

# Creation: When Darwin was writing his groundbreaking work

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*Directed by John Amiel, screenplay by John Collee, based on the book Annie's Box: Darwin, His Daughter, and Human Evolution by Randall Keynes*

The 150th anniversary of British Naturalist Charles Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of Species* inevitably sparked a renewed interest in the theory of natural selection, or evolution, as it is more commonly known. The public's curiosity is genuine and entirely welcome.

Director Jon Amiel's 2009 film *Creation* is set during the period when Darwin was conducting the research that would later form the basis of his monumental work and forever change how the human species viewed itself in relation to the rest of the natural world.

The theory of natural selection was a historic and scientific milestone in human culture and thought. Darwin's expeditions to the Galapagos Islands in 1831 and his observation of finches and other birds drew him to the conclusion that certain traits in animals were the product of a complex relationship between animals and the ecosystems in which they lived. An animal or plant with a certain trait that helped it survive and reproduce in its environment would pass on that trait to the next generation more frequently than members of the same species without that trait. In this way, the species as a whole would change over time.

Over the course of millions of years, variations and mutations in organisms produced countless forms of life that could all be traced back to a common ancestor. Or as Darwin put it in a famous passage: "[W]hilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved."

Unfortunately, Amiel's *Creation* too often places Darwin's actual work in the background, concerning

itself more with the "inner turmoil" and personal demons of its author. This is not to say that *Creation* is without value. It is a thought-provoking work that contains many fine performances and memorable sequences. It is a serious, if limited, attempt to dramatize and bring to a mass audience events surrounding one of the most significant scientific investigations in human history.

It is perhaps not surprising (although no less shameful), given the confusion over evolution whipped up and exploited by the religious right in the United States, that the film's producers had a difficult time finding a distributor for their work in the US—this, despite the fact that *Creation* was chosen to open the 2009 Toronto International Film Festival. Film distributors no doubt considered the work a risky investment.

The film was adapted from *Annie's Box* by Randal Keynes, the great-great-grandson of Charles Darwin. It follows Darwin, having returned from the Galapagos to his home and family in the British countryside, as he experiments with the selective breeding of pigeons and begins writing his monumental work. Darwin suffers bouts of ill health, and is tormented by the death of his daughter Annie from scarlet fever, for which he continues to feel a certain responsibility.

Darwin is played by British actor Paul Bettany in a fine performance. His Darwin is a sympathetic character, who is a loving father as well as a serious and committed scientist. He is, however, uneasy with the implications of his research. Bettany's Darwin is not someone who falls away from religious orthodoxy because such questioning comes easily to him, but because his scientific investigations have radically altered his way of looking at the world, whether he likes it or not. Other life experiences, in particular the

death of his daughter, have also forced him to undergo a real struggle with his beliefs.

A visit from renowned biologist Thomas Henry Huxley (Toby Jones), leaves Darwin even more troubled. “You’ve killed God,” Huxley tells him. “Science is at war with religion, and when we win we’ll finally be rid of those damned archbishops and their threats of eternal punishment.” It should be noted that while Huxley may have acted as “Darwin’s bulldog,” the filmmakers have exaggerated somewhat in making him a militant atheist, as well as in casting him as an uncritical supporter of Darwin’s theory, at least given the historical moment in which the film takes place.

While Darwin has no doubts about the accuracy and implications of his findings, making them public worries him greatly. Civilization, he feels, is built around the church. What would it mean to rebuild it plank by plank on new foundations, he asks?

Regrettably, the bulk of Darwin’s struggle with this material is depicted as if it were nothing more than a personal battle. His sickness prevents him from dedicating himself wholeheartedly to publishing his work, and he is disturbed by visions of his late daughter and other impossible nightmares. His wife Emma (Jennifer Connelly) is religious-minded and opposes his work; their marriage threatens to fall apart.

Ultimately, this becomes less an account of the writing of the *Origin of Species* and more the story of the enormous personal guilt and severe illness weighing on Charles Darwin in the years before he published his book. One wonders, if the filmmakers had created a work about Karl Marx, would they have made the focus of their story the number of trips Marx made abroad to recover from illnesses, rather than his writing of *Capital*?

Why didn't the creators of the film find enough drama in the material itself, in Darwin’s research and his struggle to publish his ideas? Why did they shift the focus of their work to other matters? There is almost no sense of the world in which this struggle occurs; the bulk of the film takes place in cabins or during walks through the wilderness. Darwin has enemies as well as friends, we are told. Who are they? What is the intellectual climate of the times? What conflicting forces are sharpening this struggle and bringing it to a head?

Amiel’s treatment of the specific historical figure Charles Darwin dissolves into the (quasi-predictable) story of a genius—any genius—who must battle personal demons while trudging along to his or her ultimate goal.

What the film does accomplish, however, is to instill in the viewer a fascination with and appreciation for the natural world as it is, rid of all mysticism. Darwin is open and honest with his children about things; he never hides the truth. Many scenes involve family outings in nature where he and his family observe and contemplate the wonders of the natural world.

In one scene, Darwin takes his children for a walk in the forest, and they notice a rabbit about to be eaten by a fox. When the children start to cry, Annie (Martha West), Darwin’s eldest daughter, reassures her siblings that the fox is just providing food for its babies. Darwin looks on appreciatively—we can understand why he favors Annie so much.

Early in the work, the filmmakers juxtapose images of schools of fish with flocks of birds moving in similar patterns, suggesting a link between the two groups of creatures and a common ancestry. Scenes like these are high points. While one never gets to grasp (nor perhaps could one) the whole of Darwin’s thought in the film, his appreciation and understanding of the natural world and its laws come through.

As Darwin himself wrote in the *Origin of the Species*, “When I view all beings not as special creations, but as lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Silurian system was deposited, they seem to become ennobled.”

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