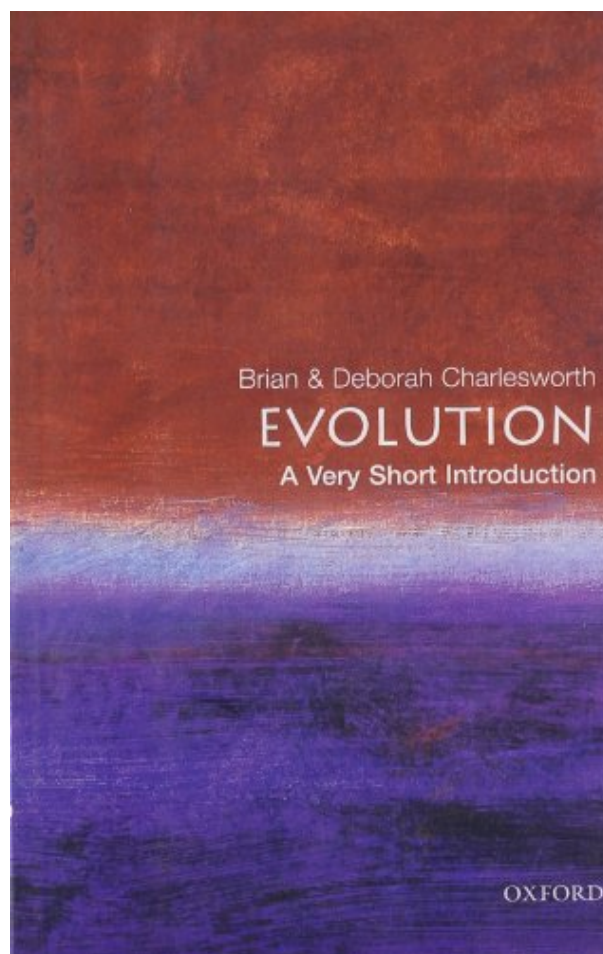
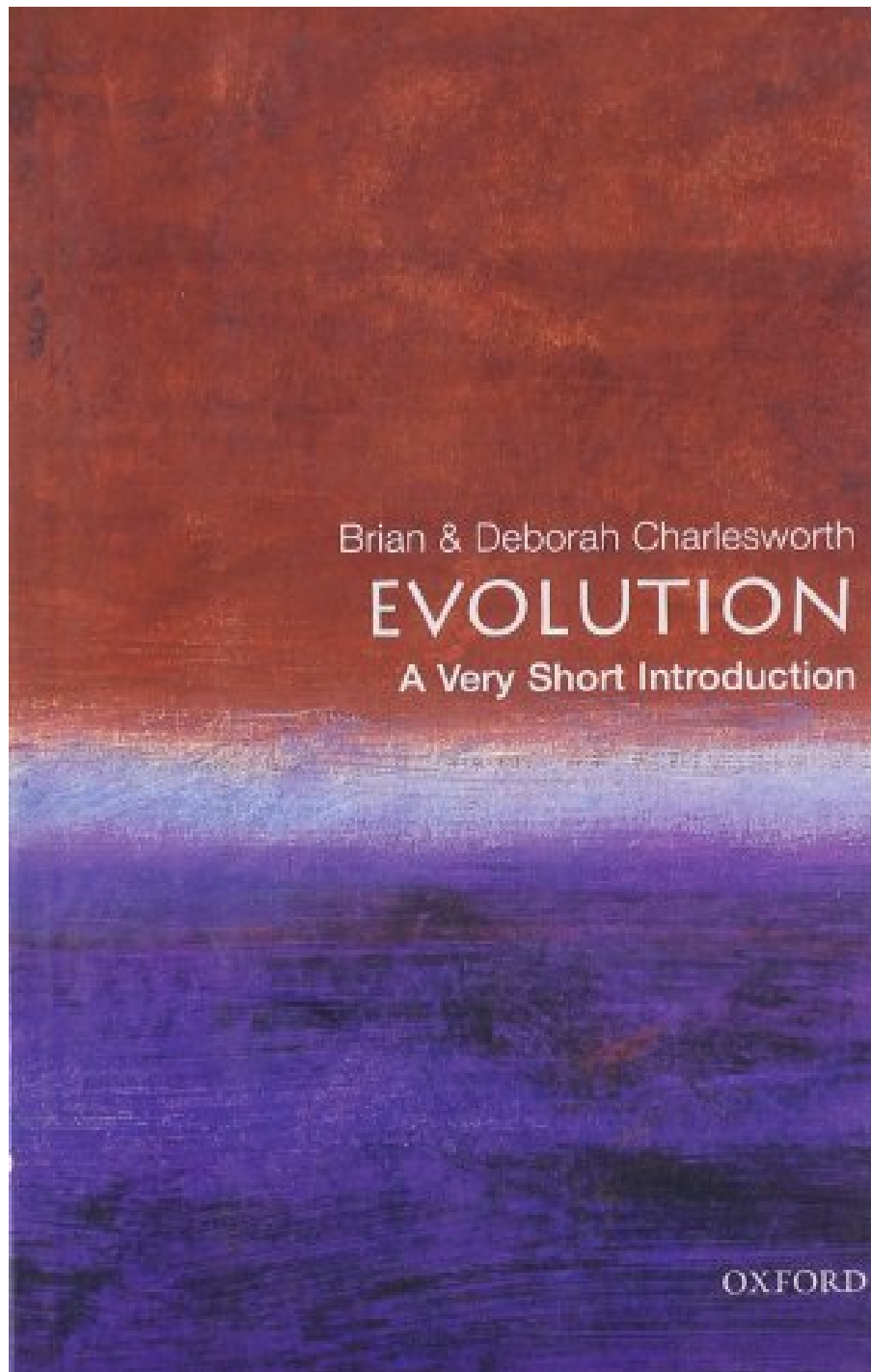


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## Review

Evolution without the crap. Focus. Two distinguished biologists tell you what evolution is about, in a crystal-clear fashion. It's refreshing to read a clear, non-polemic account of the truth, which you rarely get in popular science writing. Focus

## About the Author

Brian Charlesworth is Royal Society Research Professor at the Institute of Cell, Animal and Population Biology, University of Edinburgh, and President of the Society for the Study Evolution. His research is mainly in evolutionary genetics, applying classical and molecular genetics to the study of evolution and natural variation. He is author of Evolution in Age-Structured Populations (CUP, 2nd edn. 1994) Deborah Charlesworth is Professor in the ICABP at Edinburgh. Her research focuses on the evolution of plant breeding systems, including how they avoid inbreeding, and work on sex chromosomes and self-incompatibility.

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This book illuminates the crucial role of evolutionary biology in transforming our view of human origins and our relation to the universe, highlighting the impact of this theory on traditional philosophy and religion. The authors introduce the general reader to some of the most important basic findings, concepts, and procedures of evolutionary biology, as it has developed since the first publications of Darwin and Wallace on the subject, over 140 years ago. They show how evolution provides a unifying set of principles for the whole of biology and sheds light on the relation of human beings to the universe and each other.

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66 of 71 people found the following review helpful.

An excellent summary of current knowledge

By Peter Reeve

It is a sign of the times that the authors on occasion take a defensive attitude to their subject. Creationism, for whatever reason, has proved remarkably adaptive and, strange as it may seem, evolutionary biologists still feel obliged to painstakingly lay out the evidence for evolution per se, rather than just discuss its mechanisms or trace its history.

The Charlesworths do a good job of this, albeit in a rather dry, academic style that may not suit readers that

just want a light, readable introduction to the basic principles of evolution.

The book contains a fairly heavy dose of microbiology, as the authors go to some lengths to detail the biological functions underlying heredity and evolution. This is useful revision for readers with high school science, but tough going for the complete beginner. Similarly, the style is plain and succinct but never light or breezy. This is not a dummy's guide.

Evolution theory took a spectacular wrong turn in the latter part of the 20th century with the emergence of the idea that selection acts only at the gene level, a view popularized by Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene*. This bizarre notion gained a considerable following and was the subject of a heated dispute between Dawkins and Gould that ended only with the latter's death. Thankfully, sanity has been restored and it is now once again recognized that selection can take place at any level, and it is refreshing to see the Charlesworths, in this book, stating unequivocally (p 74) that there can be selection at species level and at other levels (p 73). Interestingly, there is an extract from a very favorable review by Dawkins of this book, on the back cover. Did he skip pages 73 and 74 or has he at last seen the light?

This series is prone to typos and the mutant printing gene has not been bred out of this particular book. Figure 19 is a monumental example. It is printed in landscape rather than portrait mode, effectively sideways (you'd have to see it to understand) thus leaving half the page blank and half the figure missing. The birds and mammals are therefore cruelly pruned from the tree of life. OUP really should get a grip.

Look elsewhere if you want a true introductory text, but select this if you want an excellent summary of the current state of knowledge of evolution and its underlying biological processes.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

The biology of evolution

By Dr. H. A. Jones

Two eminent professors of biology, both F.R.S., from the University of Edinburgh have collaborated to write this short monograph in the Oxford series of Short Introductions. It certainly maintains the standard of academic excellence characteristic of this series. The book is full of fascinating facts, illustrated with twenty-one figures. The degree of detail is such that the book might be more suitable as an introduction to evolution for biology students rather than for a lay readership, who might find the book on the same subject by John Maynard Smith slightly less intimidating.

Maynard Smith, the dedicatee of the book, was Brian Charlesworth's mentor at the University of Sussex. Though his book was published in 1958, it has been brought up to date in a new edition for Cambridge (1993) by Richard Dawkins. The book by the Charlesworths has the advantage of being a decade more recent again and in a fast-moving field, currency is important. The short section on mutations of bacteria is particularly good and the illustration (Fig.8) of how DNA codons relate to specific amino acids in proteins is very clear; but I think taking nearly a page to illustrate evolutionary changes in the fossil foraminiferan *Globorotalia* and another for the phylogenetic tree of Darwin's finches is too much information for all but specialist students. Figure 19, criticised by one reviewer, is quite correct in my book.

This book is pure biology: there is nothing here about Intelligent Design ('human beings are the products of impersonal forces') or any other religious issues. In this, the book follows the materialist approach of the excellent little monographs by Richard Dawkins. The book is clearly written, well illustrated and there is a very good index and therefore unhesitatingly recommended for the serious student of biology.

Howard Jones is the author of *The Tao of Holism*

## The Theory of Evolution (Canto)

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Evolution in the Very Short Introduction Series

By Robin Friedman

"Evolution: A Very Short Introduction" (2003) by Brian and Deborah Charlesworth offers a concise, detailed introduction to evolutionary biology. The Charlesworths are both Professors at the University of Edinburgh. Brian Charlesworth is former President of the Society for the Study of Evolution while Deborah Charlesworth has served as President of the European Society of Evolutionary Biology.

The Charlesworths offer the following introduction to this overview of evolution.

"The relentless application of the scientific method of inference from experiment and observation, without reference to religious or government authority, has completely transformed our view of our origins and relation to the universe in less than 500 years. In addition to the intrinsic fascination of the view of the world opened up by science, this has had an enormous impact on philosophy and religion. The findings of science imply that humans are the product of impersonal forces, and that the habitable world forms a minute part of a universe of immense size and duration. Whatever the religious or philosophical beliefs of individual scientists, the whole programme of scientific research is founded on an assumption that the universe can be understood on such a basis."

Evolutionary theory still provokes controversy. The Charlesworths do not hide their view that evolutionary theory is inconsistent with the position of supernatural, intentional creation of separate species. At several points in this introduction, they criticize supernatural creationism directly. Throughout the book, they gather the support for evolution from various strands of science and argue that it is overwhelming.

The Charlesworths begins with a chapter explaining the nature of evolutionary biology drawn from Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace. Then, in two chapters, they offer corroboration for the theory from two separate strands. In the first, the Charlesworths consider similarities and differences between organisms as showing evolution. The most interesting discussion in this chapter considers findings in cell biology and biochemistry. The study of heredity and of the nature of DNA across all forms of life corroborates and expands evolutionary biology in ways not available to Darwin and Wallace.

In their second chapter setting out evidence for evolution, the Charlesworths examine "patterns in time and space", a form of evidence on which both Darwin and Wallace relied. This source of evolutionary theory is based upon the enormous scope of geological time together with the fossil record. Further studies since Darwin and Wallace, including advances in cell biology and dating techniques have served to corroborate and strengthen the early findings.

In the following portions of their study, the Charlesworths discuss how evolution and natural selection explain the adaptation of species to their environment. They describe how evolution accounts for the astonishing diversity and change in living species, and they conclude with a short chapter on difficult problems in evolution, such as accounting for complex organs including, for example, the human eye.

The Charlesworth's study is short but dense. It requires close, careful reading, particularly in the sections involving cell biology. The book offers as a reward for the required effort a renewed understanding for the lay reader of evolution, its basis and importance. In my own case, I studied evolution in school many years ago but found it useful to focus upon it through this book. The Charlesworths' study will also be useful to students coming to evolutionary biology early in their lives. The book includes a brief bibliography for

further reading.

I have found the Very Short Introduction Series of Oxford University Press highly useful in exploring a broad range of subjects. I have especially benefitted from books in the series about the sciences in that I have tended to take the sciences for granted though adult life. This study of evolution fits well with other works in the series I have read, including various books about geology, chemistry, and the relationship between science and religion. Readers wanting an informed brief account of evolutionary biology will benefit from the Charlesworth's Very Short Introduction.

Robin Friedman

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