

BOOK REVIEW
of
Denyse O’Leary,
By Design or by Chance?,
Castle Quay Books, 2004.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

Much has been written on the subjects of evolution, the origin of life, intelligent design, etc. Many think these are primarily scientific questions and leave it to scientists to figure out. Others see the religious implications and question the motives of those who argue one way or the other. In my opinion, Denyse O’Leary’s book is unique in her response to these questions. Her book presents the “big picture” perhaps better than anyone has done before. She asks the right questions, and attempts to give both sides of the each issue. Her presentation gives the sense of being fair and balanced. O’Leary is not a scientist but rather a journalist. This may be thought a disadvantage, but she has done a truly commendable job of investigating the issues, interviewing many people and tracking down source material, and investing a great deal of time and effort. Most books on these subjects are from a narrow scientific perspective, or from a theological point of view that is not as well informed about science as one could wish.

My opinion is supported by those knowledgeable in the subject area. From the back cover, Phillip Johnson endorses the book, referring to it as “a magnificent introduction to the people and issues involved in the greatest intellectual controversy of our time.” Jonathan Wells writes about O’Leary’s book that “Anyone who wants to get up to speed on this history-making controversy should read her book.” William Dembski writes that “Denyse O’Leary helps the nonspecialist reader to weigh this momentous option and come to the right conclusion.” And Timothy Standish writes “In a world where miracles are not suppose to happen, *By Design or by Chance?* may represent the impossible: a clearly written, thoroughly researched book that avoids the arm-waving, bluster and politics of the most controversial question in science – Where did we come from?”

Although O’Leary is careful not to state her own position emphatically, choosing to maintain the position of an impartial journalist, I think it is unavoidable but to conclude that she is on the side of design. Nevertheless, I think she has taken the higher path of attempting not to offend anyone unnecessarily, wanting them to stay with her as she presents the evidence. I don’t know how anyone could objectively read this book and conclude that a materialistic origin of life, with materialist evolution to follow, is the logical and only scientific position to hold. It certainly is not defensible as the only thing to teach in public schools on these scientifically controversial issues. That position, I believe, is untenable, and O’Leary helps a great deal to establish it as such.

The book has four parts and a total of sixteen chapters. Part One is *Was the Universe Created or Was it Always Here?* Part One has three chapters: 1. By Design or by Chance?. 2. The Best Arguments for Chance. 3. The Best Arguments for Design.

Part Two is *What About Life? Did it Start by Design or by Chance?*: 4. Why Design or Chance Matters so Much. 5. Who was Darwin? What did He Really say? 6. Who Loved Darwin? Who Hated Him? 7. The Scopes Trial: What Really Happened? 8. How Modern Evolutionists have Evolved away from Darwin. 9. Darwin’s Quarreling Heirs: Dawkins vs. Gould.

Part Three is *In the Beginning, There was . . . Creationism!*: 10. Creationism: Morphing into a Modern Movement. 11. Can a Scientist be a Creationist? 12. Why has Creationism been Growing?

Part Four is *Design . . . the Picture is Coming in*: 13. Intelligent Design: Why so Controversial? 14. Is ID Good Science? Is it Science at All? 15. Is ID Good Theology? Is it Theology at All? 16. The Future of Design.

In the Introduction, O’Leary states that “Modern culture, better known as ‘modernism,’ was the culture created by the theories of Darwin, Marx, and Freud. We humans were believed to be just an accident, living on a mediocre planet, circling a suburban star, in an irrelevantly repetitious universe. For culture, that means, among other things, ‘no God,’ ‘no meaning,’ ‘no purpose,’ and ‘no rules!’” So what was the response? O’Leary writes that “Many people, sensing a change in the wind, assume that the basic assumptions of modernism are false.” And yet, she writes, “Darwinism, the only type of evolution taught in most of our public schools, is based explicitly on the idea that life has no purpose and no design.” This is currently being mixed with post-modernism: rather than finding fault with modernism and going back to our Christian heritage, irrationalism has been embraced! To think, as some say, that evolution and origin of life are purely scientific questions is to be intentionally naive. “Indeed, some teachers have been forbidden even to bring up known problems with the theory. This is because modernism is the unacknowledged religion of tax-supported public school systems, and Darwinism is one of modernism’s most important teachings. Just you would not be permitted to argue against Christianity in the pulpit of a traditional church, so teachers are not permitted to argue against Darwinism in the lectern of a modernist school or university.” This by way of introduction. But what about the actual evidence?

In Part One, O’Leary presents a fascinating discussion of the best thoughts about the origin of the universe. This part, as well as the entire book, is very thoroughly referenced. The book is a delightful combination of scholarship and easy accessibility. On pages 22 and 23 she writes: “Based on scientific evidence alone, the assumption that there is a God who designed the universe is reasonable. It is *not* an act of faith, undertaken against the evidence. Arno Penzias, co-discoverer of the cosmic microwave background of the Big Bang in 1964, explains the situation like this: ‘Astronomy leads us to a unique event, a universe that was created out of nothing and delicately balanced to provide exactly the conditions required to support life. In the absence of an absurdly-improbable accident, the observations of modern science seem to suggest an underlying, one might say, supernatural plan.’” Note that O’Leary did not have to search the writings of radical, wild-eyed Christians that know nothing about science to find such a quote, but she quotes the co-discoverer of the cosmic microwave background: a highly noteworthy scientist. She does this sort of thing frequently throughout the book. She appears to be very well informed and well read.

In Chapter 8, footnote 45, O’Leary quotes noted evolutionist Michael Denton: “My fundamental problem with the theory (of evolution) is that there are so many highly complicated organs, systems and structures, from the nature of the lung of a bird, to the eye of the rock lobster, for which I cannot conceive of how these things have come about in terms of a gradual accumulation of random changes. It strikes me as being a flagrant denial of common sense to swallow that all these things were built up by accumulative small random changes. This is simply a nonsensical claim, especially for the great majority of cases, where nobody can think of any credible explanation of how it came about. And this is a very profound question which everybody skirts, everybody brushes over, everybody tries to sweep under the carpet.”

Quoting the even more noted evolutionist Stephen Jay Gould in Chapter 9, footnote 43: “The extreme rarity of transitional forms in the fossil record persists as the trade secret of paleontology. The evolutionary trees that adorn our textbooks have data only at the tips and nodes of their branches; the rest is inference, however reasonable, not the evidence of fossils.”

O’Leary makes a good case that Darwinism, and the philosophical naturalism (materialism) upon which it is based, is really a religious commitment and not science. The scientific elite that tend to have a great deal of influence would like us to believe that their beliefs are the result of pure scientific investigation, but such is not the case. O’Leary quotes A.G. Padgett, philosopher of science, in Chapter 16, footnote 15: “Some authors on both sides of the religion-science debate argue that natural science must include a ‘methodological naturalism.’ I should like to propose a bold hypothesis: there is no such thing as methodological naturalism in natural science. Rather, the term ‘methodological naturalism’ is always and everywhere a front for full-blown philosophical naturalism. Those who defend this ‘mere’ methodology always end up resorting to naturalism pure and simple.”

These are encouraging times, where Christians seem to be regaining their voice in proclaiming Christian truth in the public arena of ideas! How did we ever lose that voice? Much of the ground work has been done for us by non-Christians, simply on the basis of clear thinking and real evidence.