

The REALL News*

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." -- James Randi
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Of Evolution and the Supernatural

Book Reviews by David Bloomberg and Bob Ladendorf
Evolution's
River of Life

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Book Review: River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life, by Richard Dawkins, Basic Books, The Science Masters Series.

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It seems that the main reason he has done this is that the biblical origins story is such an integral part of most people's background, to the point that scientific studies looking at the ancestral origin of humankind has been referred to as "African Eve." But Dawkins explains that the river referenced by the title is not one of water, but of DNA, and it flows through time, passing along information from one body to the next.

The first chapter, "The Digital River" explains this and other important evolutionary basics. In fact, this entire book is written with the layman in mind — one does not have to have a degree in biology to understand it. Parts of it seems geared towards those who have heard about creationism and perhaps might be persuaded by some of its tenets. Dawkins uses simple logic and evolutionary theory to swat down the creationist's claims.

Indeed, Chapter 3, "Do Good by Stealth," is almost fully dedicated to discussing such matters. Dawkins writes about a correspondent who was convinced that evolution cannot be true because he read about a species of orchid which fooled male wasps into thinking the flower was actually a female wasp, tricking it into pollinating the flowers. He decided, by a fallacy Dawkins calls "the Argument from Personal Incredulity," that he could not believe this type of arrangement could have evolved, so it therefore must have been created. Dawkins explains, using numerous examples, how such an arrangement could have indeed evolved, and ends by noting that the lesson we need to learn is that we cannot simply use human judgment in assessing these matters: "Never say, and never take seriously anybody who says, 'I cannot believe that so-and-so could have evolved by gradual selection.'"

Personally, I am always glad to see a book aimed at general audiences tackle subjects like creationism. Too often such a topic is glossed over, as many scientists don't take creationists very seriously. Dawkins, however, draws a bead directly

on their claims and shoots them down. He tackles some of their other claims and questions, which I myself have been asked on occasion. "If evolution is true, then we have no purpose for being here." I generally respond that this is a matter of faith, and, as such, is outside the realm of science (and REALL). Dawkins tackles that more directly by saying, yes, that's right. Science answers the "how" questions. Just because you might want to ask "why" questions, such as "Why are we here?" doesn't mean there is necessarily an answer, and certainly not one that can be provided by science. The "why" question is often brought up by creationists as part of the "Argument from Design," and Dawkins responds to the "illusion of purposeful design" with Darwinian natural selection.

Throughout the book, which is relatively short at 172 pages in five chapters, Dawkins makes use of numerous well-thought-out scientific experiments which document some of the evidence for his discussions. As I said, this is a book for the layman, so he doesn't go into the nitty-gritty of chemical reactions, he just gives you an overview of the important information in an easy-to-read format.

I would definitely suggest this book to those without a strong backing in biology, but also to those who do have that background. Dawkins' discussions are aimed at the layman, so we, as skeptics and promoters of critical thinking, can use those arguments ourselves when challenged by creationists who ask, "I can't believe that the eye could have evolved by gradual selection. After all, what good is 20% of an eye?"

Dawkins gives us the answer that question. Simply put, 20% of an eye is better than 19% of an eye, which is better still than 18%. That's evolution in action.

Armageddon's
River of Blood

by Bob Ladendorf

Book Review: An Encyclopedia of Claims, Frauds, and Hoaxes of the Occult and Supernatural "exposed by" James Randi, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1995.

This is a book that I would like to see in every library, every newspaper office, and every TV news and entertainment office, maybe even alongside those Funk and Wagnalls' in the grocery stores. Perhaps Randi's long subtitle will give you a quick picture of this 284-page encyclopedia: "James Randi's Decidedly Skeptical Definitions of Alternate Realities."

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Reading the book, I found myself laughing out loud at some of the outrageous claims and con men, such as Dr. Albert Abrams (1823-1924) — "the consummate quack" — who sold radio-wave machines, (e.g., "Omnipotent Oscilloclast"), that he claimed could provide health cures. He died a millionaire.

The encyclopedia is not dry, but quite wry. After he describes and then debunks graphology, which claims that a person's personality and future can be determined by handwriting analysis, he concludes with mentioning that crime handwriting experts can indeed tell the future of one whose handwriting is identified. "If it matches what she [Susan Morton, a crime lab technician] is looking for, she says, she can clearly tell where the writer will spend the next four or

five years."

Randi, a professional magician and well-known skeptic, writer and lecturer, covers a wide range of individuals and subjects — many familiar, many not. It is almost depressing to turn the page and read about another charlatan or pseudoscientific subject, such as faith healing or psychic surgery. Fortunately, Randi balances his straightforward histories or explanations with those wry twists on the subject covered.

Nowhere is he more scientific — and practical — than in his determination of the real impact of the battle at Armageddon. Randi says that Armageddon has become to mean the end of the world, but, as he points out, it's a real location in Israel. "According to predictions of St. John in Apocalypse," Randi writes, "a battle between good and evil will take place there producing a river of blood 'to the height of a horse's bridle' for a distance of 200 miles." Randi then assumes that all the blood is drained at the same time, that the river is 10 feet wide and doesn't flow at all, and that the horse is small. Even at that, he says, " ... some three hundred sixty million persons would have to be slaughtered during this battle, all simultaneously." That area cannot even hold that many persons standing shoulder to shoulder, he says. "But perhaps that is one of the properties of a miracle."

The encyclopedia includes many illustrations and photos. An excellent cross referencing technique is used — subjects mentioned in another entry (e.g., Salem witch trials in the "Mather, Cotton" entry) are boldfaced and explained in more detail in their own part. The only complaint I have about the illustrations is that some have not been "screened" properly and interfere with the printed words.

Randi's encyclopedia is informative and entertaining. His last part detailing 49 "end-of-the-world" prophecies that didn't come true is devastating. The book certainly does bear out his obsession with pursuing the truth, as suggested by the quote from Bertrand Russell that he included at the start: "What is wanted is not the will to believe but the wish to find out, which is the exact opposite."