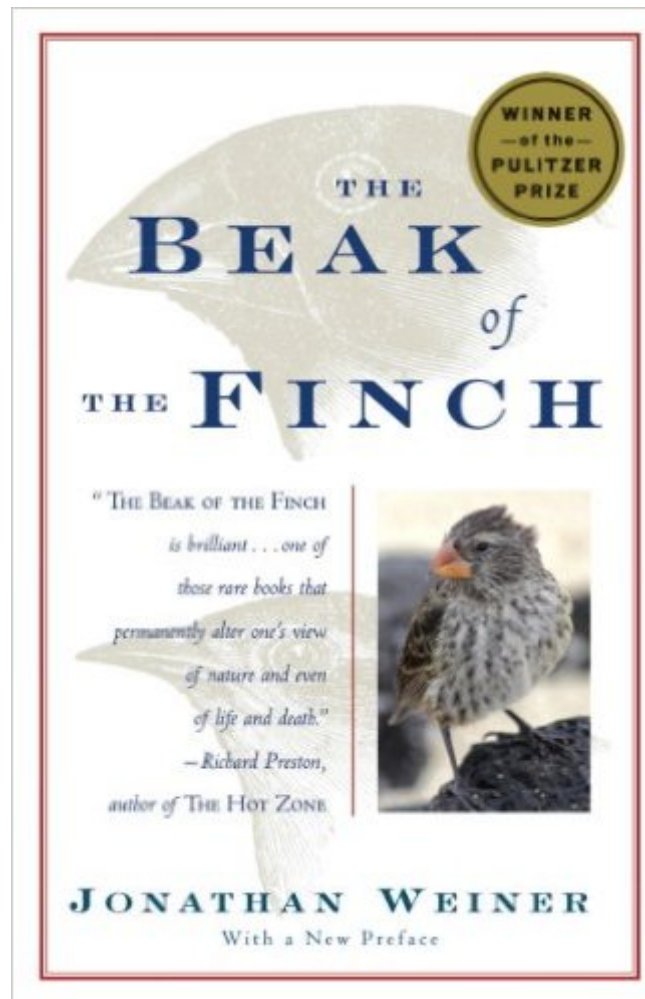


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The Beak Of The Finch: A Story Of Evolution In Our Time



Synopsis

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize
Winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize
On 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

Weiner's *The Beak of the Finch* is a positively brilliant work on the topic of evolution. A great introduction for the student of evolutionary biology, or the layman. Weiner's book destroys two of the greatest myths about evolution. 1. It's slow. 2. It can't be observed. The study of the Galapagos Finches not only proves the importance of evolution as a contemporary subject but as one that can be observed RIGHT NOW in the world around us. It's almost astonishing to see how simple evolution truly is, how it occurs in quantifiable baby steps that we can see, if we only take the time to carefully observe. Weiner not only demystifies evolution, but makes it as a topic, thoroughly accessible to the interested layman. His prose is neither dry nor technical and in fact, makes for quite an enjoyable read. I wholeheartedly recommend this book.

Weiner sets the reader down with the ghost of Darwin, on the Galapagos Islands where the Grants have been studying since 1973. He introduces us to 'Darwin's finches,' the same birds Darwin observed and wrote about in "Origin of the Species". We're introduced to a population that is perfect for evolutionary studies--a limited number of species in a closed ecosystem on an isolated island. Darwin couldn't have known what his observations would lead to so many years later, but Weiner shares with us the Grants meticulous study of over 20 generations of finches. Thousands of individual birds were measured, and their progeny tracked. Through this book, we see what they saw--evolution in action. Weiner weaves facts into a nice story. The book is engaging and reads like a novel, so much so that my 13 year-old daughter is now reading it. The conclusions (and no, this isn't a spoiler) are that evolution by natural selection occurs and that selection can occur quickly (it's not always a slow process). Weiner (and the Grants) also touches on speciation in fish populations, and bacterial and viral evolution. This was required reading in an introductory evolution class in college. I hope, someday, students in high school will be assigned this book. It was excellent, and will probably be wrapped up as Christmas gifts for a few of my friends and family.

Weiner has written a great book on evolutionary science. Instead of a frozen doctrine whose outlines are generally agreed upon as a quasi-religion, Weiner demonstrates how the modalities of evolution - how it actually occurs in nature - are still under investigation. It is a snapshot of an evolving science, carried out over a lifetime of research by two distinguished scientists. One of the particular things they are attempting to observe directly is a speciation event - the creation of a new species of finch - which we long assumed must take place over geologic time and hence is unobservable. But in the process, Weiner reviews the notion of evolution, with fascinating tidbits from Darwin's original research and thoughts on these same finches of the Galapagos. It is a brilliant portrait of the cutting edge in science as well as a detailed review of many basic notions of evolution. It is also a beautifully written book, indeed a masterpiece of elucidation. And it is all hard science, rather than the pseudo-scientific pap that passes for it in so many popular magazines today. While its rigor makes the book a challenge to read, it is well worth the effort. Recommended, one of the best pieces of scientific journalism I ever read.

Writing about science, scientists, and history in a way that keeps an educated layman absorbed is an extremely difficult craft. This writer is so adept at it that his Pulitzer Prize was almost inevitable; and I'll now read everything he writes. *The Beak of the Finch* is about what Darwin deduced from

limited observations, which only in the past couple of decades has been confirmed and better understood by biologists. The book focuses on the work of Peter and Rosemary Grant and their students in the Galapagos Islands, which Darwin visited on the Beagle. I picked up this book before going to the Galapagos--as should everyone lucky enough to do that--but it would be just as fascinating for the armchair traveler and the would-be or wannabe biologist. I marked numerous passages to read to wife and teenaged kids on our trip, and even the most cynical and anti-school of the kids rated it extremely interesting and beautifully written. The shocking punch line: "Nearly half of all Americans say they don't believe the theory of evolution."

The main complaint I have about the book is a matter of individual taste: the efforts to lend personal colour to the characters are ham-fisted, Reader's Digesty, and generally out of line with the rest of the book's quality. I have no objection to the personal touch in dealing with the work of researchers, in fact I actively enjoy it, but it requires a delicate touch and in this book it does not get it. For instance, I hardly could care less what brand of Mac adorns whose desk, whether edible or computational, and don't like having to wade through that sort of detail to get at the beef. In every other respect the book is a fine piece of work, valuable and entertaining. The treatment of the themes, the subjects and the material is well balanced. Weiner structures the subject and the contexts competently and coherently. The book obviously took a large helping of hard work to write and to research. In spite of the title, the Finches, though they are the main protagonists and endearing to boot, do not obscure the main theme, which is at all times the effect and mechanism of natural selection in evolution. Apart from the grounds for my one opening complaint, the book is well, clearly and pleasantly written. I strongly recommend it to anyone with an interest in biology, professional or not. I suspect that many readers will wonder what I was grouching about. And in case anyone with an even greater distaste for those passages feels tempted to drop the book in irritation, I urge them to grit their teeth, skim the offending bits and bear it. There is plenty of Good Stuff to compensate for the annoyance, and I cannot think of any other book which so accessibly, lucidly and persuasively covers the same material.

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