

Darwin in the blood

As a child **Matthew Chapman** wasn't much interested in his great-great-grandfather, Charles Darwin. For him, Darwin was just a part of science, someone to take for granted, rather than a hero who theorised in areas where few dared to tread. But all that changed as Chapman sat with the journalists covering the battle at Dover, Pennsylvania, when 11 parents sued their school district for presenting intelligent design as an alternative to evolution in the classroom. Now Chapman has gained some heretical views of his own, as **Amanda Gelter** discovered

What was it like growing up knowing that your great-great-grandfather was Charles Darwin?
It was not something I thought much about. I was probably proud of it, but also a little intimidated. I was not particularly interested in him as a man or in his theories. In England, as in most countries, his ideas were pretty much accepted. Watson and Crick were far more interesting to me. Both worked at Cambridge, where I grew up, and they were wonderfully outspoken. To me, Darwin was a building block rather than a real character.

Why did you attend the Dover trial?
I had written a book after visiting the Tennessee town where the Scopes trial took place [in 1925, high-school biology teacher John Scopes was tried for teaching evolution, then an illegal activity in 15 states] because I wanted to see if the place had evolved since the trial. It had not. When I heard about Kitzmiller vs Dover, I saw its potential as a similarly philosophical debate. Not only pro-evolution scientists but also philosophers and theologians were coming to testify. It looked like it might be a really good fight – and it was.

Profile

Matthew Chapman grew up in Cambridge, UK, and is now a screenwriter and film director living in New York City. He wrote *Trial of the Monkey: An accidental memoir* (Picador US, 2001) and his latest book, *40 Days and 40 Nights*, is published next month by HarperCollins.

How did people on both sides of the fence react to you when they found out who you were?
Everyone without exception was very polite. Even those, like Michael Behe, who are fundamentally opposed to the implications of Darwin, actually find it hard to dislike him, and most admire him for his thoroughness and dedication. Michael and I got along well.

Did this largely American controversy seem foreign to you as a Brit?

As a Brit, but even more as a rationalist, where reason would dictate one thing and faith another, I find American attitudes completely strange. That said, I find it more peculiar that people still believe in astrology than that they still believe in creationism. If you're a biblical literalist, there are plenty of reasons to contort yourself into believing the Earth is less than 10,000 years old. There is no reason to believe that there are only 12 personality types caused by the position of the stars at birth.

What did you learn from the Dover trial?

A great deal of science. It was a shame the trial was not filmed because very smart lawyers without significant science education used all their legal skills to make scientific arguments comprehensible to a judge, who, while also very smart, also lacked a scientific education. Previously incomprehensible things became easily comprehensible, to the dismay of intelligent-design buffoons accustomed to preaching to the choir – often literally.

What about the personalities involved in the trial?

It is impossible to remove the characters from this story and tell it properly. It takes a certain kind of character to believe in things which are manifestly absurd, and trying to understand such people is vital for many obvious reasons. And those people who refused to allow fundamentalism to damage their children's education had a quiet courage and integrity. They were individualistic and refused to be bullied. They sacrificed a lot to defend a part of the constitution that is subtle, complex, and could easily be ignored. To me, as a screenwriter, this is astonishingly powerful.

Which moments of the trial stood out for you?

The most disturbing element was how the intelligent-design crowd, many of whom I liked, would intellectually and morally contort themselves to cling to ideas one felt even they did not quite believe. The scientists among them seemed to have taken hold of small shards of the scientific whole that no one fully understands yet, and created a shield against reality. They were smart people, and at times it was painful to watch them. There was a moment when one intelligent-design scientist was literally walled into the witness box by books and articles detailing an evolutionary process he said had not been described. And though they had had months to prepare, the school board members who advocated intelligent design still knew almost nothing about it. When asked to define intelligent design, one of them defined evolution.

You write that a medieval giant has woken and is thumping on the door, but say it may be wiser to use his strength against him than resist. Explain.

Science is often accused of being arrogant. I don't think it is arrogant enough. In fact, I think the scientific method is essentially humble: if something cannot be proven, you must have the humility to set it aside or abandon it, even if you have staked your career on it. In my book, I argue that inviting intelligent design into the classroom and then demolishing it would both reveal the strength and beauty of the scientific method and undermine by association other unfounded assertions made by religion. This would be



Intelligent design should be taught so it can be demolished, says Darwin's great-great-grandson

achieved without attacking religion head-on because intelligent design is supposedly not religious. It seems like a fairly gentle way of suggesting that people who make wild claims without evidence might not be people whose views on abortion, homosexuality, stem cells or contraception are worth listening to.

But if they did teach intelligent design your way, should this be in science lessons or elsewhere?

Inclusion in the science class is what the advocates of intelligent design want. I think they should get it and face the consequences. And I think science has become diminished in children's minds by its apparent lack of contact with the "ordinary world". What science now seeks to understand has become so complex that the beautiful simplicity of its methods and its applicability to "ordinary" problems have been lost. If you cast science in a heroic role – doing battle with superstition and primitive thinking – it might seem an attractive career choice, or a child might use it when evidence needs rational assessment.

How did the trial make you feel about the US?

I feel more optimistic and more afraid. More optimistic because of the simple decency and determination of the plaintiffs, but more afraid because of the contortions of the defendants. There is a real world that can be examined and understood using, among other real instruments, the tools of science. There are certain things that are true: the Earth goes around the sun, gravity exists, and it's more than "possible" that the Earth is older than 10,000 years. There must be some part of the fundamentalist mind that recognises these facts, which contradict a literal biblical interpretation. Yet they insist that another truth in conflict with this one exists. I think it's likely these two "truths" will increasingly diverge, and I wonder what will happen to the people forced to straddle them. I fear the pain of it is going to lead to even darker and more twisted behaviour than we have seen already.

Do you now feel closer to Darwin?

Yes I do. Seeing how passionately inclined people disregard evidence in favour of whatever feels convenient to them, I now see that there is something heroic about simply gathering evidence until it tells you something true. It would have been much easier for Darwin, who was married to a deeply religious woman, a woman who was hurt and offended by his conclusions, just to have shut the door on his investigations. ●