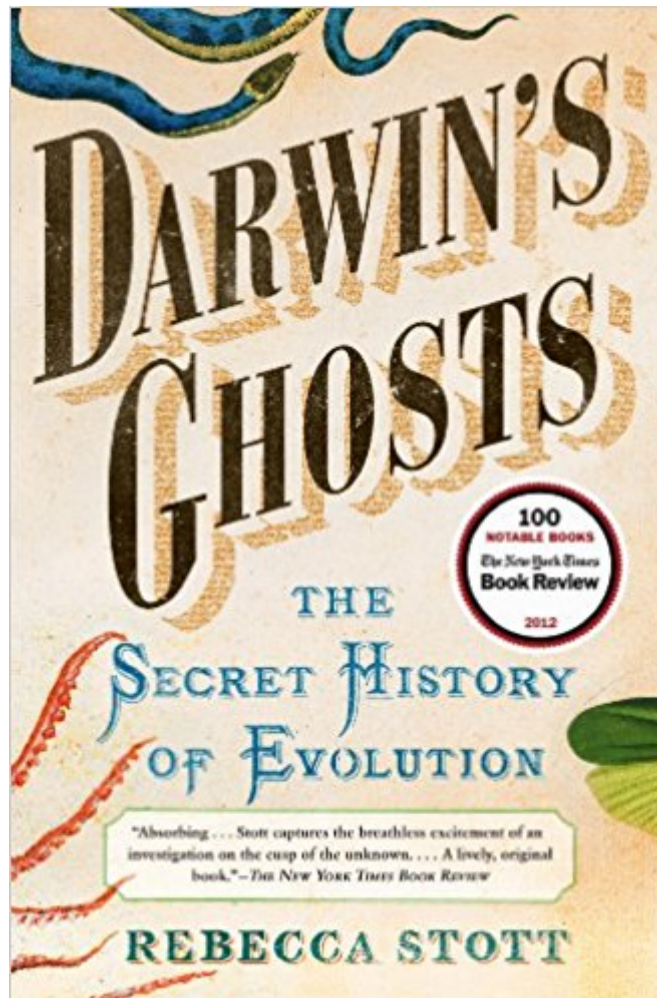


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# Darwin's Ghosts: The Secret History Of Evolution



## Synopsis

A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK “[An] extraordinarily wide-ranging and engaging book [about] the men who shaped the work of Charles Darwin . . . a book that enriches our understanding of how the struggle to think new thoughts is shared across time and space and people.” —*The Sunday Telegraph* (London) Christmas, 1859. Just one month after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin received an unsettling letter. He had expected criticism; in fact, letters were arriving daily, most expressing outrage and accusations of heresy. But this letter was different. It accused him of failing to acknowledge his predecessors, of taking credit for a theory that had already been discovered by others. Darwin realized that he had made an error in omitting from *Origin of Species* any mention of his intellectual forebears. Yet when he tried to trace all of the natural philosophers who had laid the groundwork for his theory, he found that history had already forgotten many of them. *Darwin’s Ghosts* tells the story of the collective discovery of evolution, from Aristotle, walking the shores of Lesbos with his pupils, to Al-Jahiz, an Arab writer in the first century, from Leonardo da Vinci, searching for fossils in the mine shafts of the Tuscan hills, to Denis Diderot in Paris, exploring the origins of species while under the surveillance of the secret police, and the brilliant naturalists of the Jardin de Plantes, finding evidence for evolutionary change in the natural history collections stolen during the Napoleonic wars. Evolution was not discovered single-handedly, Rebecca Stott argues, contrary to what has become standard lore, but is an idea that emerged over many centuries, advanced by daring individuals across the globe who had the imagination to speculate on nature’s extraordinary ways, and who had the courage to articulate such speculations at a time when to do so was often considered heresy. With each chapter focusing on an early evolutionary thinker, *Darwin’s Ghosts* is a fascinating account of a diverse group of individuals who, despite the very real dangers of challenging a system in which everything was presumed to have been created perfectly by God, felt compelled to understand where we came from. Ultimately, Stott demonstrates, ideas—including evolution itself—evolve just as animals and plants do, by intermingling, toppling weaker notions, and developing over stretches of time. *Darwin’s Ghosts* presents a groundbreaking new theory of an idea that has changed our very understanding of who we are. Praise for *Darwin’s Ghosts* —“Absorbing . . . Stott captures the breathless excitement of an investigation on the cusp of the unknown. . . . A lively, original book.” —*The New York Times Book Review* —“Stott’s research is broad and unerring; her book is wonderful. . . . An exhilarating romp through 2,000 years of fascinating scientific history.” —*Nature* —“Stott brings Darwin himself to life. . . .

[She] writes with a novelist's flair. . . . Darwin and the Ghosts so richly described in Ms. Stott's enjoyable book are the descendants of Aristotle and Bacon and the ancestors of today's scientists. •The Wall Street Journal

“Riveting . . . Stott has done a wonderful job in showing just how many extraordinary people had speculated on where we came from before the great theorist dispelled all doubts. •The Guardian (U.K.)

From the Hardcover edition.

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## Customer Reviews

A fascinating history, but it really shows how little others actually anticipated the idea of natural selection, though evolution was rather more broadly accepted. The author leaves out Anaxagoras and Thales among the ancient Greeks, for no reason I could understand. Nevertheless, a very interesting book.

Well written. Provides a real perspective on Darwin's predecessors, and how close they came or, in most cases, did not come to the key principle of natural selection. A number of earlier individuals

came up with the general idea of evolution, but Darwin was the first to provide a mechanism for the process. A good read if you are into the history of science.

Having read Darwin's "On the Origin of Species" in the 50s, This fits in very well. Don't read this book with a closed mind. I am now of the opinion that all religion is just superstition.

Rebecca Stott serves up an illuminating view of history with the back story of the struggle to present a scientific view of how we all came to be. I have to confess, my knowledge consisted of Charles Darwin publishing his ideas in "On the Origin of Species." Ms. Stott presents the history of all those who preceded Darwin, scientists who dared to present views on evolution, views which painted them as heretics and purveyors of dangerous speculations. The reader can only imagine the bravery of those who dared to publish what they believed to be fact, as their writings could ruin their careers as well as place their lives in danger. The author presents the story of these scientists (beginning with Aristotle in 344 BC) in an entertaining manner, and readers will gain much knowledge as they travel through the centuries and learn of discoveries of people we may not have ever heard of before. The book is an easy and fun read, and is anything but dry. Definitely a five-star journey.

Most of us know of Charles Darwin as the father of natural selection and some of us may have heard of Alfred Russel Wallace, a co-discoverer of natural selection and of J-B Lamarck who developed the "use it or lose it" school of evolution. But this is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of philosophers and scientists who studied evolution up until Darwin's discoveries. This book is not about Charles Darwin, but about the "Historical Sketch" he wrote to introduce Origin of the Species. It is about all the philosophers and scientists who preceded Darwin, dating as far back as Aristotle. This book filled in many blanks in my knowledge; it was one of the most informative books on the history of science I had read for a while. The only book that is its equal is the Egg and Sperm Race by Matthew Cobb. Darwin's Ghosts author Rebecca Skoot is an excellent writer. The book was fast-paced and it was hard to put down. I strongly recommend this book for anyone interested in the history of science.

Rebecca Stott has done an immense amount of research into the origins of Western evolutionary theory. Starting with Aristotle she takes us on an intellectual adventure filled with political upheavals and religious persecution. While the depth of her research is evident in the details she brings us

about the life of each natural philosopher, the book is never bogged down by detail. Instead, she manages to put the reader into the times and feel the excitement of the new ideas they're developing as well as their fear of imprisonment or death at the hands of the current government and church forces. This book would be a wonderful introduction in a college class on evolution and even more broadly on the history of science. I look forward to reading more works by Ms. Stott.

I enjoyed this. It adopted a very lay tone, and felt as though it was made to be enjoyed, which is fine and a welcome relief from some of the Darwinian literature out there. I didn't think that the history of evolution predating Darwin was all that secret, but Stott amplifies a lot of stories and provides color in the nature of the cultures which spawned proto-evolutionary theories.

Presents a lot of unfamiliar names and provides more depth to the history of natural selection/evolution. This book would have been really useful in high school or possibly even middle school. It's focus is more on reminding the reader of those who came before Darwin. Its easy to read.

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