

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

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### FOLLOW THE EVIDENCE

**By Design or By Chance? The Growing Controversy on the Origins of Life in the Universe.** Denyse O’Leary. 2004. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers. 337 p. ISBN: 0-8066-5177-6. \$15.99.

*Reviewed by Henry Zuill*

Denyse O’Leary writes professionally about science, religion, and faith, and yet she admits she had no clear convictions on Darwinism and Intelligent Design (ID) before writing *By Design or By Chance?* Having completed this book, she now describes herself as “post-Darwinian.” While accepting change over time, she finds Darwinism to be an inadequate explanation.

While working on *By Design or by Chance?*, O’Leary discovered gaps in what many see as rock-solid evidence supporting evolution. Moreover, she accuses Darwinists of unscientific misbehavior. She especially puts ultra-Darwinist Richard Dawkins under the gun for his extreme rhetoric (p 238). While she found evidence for design compelling, she was clearly unimpressed upon discovering Darwinists engaging in the very transgressions of which they accuse creationists.

O’Leary’s writing is engaging and well crafted, rich with well-chosen words that cleanly and cleverly present twists and turns in the history of ideas about origins. For example, she recounts the story of Darwin’s Bulldog, Thomas Huxley, who excitedly and mistakenly concluded that deep-sea ooze was somewhere between non-living and living (p 41-42). She tersely writes, “So, for the first time in history, Darwin’s colleagues had solved the mystery of life. As it turns out, for the last time, too.”

*By Design Or By Chance* is not highly technical while at the same time avoiding inaccuracies inherent in oversimplification. It fills an

important niche, making information delightfully available to non-experts — and “experts” as well. Definitions, time lines, and salient quotations in sidebars and boxes, along with copious endnotes and a thorough index, are helpful, particularly for interested, but otherwise uninitiated, readers. The “Afterword” is especially valuable, bringing O’Leary’s argument and new direction of thinking into succinct focus. It appears she has tried very hard to be fair and balanced, and from this upright stance, in the end, she gives the nod to design. Readers may not always agree in every way with what they read, but they cannot fault her integrity.

O’Leary chronicles the *modern* design movement, logically beginning with cosmology; clearly laying out evidence suggesting the “Big Bang,” explaining the discovery of, and controversy over the Anthropic Principle and the Rare Earth concept. Then comes overwhelming biochemical complexity in cells — unanticipated by the early Darwinists (this misunderstanding was at the heart of Huxley’s blunder over deep-sea ooze) — leading to the recent revolutionary ID movement. She notes that life is chemistry and physics, but most importantly information (p 53) — and, it seems, this information extends beyond genes. Most biologists are only beginning to grasp the implications of this idea.

O’Leary tackles theological questions about ID in Chapter 15: “Is ID Good Theology? Is It Theology At All?” ID is different from its earlier counterpart — Paley’s more idealistic natural theology. She quotes William Dembski when explaining that real design is a compromise between competing objectives (p 216). It might be added that even if the original creation was “perfect,” it is now degenerate. These details are important when placing ID correctly within the spectrum of ideas about origins. While things in nature do not need to be perfect from our perspective to be intelligently designed, she quotes Stephen Meyer to point out that intelligently designed systems “...possess features that in any other realm of experience would trigger the recognition of an intelligent cause” (p 210).

Darwinists and theistic evolutionists find ID repugnant for obvious reasons. But others, among whom are some Young Earth Creationists (YECs), have scarcely more regard for it. Nevertheless, individuals from these, and other persuasions, are finding comfortable lodging under the ID “big tent.” A major and seemingly wrong-headed concern among some YECs is that ID does not specifically identify the designer. ID

proponents are cautious; they do not say the designer is God. O’Leary writes: “The design does not tell us who the designer is” (p 207). Empirical evidence is limited in what it says about the nature of the designer, and thus from that standpoint, cannot specifically be equated with the Judeo-Christian God without invoking revelation. Nevertheless, in Scripture God is by definition the Designer (i.e., Psalm 95:6; Isaiah 40:28). Rather than opposing ID, YECs should applaud it; for once science does not arbitrarily exclude the Creator! On the other hand, some Old Earth Creationists, fault ID for not distancing itself from YECs. When following empirical evidence, it may not be possible to please every philosophical position.

In evaluating various positions relative to origins, O’Leary is hardest on Darwinians and their followers, theistic evolutionists. In fact she thought Charles Darwin more honorable for losing faith over a cat playing with mice, than Ken Miller, a theistic evolutionist, who said it might not matter, after all (p 240). (Suffering in nature does matter!) On the other hand, while not necessarily accepting the YEC position, she is quite gentle with them. She writes: “...scientists working within this constraint will likely continue to come up with interesting information nonetheless. It is wrong for other scientists to ridicule or harass them.”

O’Leary’s respect was clearly won by ID: “The question is how to interpret the evidence. The most reasonable explanation is design” (p 243). This will undoubtedly make many Darwinists unhappy. Within the Darwinian camp the only valid question is: how did nature, in the absence of an Intelligent Designer, create what so obviously appears designed? For them, the question of whether or not nature was intelligently designed is forbidden. However, as O’Leary quotes Richard Halvorson: “The most important question for any society is the one that is forbidden.”