

EVOLUTION

The Evolutionist: The Strange Tale of Alfred Russel Wallace. By Avi Sirlin. 2014. Aurora Metro Books. (ISBN 9781906582531). 336 pp. Paperback. \$13.33.

Did Charles Darwin directly make a request to Alfred Russel Wallace to relinquish their partnership in proposing evolution by natural selection? In this historical fiction, Darwin says to Wallace, “[W]e remain two parents of a precocious and beautiful child. We each clasp her by the hand and wish to lead her safely into adulthood. Instead, I fear she will be torn asunder.” Wallace gently asks, “You wish for me to let go?” and Darwin replies, “We speak of my life’s work. You have many fields of study, many causes, many prescriptions.” This conversation takes place following the trial of medium and spiritualist Henry Slade for fraudulent activity; Wallace had testified in Slade’s favor. Spiritualism was one of Wallace’s many fields of study, causes and directions that put him at odds with the scientific community and threatened the nascent proposal of evolution by natural selection.

Sirlin’s story captures the events, between 1852 and 1876, that set the stage for this imagined exchange which encapsulates Wallace’s place in scientific history. The tale opens with 29-year-old

Wallace boarding a ship to England after four years in the Amazon. His personality and scientific explorations begin to be revealed when disaster strikes. The ship catches fire and sinks in the mid-Atlantic with his priceless specimen collection and source of income. All on board are set adrift in two lifeboats for seven harrowing days until rescued by a passing vessel. During this time, through Wallace’s thoughts and his storytelling to the sailors, we get flashbacks of his life leading up to, and including, his time in the Amazon. Maps of his Amazon and Malay expeditions for quick reference are absolutely necessary at this point, along with an index with chronological lists of dates, places, and key events of Wallace’s life.

Although each of the 27 chapters is titled by date and location, I found myself constantly distracted from the story to search for locations and characters. The author states that “characters other than minor ones are real with the exception of Ramsey Newcastle based on Joseph Hooker Jr.” However, which characters are minor? A list of historical figures Wallace interacted with could more smoothly help readers follow Wallace’s development as a scientist and clearly place some influential figures of the time.

In crafting the personalities of Wallace and his contemporaries to realistically provide a story of the scientific and social culture of the time, the author is not completely successful. Characters and conversations seem awkward or stilted, leaving the reader unconvinced about behaviors. This often interferes with immersion in the novel, especially during its first half. Sirlin does build Wallace as at least an equal to Darwin as a broad scientific thinker, a very perceptive field biologist, and an activist of his times. The author also offers what might be perceived as fatal flaws that contributed to Wallace’s unrecognized role in proposing natural selection. Wallace believed that his fellow scientists had his same unbridled curiosity, and he showed an inability to fully interpret interpersonal interactions and know

when tempering his actions might gain him influence.

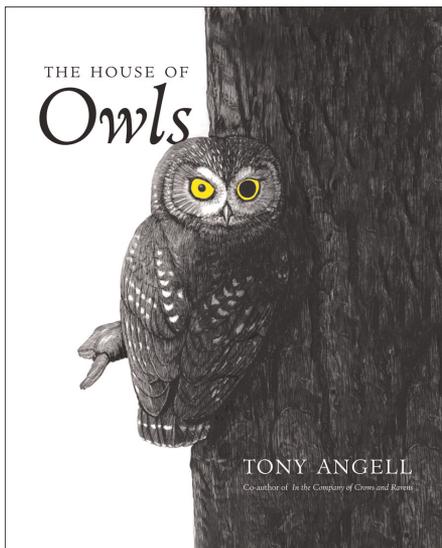
Weaving these aspects of Wallace’s personality into his little-known scientific endeavors did enhance the story, especially his ethnobiology research. When Wallace presented a paper (“On the Insects Used as Food by the Indians of the Amazon”) to the Entomological Society, “He felt confident of a rapt audience. However when Mr. Newman announced the title of his paper silence fell upon the room. Wallace imagined his audience’s intrigue as he stepped to the podium.” Sadly, his colleagues did not see any relevance to the research and showed contempt for what they considered savage practices and an opening to ridicule Wallace. He also used his prominent position as president of the Biology Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science somewhat naively. Because Wallace thought that spiritualism could be investigated scientifically, he organized a presentation on mesmerism and spiritualist phenomena, which was not well received and proved a liability for his influence and place in the scientific community. As readers, we ponder who – Darwin or Wallace – was more perceptive about the strategy of convincingly introducing new scientific proposals?

The Evolutionist will allow you to go beyond Darwin as the only person making observations and accumulating vast bodies of evidence that lead to the proposal of the mechanism for evolution. The number of insects and other specimens that Wallace observed, recorded, and collected is mind boggling; sample size was not an issue. The book squeezes the scientific and social climate of the mid-1800s into a relatively short read and provides numerous jumping-off points for examining the process of science on several levels. In conjunction with this novel, I would strongly encourage including Wallace’s (1858) short and readable essay “On the Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type,” which is easily found on the Internet.

I rate this book “three frogs” because it is not a smooth read on several levels: the way the characters interact, confusion about the timeline, locations, and fictional and nonfictional characters. *The Evolutionist* is worth reading because Wallace’s personal story showcases the depth and breadth of the scientific process through Wallace’s perseverance, skill, and intellect.



Gail A. Baker
Lane Community College, Science Division
Eugene, OR 97405
bakerg@lancc.edu



ANIMALS

The House of Owls. By Tony Angell. 2015. Yale University Press. (ISBN 0300203446). 203 pp. Hardcover. \$30.

“I dare say a flock of books on owls has been produced over the past several decades,” notes author Tony Angell in the foreword to his volume *The House of Owls*. “With good reason,” he adds: “owls are fascinating subjects.” This book is a welcome addition to the cadre: Angell approaches

owls with admiration, biological and ecological understanding, care, and familiarity. *The House of Owls* is a lovely combination of personal narrative, natural history, overview guide, and visual treasure.

The first half of the book is a presentation of the natural history of owls, divided into two sections. The author describes his firsthand experience as his family observed nesting western screech owls for a quarter of a century. Readers rejoice with the author in the success of the occupants of “The Fortress,” a homemade owl-nesting box. Over the first year, a pair of nesting screech owls, displaced from their storm-damaged nest, takes up residence in the nest box, and (as the author and his family watch) court, forage, nourish their babies, teach their owlets to hunt, and, finally, in the fall, disperse into the surrounding woods – a cycle that the author and his family then observed repeated for 25 years. “About Owls” is the author’s presentation of the evolution, adaptations, behavior, and history of owls. A consummate naturalist, Angell investigates his owls’ nesting box to learn about their diet and their effect on the local ecosystem, examines a dissected great horned owl’s flight muscles and aerodynamic fat deposits, and depicts skulls of several species showing the asymmetrical ear openings that allow owls to hunt prey they cannot even see, such as under snow cover. Behavior, diet, hunting skills, role in human history, and ecology are all presented interestingly and clearly. There is some amazing information: a pair of owls with five owlets will consume more than 3000 rodents in a single nesting season; the bare bottoms of a great gray owl’s toes allow it to sense and grip prey hidden beneath the snow, and an owl in a medieval heraldic device symbolizes the power, intelligence, and fair nature of the owner.

The second half of *The House of Owls* is essentially a field guide to the various owl species found in North America, arranged in three sections: “Owls in Company with People,” “Owls of Unique Habitat,” and “Owls of Wild and Remote Places.” Each section presents the owl, its scientific name

and characteristics, range map and habitat, food preferences, vocalizations, courtship and nesting, threats and conservation, and vital statistics. Angell’s description of the barn owl (“Owls in Company with People”) make one long to have the right old outbuilding in which an owl family can establish itself; his presentation of the spotted owl (“Owls of Unique Habitat”) helps the reader understand it as a keystone species in the old growth conifer forests of the far west. The description of each owl species is interesting and informative. Readers will find themselves listening more intently to the summer night sounds in hopes of discovering these local aerial predators.

A third charming, informative, and wonderful aspect of *The House of Owls* is the many illustrations depicting owl behavior, anatomy, and habitat that grace almost every page of the volume. Angell is a talented artist: his scratchboard and pen-and-ink illustrations are treasures, and it comes as no surprise that Angell won the prestigious Victoria and Albert illustration award in 2006; his portrayals of owls in their interactions and habitats are sensitive, thoughtful, and lovely. Angell thoroughly understands the didactic value and power of illustrations: without even looking at the text, a reader can understand owls – their habitat, habits, threats, and behavior – through examination of Angell’s lovely illustrations.

A House of Owls is one of the finest and most approachable of natural histories I have seen: charming, thoughtful, informative, and serious. Interested readers and students will find much within this modest volume, including one of the clearest verbal and visual presentations of natural history available. Angell brings owls close to the reader, allowing them to rejoice in and value a natural world that is closer, and more valuable, than they may have previously imagined.



Cate Hibbitt
Lincoln School
Providence, RI 02809
chibbitt@lincolnschool.org