Living Large in Nature: A Writer’s Idea of Creationism

by Reg Saner

reviewed by Lisa H Sideris

Reg Saner’s book Living Large in Nature: A Writer’s Idea of Creationism explores the concept of creation from a writer and nature lover’s perspective. The book is part memoir, part argument for the superior charms of a Darwinian view of life—not to mention the charms of the American West. Throughout this nontechnical and highly readable book, Saner celebrates creationism with a lowercase c, by which he means the creative process—a process of self-evolution and self-discovery—that occurs in and through the act of writing. Uppercase Creationism, and its more recent manifestations in “intelligent design” (ID), are examined and criticized at regular intervals throughout the book. Saner offers his own encounters with wonder in the natural world, and his experiences of self-evolution through writing, as examples of what living large—being more fully alive—might mean. He suggests parallels between the mysterious (at times, inexplicable) processes of creativity known to all writers and the ancient and ongoing processes of evolution all around us.

The motif of “largeness” recurs in various clever ways throughout the book. Saner reflects, for example, on his relocation from the flatlands and impoverished vistas of the Midwest to the wide open skies and breathtaking mountain glory of the American West. Western landscapes seem naturally to evoke feelings of awe and openness to ideas on a much grander scale. One such grand idea is evolution. Saner recounts his Creationist (in the usual sense of the word) childhood in a bleak and uninspiring Midwestern town: “even on the clearest days,” he recalls, “I couldn’t see the world from there.” In winter months, “bleakness over vistas of ploughed furrows induced a subspecies of Arctic melancholia … your heart would struggle not to feel like a coal mine” (p 12). Open skies, he suggests, may facilitate open minds, for they engender in us “interrogative moods” (p 116). Saner acknowledges (in a way) the absurdity of claiming the West to be objectively superior to the Midwest. Still, as a Midwesterner myself (by birth and at least partly by choice), I found his appraisal of the aesthetic and intellectual deficits of my bioregion a tad condescending.

Saner seems to relish giving a bit of offense now and again; in this respect, his writing exhibits some of the swagger and self-congratulatory posturing characteristic of Darwin defenders such as Richard Dawkins. The image of the closed-off world of a coal mine is suggested again in Saner’s frequent recourse to the imagery of Plato’s cave allegory. He likens Creationists to Platonic cave-dwellers who prefer the shadowy retreat of the cave to the bright light of truth and enlightenment that beckons just beyond. The idea that Creationism is rooted exclusively in fear and delusion shapes Saner’s negative view of religion in general—even while he hails his own writing as essentially religious. “Every god,” he observes, “is born of our fears and wishes” (p 41). Some of Saner’s talking points on religion seem
to come straight from Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, and are equally innocent of any actual theorizing with regard to religion, its meaning, history, or function (aside from simplistic accounts of religion's alleged role in maximizing evolutionary fitness. Saner suggests, for example, that humans' preoccupation with a deity who is up above us somewhere stems from an ingrained mammalian association of size with dominance. This theory is corroborated by the fact that women prefer to mate with tall men. *Et voilà*: behold Saner's “theology of up”). Readers already familiar with Dawkins's extended diatribe will find nothing new in Saner's portrait of the Biblical God as a vengeful, narcissistic, bloodthirsty, and jealous tyrant. Saner chronicles God's genocidal activities and mocks the image of a “divine Sky Cop” (p 35) whose teachings mandate death by stoning, and whose son, Jesus, assails all family values. In one gratuitous aside, he suggests similarities between Christian faith and the certitude of suicide bombers bent on indiscriminate death and mutilation (p 62). To be fair, and as Saner notes, some Creationists rush headlong into such associations as well, linking Darwin's theory to the evils of Nazism, eugenics, and such extreme acts of violence as the slayings at Columbine High School (p 91). Still, hurling epithets back and forth does little to capture hearts and minds, as a good writer ought to know. “In a nutshell, Creationists simply can't stand the facts of life,” Saner concludes. “That's why they throw hissy fits” (p 4). Such insights, if they can be called that, are not worthy of a writer of Saner's stature.

A more nuanced understanding of the forces that contribute to Creationism or “intelligent design” might reveal motives other than simple fear and a stubborn preference for ignorance. Saner maintains that ID proponents reject Darwin's theory because they do not want nature to matter so much. They seek to preserve a space for divine creativity. Yet the wave that ID rode in on is part of a larger dissatisfaction with the materialist excesses of neo-Darwinism. ID's objections are not so different from those of other theologians (for example, process theologians who accept Darwinian theory) who take issue with what they see as the reductionist, materialist philosophy (and not mere methodology) that grounds neo-Darwinism. Though ID has pursued a different path, insisting that its alternative be taught as science in the classroom, its misgivings are not idiosyncratic. Many a commentator on the culture wars has noted that ID would not have such a receptive audience were it not for a vocal subset of Darwinists who proclaim organisms, including humans, to be machines programmed by genes—and then treat all objections to such characterizations as a simple failure of courage in the face of facts. There is no doubt that ID fails utterly as science; its mysterious processes of irreducible complexity are asserted rather than scientifically explained and defended. But its motivations are complex and are shared by others who bear Darwin no particular animus but wish to restore enchantment, mystery, or wonder to natural processes (even if doing so necessitates invoking a *deus ex machina*, as it apparently does for ID). Indeed, an understanding of evolution as a creative, surprising, and somewhat mysterious force seems close to Saner's heart. Saner's insistence on describing complex human and animal behaviors as “encoded” is puzzling, and does little to convey his obvious sense of awe before the creative, autonomous forces at work in the universe and in the writer's own mind.

While I doubt that fear is the fount of all religious rejoinders to Darwin's theory, Saner may be right that widespread flight from evolution has something to do with the ego-crushing effects of an evolutionary worldview. Evolution undercuts the idea that the world is made with us in mind, but for all that it takes away, it offers a universe more strange and won-
drous than anything humans could imagine, Saner argues. I agree with him. Yet, if wonder engenders humility, there is not much evidence of that particular sensibility in Saner’s writing. Not infrequently, he describes his amazement at the greatness of his own writing. While he credits the outpouring of creativity to a mysterious process almost beyond, or other than, the self, a surprising percentage of Saner’s book is nevertheless devoted to Saner: his past achievements as a writer, his awe at his own creative process and products; his recounting of his own pithy, punchy ripostes aimed at Creationists and other ignorant opponents in his path. This seems an odd focus for a book that seeks to celebrate nature’s power to decenter humans and their egoistic or small-minded preoccupations.

Readers may be intrigued, as I was, by Saner’s discussion of the atomic bomb (“Arias and atom bombs”), and the decidedly aesthetic attractions it held for physicist Robert Oppenheimer—though precisely why Saner includes this discussion remains somewhat unclear to me. Saner seems to offer it as an example of how the process of writing unexpectedly altered him (that is, Saner) and his perceived relationship to the bomb. Drawing on an essay he wrote decades ago, Saner shows how Oppenheimer’s sense of beauty played a critical role in the development of the bomb. Oppenheimer was irresistibly drawn to the “technically sweet” puzzle of how to create such a device, just as he was drawn to the enchanted landscape of New Mexico where the first bomb was detonated. Beauty and wonder, it seems, may be turned to unimaginably destructive ends. Saner reflects on the duality of human nature—our predatory and our cooperative sides—as revealed in this paradox. One might expect that this glimpse of the dark side of human nature would lead Saner to temper his great enthusiasm for science as the clear path to enlightenment and salvation. Not so. Readers will search the book in vain for any acknowledgement that science—and not just religion—sometimes provides a ready vehicle for humans’ darker impulses. Nor does Saner seem aware that for every prominent ID advocate who instructs the faithful that Darwinism equals atheism, there is a prominent scientist or science writer celebrating that same simple equation. In the end, Saner’s book is a sermon to the converted. I doubt that it will succeed in dragging any Creationist cave-dwellers into the bright light of evolution, though it may convince some melancholy Midwesterners to strike out for sunny Colorado.

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