The Explanation for Everything

by Lauren Grodstein
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reviewed by Laurel Saiz

Lauren Grodstein never does give us “the explanation for everything” in her new novel, The Explanation for Everything. That’s in part because the nicely-crafted novel skillfully maintains a reader’s attention with several well-developed and parallel storylines. Different characters experience different journeys and arrive at markedly different places. One conclusive ending would thus be too pat and contrived.

It’s also good that The Explanation for Everything doesn’t provide the “answer to everything.” A book like that would read more like a morality tale or a tract. This book is neither of those. As a whole, it is a compelling and engrossing work of fiction, with science and faith as continuing themes. This isn’t to say that the book is entirely spot-on. In a couple of places, the characters’ decisions about accepting evolution and their about-faces regarding God and religion are groaningly implausible. That doesn’t detract, though, from the book’s overall readability and engaging accessibility.

The Explanation for Everything is primarily the story of Andy Waite, a researcher and biology professor in a small, second-tier college in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. Andy’s career has not taken off the way it should have, given his early promise and connections. Underfunded, marginal Exton Reed College is “small, but also perversely overcrowded” and “ringed by parking lots and the bait-and-tackles and convenience stores of Reed Township.” A hotbed of intellectual inquiry it is not.

Andy’s life plans and expectations were waylaid by the unexpected death of his wife. It’s a sign of Grodstein’s craft that her death is introduced with fleeting and tantalizing references early on, before being explained about a quarter of the way into the tale. The novelist can certainly hook a reader! The ramifications of the tragedy continue to appear in various guises as the book progresses; a related story with an unseen side character continues until the novel’s dénouement.

Thus, several narrative threads weave together key people from Andy’s past and current circumstances: two current students, a local divorcee, an imprisoned man, a leading scientist, and the scientist’s tragic protégée.

Andy’s inspiration was Henry Rosenblum, now a Princeton University emeritus professor and one of the recurring characters. It was Rosenblum, Grodstein writes, who “guided Andy’s research through generations of mice and endless revised papers … And it was under Rosenblum that Andy became an avowed and devoted atheist, seeking out, like his mentor, the superstitious gaze of the Believer wherever it roamed and staring it down in an unlosable game of chicken” (pages 8–9).
Rosenblum is clearly a Richard Dawkins-like evolutionary biologist and unapologetic atheist. Rosenblum’s best-selling book *Religion’s Dangerous Lie* conjures up Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*, and his thinking mirrors that of Dawkins’s *The Selfish Gene* and *The Extended Phenotype*. Grodstein writes about Andy, “he could hear Rosenblum in his ear: *The only thing that motivates us is the preservation of our genes. Religion itself is a response to that need to preserve. And there are clearly no lengths to which our DNA will not go to preserve itself—building a cathedral is nothing compared to outwitting several ice ages*” (pages 225–226, emphasis in original).

But Rosenblum is a now a fallen academic and a reviled public figure after a scandal involving another mentee, a young Korean-American student named Anita Lim. It is another testament to Grodstein’s ability as a writer that the events surrounding Rosenblum and Lim are alluded to and then parsed out in intriguing stages, adroitly maintaining the book’s suspense.

Andy hasn’t seen Rosenblum in years, but from him, Andy may have gotten his certainly about his beliefs. On the first day of every semester, Andy writes on the blackboard: “1. Evolution is the explanation for everything. 2. Darwin was right. 3. And people who don’t believe Darwin are wrong” (page 19). For the necessary dramatic tension in the novel, the only students who show any spark of excitement and interest in Andy’s class are, as could be expected, two students who don’t buy that “Darwin was right.”

One student, Lionel Shell, is the thorn in Andy’s side, earnest and engaged, but also provocative and irritating. Lionel is “a skinny devout Christian from rural Delaware who had taken the course three semesters ago as a sophomore, and who had spent those fourteen weeks alternately glowering at Andy and raising his hand with a passion that dragged him halfway across his desk” (page 20). Now Lionel is back in the class, mostly to goad his professor. Lionel takes to standing in the hallway outside Andy’s office with a sign saying “Genesis 1:1” hanging around his neck.

More likeable is Melissa Potter, a warm and genuine student who approaches Andy because she wants him to sign on to oversee an independent study on “intelligent design.” Grodstein does poor Melissa no favors in the looks department, describing her as “awkwardly built, of course, tall, thick, and broad—had she been born a boy she might have been a linebacker—but, in the way of certain homely girls, she had a smile that lit up her entire face” (page 142).

In her academic quest, Melissa poses all the arguments familiar to those who follow the evolution culture wars. Melissa asks, “But Darwinism is unprovable too, right? ... It’s just a theory too—I mean they call it the theory of evolution, don’t they?” (pages 29–30). Andy rejoins with the response that many readers of the book will immediately think in their heads when hearing this “it’s only a theory” cliché: “Ah, this old chestnut. ‘But when scientists use the word theory, they don’t mean something that can’t be explained. They call it the ‘theory of gravity,’ for instance, but the force of gravity isn’t open to debate” (page 30, emphasis in original).

In the conversations with her independent study professor—yes, he does agree to it!—Melissa rolls out all the tropes intelligent design proponents present with such regularity. The “irreducible complexity” of the eye. The chemical defenses of the bombardier beetle. The
heart of the giraffe. She gamely, but politely, argues with Andy, “But to think that random mutations could be so miraculously beneficial as to create the eye, the wing, the lung—can’t you see how silly that is?” (page 110).

The go-to prop of the intelligent design movement—the bacterial flagellum—is here as well, in a brief mention very late in the book. Was this another intentional move, I wondered, to keep the sustained interest of those readers who have followed the creationists’ repeated and tired efforts and Michael's Behe’s favorite bit of “evidence” in the 2005 Pennsylvania school board case, Kitzmiller v Dover? (For a good chuckle, read Matthew Chapman’s 40 Days and 40 Nights: Darwin, Intelligent Design, God, Oxycontin, and Other Oddities on Trial in Pennsylvania. Chapman, Charles Darwin’s great-great-grandson, covered the trial and writes, “When the ghastly specter of the bacterial flagellum once again reared up in court, the spectators groaned, and Judge Jones muttered amiably, ‘We’ve seen that...’” [Chapman 2008:244].)

All that’s missing from Melissa’s arsenal is the oft-repeated hemoglobin argument, but the student has something else to help her win her case, if not in the independent study, then with Andy as a human being. She is patient, kind and understanding and begins to become more and more involved with his personal life, babysitting Andy’s two daughters and joining them on family outings.

Melissa also gives Andy some “intelligent design literature” and religious books, including the juvenile and upbeat-sounding God Is a Rainbow. (A stand-in for Of Pandas and People?) Andy recognizes it for its corniness. He notes the cheaply bound cover with “a blurrily printed rainbow with a pot of gold at one end and a cross at the other.” Inexplicably, though, he’s drawn to the book. He peruses it as he moves closer to crossing the line of professor-student impropriety with Melissa.

Even harder to swallow is the intense reversal on the part of poor Anita Lim. Grodstein tells Lim’s story—and ultimate tragedy—through the literary technique of first-person letters and manuscripts written by her and Hank Rosenblum. (Elsewhere, Grodstein includes some of Andy’s letters to other people to help flesh out the various developing narratives.) Lim was preternaturally brilliant and the verge of a major scientific breakthrough. She is described with all sorts of hyperbole. In one of the texts-within-the-text, Rosenblum tells Andy that Lim was sequencing the genomes of viruses that might have helped build “the first DNA molecules on the earth over a billion years ago.” She was close! Rosenblum asserts, “I believed, given enough time, that Anita would have exposed the foundation of life on earth” (page 200).

Alas, that was not to be. What turned Lim from this pursuit is a plot contrivance that serves as one of the most climactic sequences in the novel. Melodramatic, yes. Easy to accept given her scientific dedication? No.

More convincing is the story arc with Andy’s neighbor Sheila, a divorcée with a small son and a history of alcoholism. Here, too, are parallels in the story. Andy’s ongoing research project involves using lab mice to study alcoholism and the brain. Rather than Guinea pigs or lab rates, here is a person in the flesh whom Andy can observe grappling with the
lure and effects of alcohol. Andy's involvement with Sheila is not as flamboyant as that of Rosenblum's with Anita Lim, but it is true-to-life.

In *The Explanation for Everything*, the descriptions of the town and college settings, the seen and unseen characters’ thoughts and memories, and the day-to-day interactions often feel exactly right. The parts with Sheila are among the most believable.

By looking at Andy and the people in his life, we know that humans often resist and step back from someone who might be a logical choice for relationship. Likewise, we know that people often make the worst, ill-conceived choices in their private lives—ones that outsiders with a more objective, rational mind would avoid with a ten-foot pole.

As a reviewer, I purposefully did not read anything about Grodstein's background that would indicate what the author's motivation was. Anti-creationist screed? A fundamentalist Christian Trojan horse disguised as a book exploring concepts about evolution?

My guess as to Grodstein's message? Having a belief in a higher order is nice and might be comforting. Science and Darwin's theory of natural selection can answer a lot of truly profound questions, but at the end of the day, they can't help you develop sound romantic or family relationships.

**References**


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