



REVIEW

Among the Creationists: Dispatches from the Anti-Evolutionist Front Line

by Jason Rosenhouse

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reviewed by **Taner Edis**

Jason Rosenhouse, who teaches mathematics at James Madison University, might at first seem an unlikely person to be interested in the creationism/evolution wars. Creationism is a constant nuisance for biologists and geologists, and to a lesser degree for other natural scientists. Social scientists can find creationism to be a fascinating part of the American cultural landscape. But the denial of evolution rarely interferes with the life of a mathematician. And yet, as not only a mathematician but a Jewish atheist coming from a very different background than a typical conservative Christian troubled by evolution, Rosenhouse has produced one of the most readable, interesting, and different books about creationism that has appeared in many years.

Rosenhouse appears to have been drawn to investigate creationism largely because it was so strange to him at first. *Among the Creationists* contains many fascinating stories of his encounters with young-earth creationists and “intelligent design” proponents; indeed, the book is structured around a series of recent anti-evolution conferences he attended. These conferences frame both Rosenhouse’s observations about creationism in the context of conservative religion and the deeper intellectual questions prompted by these adventures among the creationists.

Rosenhouse’s blend of personal observation and probing investigation of scientific and philosophical questions is what makes the book such a delight. Precisely because creationism can appear so absurd from an academic standpoint, there is a danger of ignoring the intellectual concerns that animate creationists, or to treat evolution-deniers as fundamentalist caricatures. Rosenhouse never falls into such traps. He is invariably respectful of anti-evolutionary ideas—while being careful to explain exactly why they fail, he makes a genuine effort to understand the intellectual appeal they hold for many creationists. For example, starting with describing the well-funded, professionally presented Creation Museum in Kentucky, Rosenhouse goes on to explore theological concerns about evil in the world and the notion of a “curse” on creation. And then, he goes on to address why theologically liberal attempts to endorse evolution as a way of distancing a creator from the suffering in our world seem unconvincing—both to conservative Christians and to those standing outside the Christian tradition such as Rosenhouse himself.

Such discussions illustrate one of the most impressive aspects of *Among the Creationists*. The literature on evolution, theology, and philosophy is immense. And yet, in the space of a handful of pages, Rosenhouse invariably touches on almost all the important arguments,

cites representative and up-to-date examples from the relevant literature, and concisely and with a minimum of jargon presents his own conclusions. Not all his readers will always agree—I had my occasional minor gripes, even though our views on creationism and the significance of Darwinian evolution for debates concerning the reality of supernatural agency are very similar. But it would be hard to find fault with how Rosenhouse guides readers through this complicated intellectual landscape.

Since Rosenhouse does not just present his encounters with creationists but uses creationism as a device to develop his own views on science and religion, the result is not always identical to the liberal consensus view endorsed by organizations such as the NCSE. Since evolution is culturally controversial in the United States, defending science education relies on a complex, sometimes awkward, political coalition. Polls suggest that even Americans who accept evolution usually have a non-Darwinian process in mind. Doubtless many of them imagine evolution to be an explicitly guided, progressive process. So support for evolution education is in some respects remarkably shallow, relying on the acquiescence of a religiously liberal population that dislikes fundamentalist attitudes but dubiously tries to respect both the current state of natural science and deep-seated intuitions of intelligent design manifested in life. As Rosenhouse explores the significance of creation and evolution for supernatural beliefs, he directly and indirectly ends up criticizing liberal guided-evolution views as much as overt opposition to evolution.

Therefore *Among the Creationists* perhaps inadvertently also raises some difficult questions. Public arguments over creation and evolution are motivated primarily by politics or defense of a conservative Christian subculture, not really about science. And so, those of us who want to preserve the integrity of science education, or who just want a quiet life, feel most comfortable asserting a standard liberal consensus view. And yet, gently but firmly, Rosenhouse makes it clear that much in this liberal consensus—its hard boundaries between science and nonscience, its assertion of a cheap compatibility between Darwinian evolution and an anthropomorphic God in charge—is intellectually very shaky.

So, on the one hand, I would love to recommend a book such as *Among the Creationists* to anyone interested in the creationism/evolution wars. Even readers professionally interested in creationism will find much that is fresh in Rosenhouse's writing. And others, for example bright college students intellectually intrigued by the debate that surrounds them, will find *Among the Creationists* to be very readable and to the point. Rosenhouse's forthright examination of exactly the sorts of questions students wrestle with would, I think, be invigorating, regardless of whether they agree with him.

But on the other hand, I have a paranoid streak, and I do want a quiet life. Though I agree with Rosenhouse that the liberal consensus view on science and religion has many intellectual flaws, it also seems politically indispensable to maintain a coalition in favor of teaching evolution. So even after reading Rosenhouse, I harbor contradictory hopes. I hope that those around me who have serious scientific and philosophical interests in the phenomenon of creationism read *Among the Creationists* and seriously engage with its arguments. I think that more often than not they will find Rosenhouse to be persuasive. But I also hope that politically, the liberal consensus remains strong enough to do its job. Rosenhouse's subtle undermining of this consensus, even though I largely agree with him, leaves me somewhat worried.

But then, a good book should be thought-provoking. It should, perhaps, leave readers with a few uncomfortable questions. Rosenhouse succeeds admirably.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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