Anarchy Evolution: Faith, Science, and Bad Religion in a World without God

by Greg Graffin and Steve Olson

reviewed by Richard P Meisel

Greg Graffin is the lead singer of Bad Religion, one of the seminal punk bands to come out of Los Angeles in the early 1980s. He also has a PhD in the biological sciences. This combination of punk rock star and scientist is surprisingly common (McCook 2011), but what makes Graffin unique is the way he disseminates his worldview. Like other lyricists, he allows his personal philosophy to permeate his songs. In addition to his songwriting, however, Graffin has turned to academic and popular writing to explore his personal brand of atheism, which he calls “naturalism”.

Graffin's PhD dissertation described the religious beliefs of evolutionary biologists (Graffin 2003). In his new book, Anarchy Evolution, Graffin (along with science writer Steve Olson) presents his own naturalistic worldview in semi-autobiographical form. In addition to Graffin's philosophy and biography, the authors also mix in brief introductions to evolutionary biology. Each component is compelling in its own right—Graffin has led a renaissance life, he has honestly reflected on his personal philosophy, and NCSE members would agree that evolution is a fascinating subject—but the connections among these elements often come off as contrived.

For much of his life, Graffin has divided his time between punk rock and science. Bad Religion was founded when Graffin was in high school. Unlike many other Los Angeles punks, however, Graffin managed to stay out of legal trouble and avoid drug abuse. After riding the late-1970s/early-1980s popularity of punk rock, Bad Religion's productivity waned in the mid-1980s, in part because Graffin enrolled in college. After graduating from UCLA, Graffin took a job as an assistant preparator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History. Bad Religion began recording albums again in the late 1980s, around the same time Graffin started his graduate training at UCLA. After earning his master's degree in geology, Graffin started working toward a PhD at Cornell University. Meanwhile, Bad Religion became international rock stars.

Anarchy Evolution describes the parallel progression of Graffin's musical and scientific careers. The fact that each is presented achronologically is not the least bit distracting, and Graffin's experiences make for compelling stories. For example, the authors describe an expedition to the Amazon Basin where Graffin was responsible for shooting and trapping wildlife to document the local fauna. When he was sent on the expedition, Graffin had just finished college and had yet to do any serious fieldwork. The interactions between the various scientists were far from collegial, correcting the idealistic view of the process of
science that Graffin previously possessed. To add insult to injury, the expedition came to an end when a coup overthrew the Bolivian government, and Graffin escaped to Trinidad in a two-seat Cessna. He had to leave all of his specimens in South America, making the trip a scientific failure.

Portions of Graffin's biography are found in each chapter, and the parts about Graffin's musical career are equally enthralling as his scientific adventures. Unfortunately, the authors end the stories with clumsily constructed morals that are usually implicit in the stories themselves. These morals are often used to segue between the biographical components of the book and the more philosophical points, but such deliberate transitions are unnecessary. Instead, they have the effect of turning Graffin's biography into a series of fables, as though the authors do not trust the reader to extract the take-home messages on his or her own.

Graffin and Olson give a similar treatment to the portions of the book introducing evolutionary concepts. The introductions to evolutionary biology in Anarchy Evolution are by no means comprehensive; for that readers should turn to books by Richard Dawkins, Stephen Jay Gould, Sean B Carroll, or Carl Zimmer. And while some biologists may disagree with the details presented in Anarchy Evolution (such as possible overstatures of the importance of epigenetics), I found the authors' treatment of evolution to be solid for the most part. As with the biographical components, however, the authors insert forced connections between evolutionary biology and Graffin's personal philosophy that are more jarring interruptions than smooth transitions.

This brings up the question: for whom is Anarchy Evolution intended? I would recommend it to fans of Bad Religion (and Greg Graffin) who are not very familiar with evolutionary biology. Because the book is loaded with stories from Graffin's biography (including the founding of Bad Religion) and descriptions of Graffin's personal philosophy (with obvious connections to Bad Religion lyrics), it is likely to capture the interests of punk audiences. Once they are pulled in by these components, they will receive a few short lessons on evolution. Perhaps this introduction will inspire them to explore additional books that delve further into some of the evolutionary concepts discussed in Anarchy Evolution.

REFERENCES

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