for a Creation Story*, coauthored with the historian Donald A. Yerxa. In *Saving Darwin*, Giberson escorts the reader past a number of familiar landmarks: the development of Darwin's theory of evolution against the background of Paley's natural theology, the emergence of fundamentalism as a reaction to the higher criticism, and the contentious legal history of teaching evolution from the Scopes trial in 1925 to the *Kitzmiller* trial in 2005. A detour introduces Darwin's “dark companions”—the disreputable movements, such as eugenics, with which evolution is often associated, especially by its detractors. Making their appearance in serried ranks throughout the book are the partisans of creation science and intelligent design, the polemicists of atheism who invoke the success of evolutionary biology in the course of arguing against faith and the Christians who have made their peace with evolution.

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Toward the end of the tour, Giberson discloses his own allegiance: “I think evolution is true. The process, as I reflect on it, is an expression of God's creativity, although in a way that is not captured by the scientific view of the world.” He was not always of that opinion. As a college student, he recounts, he was a hardcore fundamentalist armed with a copy of *The Genesis Flood*, the foundation of creation science, and eager to join the creationist cause as soon as he obtained his doctorate. His study of science, however, convinced him that evolution was scientifically robust, and his exposure to biblical and theological scholarship persuaded him that accepting evolution was not, after all, a problem for the essential tenets of Christianity. Although Giberson offers a few tentative suggestions (describing them as “above my pay grade”) toward a reconciliation of evolution and Christianity, the book's subtitle, *How to Be a Christian and Believe in Evolution*, is misleading. His main concern in *Saving Darwin* is not with how but why: he is not providing the theological details of such a project but arguing for its desirability.

Such a reconciliation may be desirable, but is it possible? Both creationists and at least a handful of atheist polemicists—if not as many as Giberson seems to think—agree that it is not. Thus central to *Saving Darwin* is a rejection of the idea that there is a forced choice between Christianity and evolution. “Almost everyone who talks about evolution insists that we must make a choice between evolution or creation, materialism or god, naturalism or supernaturalism,” Giberson declares. “But this dichotomy is *wrong*.”

These are not the only two options. These are not even the most reasonable options” (emphasis in original). Opposing the dichotomy, and thereby making space for reconciling science and faith, is the main concern of *Saving Darwin*. It is a praiseworthy concern, especially in a country where almost a third of science teachers report experiencing pressure to teach creationism in their classrooms. Even those who are not especially interested in whether Christianity is able to accommodate evolution ought to respect sincere and honest efforts at reconciliation, if only in the hope that they will help to reduce the pressure on the beleaguered teachers, giving their students a better chance to attain a proper understanding of evolution.

But Giberson's concern sometimes leads him to overstate the case. Is it really a fact that “almost everyone who talks about evolution” insists on the dichotomy? Then what of Howard van Till, Darrel Falk, Francis Collins (who contributed the foreword to the book), Kenneth R. Miller, John Haught, Alister McGrath, Keith Ward, and Michael Ruse, all of whom Giberson approvingly mentions as affirming the compatibility of Christianity and evolution? Similarly, Giberson complains that “the content and significance of evolutionary theory is communicated to broad audiences by people like [Richard] Dawkins” in trade books like *The Blind Watchmaker*, which famously includes a hefty dollop of triumphal atheism along with evolution. But what about Carl Zimmer, Sean Carroll, and David Sloan Wilson, for example, who expound evolution in popular trade books without lashing out at faith? And surely the primary messengers of evolution for the broadest audience are biology textbooks, which are generally silent on or neutral about the implications of evolution for religion. Unmentioned, too, are the efforts of the scientific establishment to debunk the dichotomy that Giberson deplors, such as *The Evolution Dialogues* (published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2006) and *Science, Evolution, and Creationism* (published by the

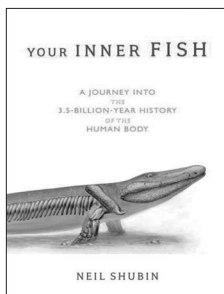
National Academy of Sciences in 2008).

Perhaps in the spirit of Mercurio's "A plague o' both your houses," Giberson sometimes draws a misleading equivalence between creationists and their opponents. His discussion of a fracas over a definition of evolution offered by the National Association of Biology Teachers in 1995, for example, is captious and uncharitable, perhaps because it relies on a tendentious account by Phillip Johnson, the godfather of intelligent design. Similarly, his discussion of a failed attempt to include antievolution rhetoric in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 criticizes the scientific community for its strenuous opposition to the so-called Santorum amendment, while not acknowledging that, even despite the amendment's failure, it was subsequently invoked to justify policies that compromised the integrity of sci-

ence education. He criticizes the National Association of Biology Teachers for claiming (in his words) "that evolution is a science because it *is* like physics" (emphasis in original), whereas, as acknowledged just two pages earlier, the comparison was not advanced in service of such a sweeping claim. Just as a more reflective Mercurio might have credited Romeo at least with trying to stop the duel, so a more thoughtful Giberson might have given creationism's opponents their due.

There is still plenty to appreciate in *Saving Darwin*, especially the discussion of creation science and intelligent design. In such a thoroughly debated area, it is difficult to advance the argument, as Giberson realizes. After explaining his rejection of intelligent design on scientific and theological grounds, for example, he apologizes for the lack of novelty,

explaining, "Intelligent design is a nineteenth-century argument, flailing about in a new century where it doesn't belong." But he is familiar with his material, he organizes it well, and he possesses a good eye for the telling detail. A few bouts of whimsy induced a wince, such as the reference to "a leading French intellectual bearing the ponderous name Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon"; the Comte de Buffon's given name was Georges-Louis Leclerc, which is two syllables less ponderous than "Karl W. Giberson"—but who's counting? If Giberson's name is comparatively ponderous, at least his prose is not: the writing is generally clear and fluent. Overall, anyone seeking a lively and engaging, if occasionally tendentious, introduction to the evolution wars from the standpoint of a Christian who accepts evolution will enjoy *Saving Darwin*.



Fish Tales

DANIEL GRASSAM

Your Inner Fish: A Journey into the 3.5-Billion-Year History of the Human Body. By Neil Shubin. Pantheon Books, New York, 2008. ISBN: 978-0375-424472. 240 pp. Hardcover, \$24.

Owing to a series of unexpected staffing issues at the University of Chicago, author Neil Shubin found himself, a paleontologist, teaching human anatomy to first-year medical students. Despite the seemingly disparate nature of these two topics, Shubin found that being a paleontologist was actually advantageous, "Because the best road maps to human bodies lie in the bodies of other animals." And those roads travel over a period of 3.5 billion years. Who better to discuss billion-year-old history than a paleontologist?

Daniel Grassam writes from Auckland, New Zealand.

Shubin's tale, however, begins a more recent 375 million years ago with a fish. Not just any fish but Tiktaalik, a once-missing-link fossil predicted by paleontology yet undiscovered until Shubin and his colleagues uncovered it in 2006. What makes Tiktaalik important to the narrative is that it is an intermediary between fish and land-living animals, an essential chapter in the human story.

"All fish prior to Tiktaalik have a set of bones that attach the skull to the shoulder, so that every time the animal bent its body, it also bent its head. Tiktaalik is different. The head is completely free of the shoulder. . . . Seeing Tiktaalik is seeing our history as fish,"

writes Shubin. From our relation to Tiktaalik, Shubin travels through the human body by part and by function. Chapters for hands, head, teeth, vision, smell, and hearing deconstruct our anatomy and expose the links to life's other kingdoms. "When you see these deep similarities among different organs and bodies, you begin to realize that the diverse inhabitants of our world are just variations on a theme."

A laudable facet of *Your Inner Fish* is something that cannot be found in its pages. At no point does Shubin mention creationism, intelligent design, or the purported controversy around evolutionary theory. He gives ID all the attention it deserves by leaving it out completely. The closest that Shubin comes to acknowledging the debate is in the final chapter. In this section, Shubin highlights the impact of our biological past on our present physiology, specifically obesity, heart disease, and hemorrhoids. "Virtually every illness we suffer has some historical component...each of these examples show that we were not designed rationally, but are products of a