

Book Review

Our Huxley

A review of *A Devil's Chaplain* by Richard Dawkins. Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 2003.

David P. Barash, Department of Psychology, University of Washington, Seattle, Wa. 98195, USA.
Email: dpbarash@u.washington.edu.

Some things warrant attention simply by existing: if a previously unknown Bach partita is discovered, it is likely worth hearing. If someone finds a new painting by van Gogh, it is probably worth seeing. And whenever Richard Dawkins comes out with a new book, “depend upon it,” as the Brits are wont to say, it is worth reading. Well, he just did, and it is.

This is true even though *A Devil's Chaplain* is a collection of previously published pieces, and a slender and diverse collection at that. Herein are book reviews, forewords to other people's books, eulogies (for biologist W. D. Hamilton and sci-fi author Douglas Adams, an eclectic duo that bespeaks Dawkins's own wide-ranging interests), some wickedly and hilariously effective critiques of religion – whether organized or un - a few notable restatements of gene-based evolutionary thinking, and a very affecting concluding essay – directed to his daughter on the occasion of her tenth birthday – that should be required reading for all parents, children, teachers, and, most of all, would-be purveyors of the bombastic, believe-it-because-I-say-so snake-oil that Dawkins finds especially detestable and that he debunks so effectively. *A Devil's Chaplain* should be particularly welcome to American readers, since most of its components have not yet been easily available outside the UK.

It is rare that I agree with everything I read, and so, just to maintain my record of curmudgeonly dissent, here is the obligatory gripe, both factual and trivial: the marvelous phrase “physics envy” was coined by population biologist Joel Cohen, not Peter Medawar. Not to worry, however; as Dawkins so ably reminds us, Medawar fathered many a notable phrase. And so, indeed, has Dawkins, who has emerged as not only a formidable biologist and wordsmith, but who gets my vote as our foremost writer of evolutionary wisdom. Thomas Huxley became known as “Darwin's bulldog,” in recognition of his able and indefatigable defense of evolution by natural selection. I have searched in vain for a comparable

zoological metaphor to apply to Richard Dawkins; my best suggestion is admittedly derivative: our Huxley.

Our Huxley is currently Professor of the Public Understanding of Science, at Oxford, and the only such professor I know of. In these days of dangerously fatuous fundamentalist clap-trap, and with the unelected, god-besotted, war-mongering, intellectually challenged nincompoop who is currently president of the United States proclaiming that evolution is still “as yet unproven,” we could use a few more such exemplars of clear thinking and crystalline writing. But sadly, there aren’t very many Bachs or van Goghs, either.

David P. Barash is professor of psychology at the University of Washington, Seattle. His most recent book is *The Survival Game: how game theory explains the biology of cooperation and competition*. 2003. Times Books/Henry Holt: New York.