Creation: How Darwin Saw the World and Changed it Forever

directed by Jon Amiel
Santa Monica (CA): Lionsgate, 2009. 108 minutes

Darwin’s Darkest Hour

directed by John Bradshaw
Washington (DC): National Geographic Television, 2009. 90 minutes

reviewed by Timothy H Goldsmith

These accounts of Darwin's life share some common threads. Both make a sustained effort to inform the viewer about how Darwin worked and his fundamental contributions to science. Both present a picture of Darwin's domestic life, his relationship with his wife, their contrasting religious beliefs, and their loss of children to infectious diseases for which the 19th century had no cure. Both address the crisis presented to Darwin by the letter from Alfred Russel Wallace in 1858, which revealed that Wallace had independently hit upon the central idea behind natural selection. Despite these similar themes, the films paint two starkly different pictures.

Creation is a screen adaptation of the book Annie's Box: Charles Darwin, His Daughter and Human Evolution by Randal Keynes, a great-great-grandson of Darwin. The “box” holds a collection of keepsakes of Annie, the Darwins’ oldest daughter and their second child, who died at the age of 10; however, making the box and Annie so central to the story imposed some boundary conditions on the screenwriters. Perhaps because of these confines, I found Creation at best a narrow and at worst a distorted picture of Darwin (played by Paul Bettany). His chronic illness as an adult was manifest physically largely as a gastric disorder, but in Creation it melds into a hallucinatory psychosis so disabling that Darwin sees writhing creatures in his jars of pickled specimens and has to be literally dragged out of bed by his friend the botanist Joseph Hooker in order to write. The moral aspects of his dilemma about how to react to the preemption by Wallace of his life’s work seem muted, and his immediate response to the letter from Wallace is bizarre laughter. Darwin then angers the local minister in a sharp exchange in the garden by pointing out that nature works in ways that are hard to reconcile with a loving God. In Darwin's Darkest Hour, the same exchange occurs in a quiet conversation with Emma.

The death of Annie was a great loss to both parents, but it occurred in 1851, seven years before Wallace’s letter arrived. You would not know this in watching Creation, in which Annie's death and a rift with Emma seem to be at the heart of Darwin's problems in 1858. The central role of Annie in the film also underplays Darwin's involvement with his other children.
Almost from the outset *Creation* toys with history. In a story Darwin tells Annie, we get a distorted account of FitzRoy's motives in capturing several Fuegians, including two young children. What happened is both more complex and more interesting than Darwin's supposed telling to his young daughter. (FitzRoy did not, as suggested, buy Fuegian children for the purpose of taking them to England. He did capture four Fuegians over a period of time, two of whom were young children, but his motives were to recover a stolen boat. The decision to take them to England came later when he could not recover the boat. It may indeed have been a bad decision, but I don't think Darwin would have told the story the way it appears here.)

*Creation* is not successful in presenting the elegance and power of natural selection as a creative natural process. The comparison of artificial and natural selection is clear enough in scenes in Darwin's pigeon loft, but the message may be visually compromised for some viewers. Darwin's experimental efforts to remove the flesh from the skeletons of deceased birds by soaking them corrosive solutions is shown dramatically while giving the viewer no information why this was being done. More importantly, Thomas Henry Huxley makes a brief and peppery appearance to argue that the importance of Darwin's work is in revealing the false nature of theological explanations of nature. This may be vintage Huxley, but the conversation frames the science in a confrontational manner that fuels the psychological drama portrayed in *Creation* while doing little to improve the viewer's understanding of the evidence for descent with modification and the process of natural selection.

The illustration on the box containing the disk and the title *Creation* are misleading enticements. Darwin is seated on the floor with a young orangutan that was in the London Zoo at the time and was observed by Darwin. Their arms are extended, with index fingers almost touching, suggesting Michelangelo's ceiling in the Sistine Chapel. Whether the illustration was made to go with the title or the other way around is hard to say. The ape is a bit player, and the image a tease, symbolic of the film's cavalier approach to both history and science.

The contrast with *Darwin's Darkest Hour* (with Henry Ian Cusick in the title role) is striking. Here most of the story takes place in the two weeks between the arrival of Wallace's letter and the decision to proceed with a publication based on Darwin's decades of work. The viewer's understanding of Darwin's scientific contributions is greatly enriched with informative flashbacks. These occur during conversations with Emma, who is determined that her husband find an honorable solution to the problem of Wallace's letter without sacrificing his own priority. We learn much about Darwin's life before the voyage of the *Beagle* and many of the people with whom he interacted: his father, his uncle (Emma's father), Captain FitzRoy of the *Beagle*, the geologist Charles Lyell, the botanist (and Darwin's close friend) Joseph Hooker, and the ornithologist John Gould. The prod from the Scottish biologist Robert Grant, which occurred while Darwin was escaping from his medical studies at Edinburgh, provides an interesting and I believe accurate view of Darwin's thinking at that point in his life. Through these several lenses we see Darwin's maturing understanding of the power of geological forces, the influence of Malthus, the concept of natural selection and its analog in animal husbandry, the role of geographical isolation, the capacity of seeds to survive ocean rafting and still germinate, as well as the evidence that Darwin had shared a written summary of his conclusions with Hooker a dozen years before the arrival of Wallace's letter.
Darwin’s chronic illness as well as his fond memories of Annie are handled without making either the center of the story, and there is a balance between Darwin’s joy in interacting with his children and tragic loss of two of them. During the Wallace crisis, another daughter was dangerously ill, and the infant Charles died of scarlet fever. The difference with Emma over religion is presented respectfully and with the knowledge that it was an open difference from the time they were married. In both this film and (ultimately) in Creation, Darwin has Emma’s support in publishing what they both know may be a source of trouble, but in Darwin’s Darkest Hour the success of their marriage never seems to be in doubt.

To summarize, Darwin’s Darkest Hour is not only far richer in the development of Darwin’s thinking, but also—it seems to this viewer—built on more solid historical ground. It also offers a more elegant presentation of evolution by natural selection, often accompanied by stunning photography.

About the Author

Timothy H Goldsmith is Professor Emeritus of Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology at Yale University. He is the author of The Biological Roots of Human Nature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) and, with William Zimmerman, Biology, Evolution, and Human Nature (New York: Wiley, 2000). He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a former chair of the board of Biological Sciences Curriculum Study.

Author’s Address

Timothy H Goldsmith
Department of Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology
Yale University
New Haven CT 06520
timothy.goldsmith@yale.edu