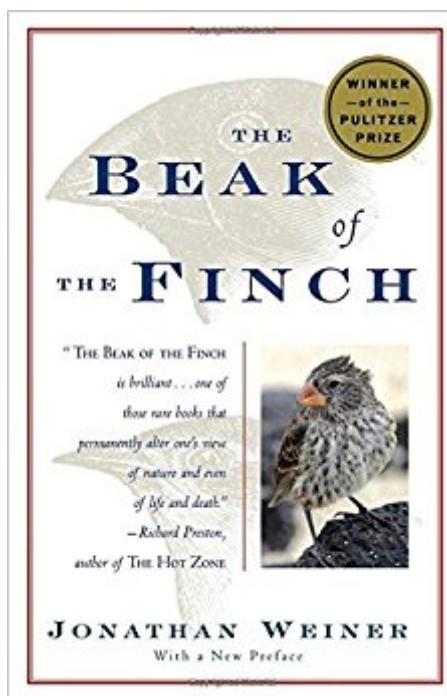


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The Beak Of The Finch: A Story Of Evolution In Our Time



Synopsis

Winner of the Pulitzer PrizeWinner of the Los Angeles Times Book PrizeOn a desert island in the heart of the Galapagos archipelago, where Darwin received his first inklings of the theory of evolution, two scientists, Peter and Rosemary Grant, have spent twenty years proving that Darwin did not know the strength of his own theory. For among the finches of Daphne Major, natural selection is neither rare nor slow: it is taking place by the hour, and we can watch. In this dramatic story of groundbreaking scientific research, Jonathan Weiner follows these scientists as they watch Darwin's finches and come up with a new understanding of life itself. *The Beak of the Finch* is an elegantly written and compelling masterpiece of theory and explication in the tradition of Stephen Jay Gould. With a new preface.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Rosemary and Peter Grant and those assisting them have spent twenty years on Daphne Major, an island in the Galapagos studying natural selection. They recognize each individual bird on the island, when there are four hundred at the time of the author's visit, or when there are over a thousand. They have observed about twenty generations of finches -- continuously. Jonathan Weiner follows these scientists as they watch Darwin's finches and come up with a new understanding of life itself.

Weiner follows scientists Peter and Rosemary Grant who, for the past 20 years, have studied the continuing evolution of the beaks of finches in the Galapagos Islands. Copyright 1995 Reed

A great introduction to legendary field-work. It isn't a critical analysis: it's a hymn of sorts to some admirable scientists spanning a century and a half. But it sees even in their flaws (e.g., Darwin's slow-dawning comprehension on the significance of his finches) a model for how science can and should work. By coincidence I was reading this around the time I found myself in a conversation with a creationist who claimed there had never been an observable case of speciation. (I dunno, don't ask me.). While I didn't engage, because such conversations are usually non-starters, it was rather nice to have a terrific real-world compendium of Darwin's evolving thought as it's reflected in the field work. The book wants constant updating, though. Many tantalizing hints are dropped that are not developed but which might be, given the advances in published research.

"The Beak of the Finch: A Story of Evolution in Our Time", by Jonathan Weiner. Vintage Books (Random House) 1995, NY. ISBN: 978-0-679-73337-9, PB 332 Pgs. in 8" x 5 1/8" format that includes 15 Pg. Biblio. plus 8 Pg. Index. Inveiglements include several dozen B/W illustrations, most enticingly a dozen Galapagos Finch drawings by Charles Darwin and an essential map of the Galapagos Islands and the route taken by Darwin on his biological sojourn, particularly useful while reading of the various ecological areas of Darwin Finches, fauna and flora areas being researched, independently, by various investigative biologists, most notably Peter and Rosemary Grant. Author Weiner is an esteemed science writer, editor and authored "Planet Earth" and "The Next One Hundred Years". He writes in erudite prose easily understood by non-scientists and in a style that provokes active thinking on the part of the reader: - this reader/writer interaction leads to a much fuller understanding of his informational-educational mission in writing this book than too-oft seen in most science books, and is significantly crisp when the subject of evolution is being discussed, a topic that is more abstracted of being theory than most static reviews of geology, history, and the various arts. So, Weiner presents us with a three part dissertation on "Evolution in the Flesh", "New Beings on the This Earth", and "G.O.D". Overall, Weiner provides convincing facts and ideas with on-going experimental studies indicating that evolution is an on-going phenomenon and pays homage to Charles Darwin's tedious studies and contemplations prior to publication of his "Origin of Species".

I read this while on a cruise in the Galapagos, which made it more interesting to me than if I had been somewhere else. The story of the Grants' research on the "Darwin finches" is fascinating, but I

thought the narrative did not maintain as coherent a story line as in the best popular science writing. I thought the reflections on larger issues (e.g. science vs. religious dogma, the causes and effects of climate change, and the rapid evolution of bacteria and viruses in reaction to modern medicines) at the end of the book were well done and among the best sections.

The Beak of the Finch was required for an undergraduate honors biology course that I enrolled in a few years ago. Although several years have passed and I have not continued on with my education in biology (in fact, I am pursuing a PhD in Environmental History), this book often pops into my mind. I have referred to it several times, and it was one of the best books I read in my undergraduate career. I highly recommend this book! It is enjoyable, wonderfully written, and an easy read. It illustrates evolution in "our time" in a tangible way and shows how field research is conducted in studies such as this one. It is a perfect book for the "hobby reader" or to assign to undergraduate, or possibly even high school, students.

Biologists maintain that evolution is both a theory and a fact, but the meaning of this comment is difficult for the general public to understand. Meanwhile the anti-evolutionists maintain that evolutionary changes cannot be observed. This book reviews the work of the Professors Grant which details the simplest and most important fact of evolution---that species show variation from generation to generation. This fact is the bedrock on which our theory of the origin of species rests. Mr. Weiner takes us through in great detail, accompanied by original citations, the Grants' work in which variation within species progresses in real time, from year to year and generation to generation. This is a book for the scientifically-literate reader. An understanding of the scientific process is important to grasping the book. The degree of detail may be daunting. But considering those caveats, this book describes a truly beautiful chapter in the story of biology.

What a fantastic book. Weiner is an amazing writer and this book shifts from biography, to novel, to historical nonfiction smoothly while capturing the mindset of Darwin by placing him along contemporary biologists. I'm not a biologist and have never had a formal introduction to evolution, but I feel this book has certainly prepped me for that!

More impressive, and more memorable than the story of the finches is the story of the couple that contributed to all that is written in this book. That sort of love story and passionate pursuit of intellectual and investigative inquiry manifests only in the imagination of young, biology besotted

girls and men, and now, in pages of this very book. If biodiversity and evolution was ever taught in narrative and exposition, this would be on the syllabus, and it would be the class favorite.

The book covers specific topics in evolutionary sciences at great depth - which makes this a compelling perspective. This is a story of change happening around us with far reaching consequence.

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