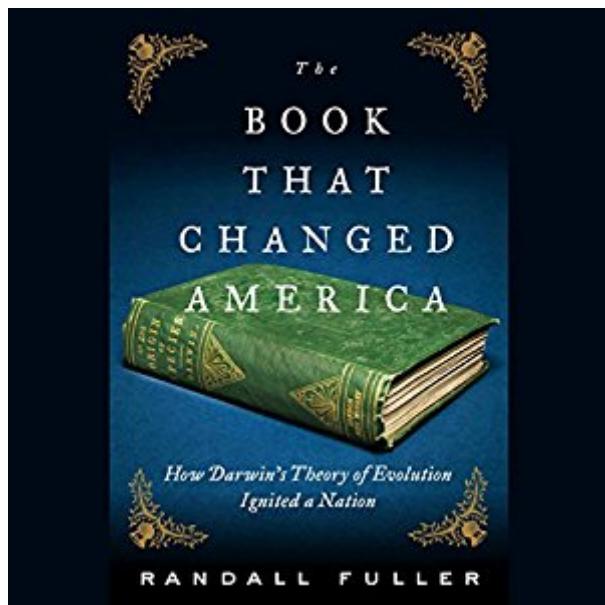


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The Book That Changed America: How Darwin's Theory Of Evolution Ignited A Nation



Synopsis

The compelling story of the effect of Charles Darwin's book *On the Origin of Species* on a diverse group of American writers, abolitionists, and social reformers, including Henry David Thoreau and Bronson Alcott, in 1860. In early 1860, a single copy of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was read and discussed by five important American intellectuals who seized on the book's assertion of a common ancestry for all creatures as a powerful argument against slavery. The book first came into the hands of Harvard botanist Asa Gray, who would lead the fight for the theory in America. Gray passed his heavily annotated copy to the child welfare reformer Charles Loring Brace, who saw value in natural selection's premise that mankind was destined to undergo progressive improvement. Brace then introduced the book to three other friends: Franklin Sanborn, a key supporter of the abolitionist John Brown, who grasped that Darwin's depiction of constant struggle and endless competition perfectly described America in 1860, especially the ongoing conflict between pro- and antislavery forces; the philosopher Bronson Alcott, who resisted Darwin's insights as a threat to transcendental idealism; and Henry David Thoreau, who used Darwin's theory to redirect the work he would pursue till the end of his life regarding species migration and the interconnectedness of nature. The *Book That Changed America* offers a fascinating narrative account of these prominent figures as they grappled over the course of that year with Darwin's dangerous hypotheses. In doing so, it provides new perspectives on America prior to the Civil War, showing how Darwin's ideas became potent ammunition in the debate over slavery and helped advance the cause of abolition by giving it scientific credibility.

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Customer Reviews

Mr. Fuller explores a wonderful period in American history, one in which Thoreau, Emerson, Alcott, Hawthorne, and Agassiz met and conversed. His recreation of this period is very interesting. These authors, philosophers, and scientists were excited by *Origin of the Species*, which arrived in the US just before the outbreak of the Civil War and provided a modest basis on which both pro- and anti-slavery adherents could find justification. Mr. Fuller describes the discussions, lectures, and soirées in which Darwin's book was discussed. However, one does not truly get a sense of the passion of these discussions, nor a sense that the idea of a mechanical process of evolution, not directed by a deity or other driving force, truly roiled either these intellectuals or the public in general. Other books describing the impact of *Origin of the Species* in Europe, give a much greater sense of shock and fervor. Perhaps the immediate and visible (though not the long-range) impact was less in the US, perhaps because of the Civil War, but ultimately the premise of the title is not well defended in the book. In fact, the last chapter tends to dribble off, rather than coming to a rousing or compelling conclusion. It is, however, interesting for a sense of this particular and special moment in history and the importance of the community around Concord, Massachusetts at that time.

"The Book That Changed America" made my day (month, actually)! I have longed for a book just like this! In my mind, "The Book That Changed America", shows in a very original way how scientists learn from one another, how science is done, and how science can, and does, change the world we live in. With this specific instance of doing science, Fuller masterfully illustrates how the most world-changing idea in human history altered human thinking about itself. Plant and animal breeders have long known that selection of genetically diverse organisms changes populations in a very real way - otherwise 7.5 billion people would never be able to feed themselves! As a retired corn breeder, I cannot to this day fathom why half of Americans still have trouble understanding the reality of evolution! Reading Fuller's book might help improve this situation. Fuller's thesis illustrates how a prominent group of thinkers in 1860's Concord, MA learned that evolution via natural selection was not a guess or a whim or an alternative idea to why life on earth is as it is. Fuller showed that Darwin's dangerous idea (this expression is also the name of a book by Daniel C. Dennett, 1995) was the theoretical basis for confirming the common origin of whites and blacks. For the people of Concord, and elsewhere, Darwin's idea that humans shared a common ancestor with all of life affirmed in no uncertain terms that American slavery must be abolished! I urge readers to spread the word! This book is a must read and it's a must for discussion. Americans still have a

ways to go before we truly understand how our common origin should inform how we treat one another and how we treat the diversity of life. The men and women of Concord didn't quite get there. Fuller did point out however, that Thoreau, had he recovered from the flu in 1862, may have united evolution with what he had been studying in fields and forests his entire life, ecology.

An interesting read, but a bit misleading as well. It follows a number of different individuals and it provides some synthesis of their response to Darwin's book. But for the most part the book focuses on the individuals rather than a larger and more corporate response. Some of these reactions are interesting, and the use of the results by abolitionists to forward their cause was new information for me. Yet the hows and wheres of this process are not followed in any great detail, just a few individual reactions. So clearly new information, but not what I thought I'd be reading based on the published reviews or the material used to advertise the book.

Very well researched and equally well written account of the effect of Darwin's opus on America as it struggled with slavery and the civil war. A great cast of characters from diverse walks of life make the pages fly!

This book is a great example of false advertising. Sadly, it isn't about how *The Origin of Species* changed America. I am not sure what this book is about. I learned a lot of interesting things about the origins of the Civil War, John Brown, and the Transcendentalists and their tight friendship in Concord, Mass. The most interesting information that actually had something to do with the title was the writing about Asa Gray and Louis Agassiz. It wasn't deeply insightful but it was information I didn't know much about. The best chapter in the book, that actually relates to the book's title is Chapter 21. No spoilers here, just check it out in a bookstore and realize this is the best the book has to offer as he relates Asa Gray's struggles- good stuff. Pair this with the worst chapter in the book, Chapter 17, "Moods." I challenge the author (or any reader) to respond to my review and explain what this chapter has to do with the title of the book. Once again, check it out in a bookstore and I guarantee you will be scratching your head when you finish the chapter. Finally, even though the author didn't succeed in explaining how Darwin's book changed America I enjoyed many parts of the book because I am a very curious person and I learned things I didn't know, plus he writes well. I am also inspired to discover if a local park (Sanborn Park) is named after Frank Sanborn. A science center called Walden West is in the park. I had never heard of Frank Sanborn until I read this book so I suspect there is a connection since he was a friend of Thoreau's. For that connection

I am grateful, and it helped me decide to give the book a three star rating.

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