
Charles Darwin’s voyage on the Beagle from 1831 to 1836 was, in his view, “by far the most important event in my life,” which “determined my whole career.” Few scientists are as important to biology as Darwin, and few periods in his life were as formative, so it is hardly surprising that a significant segment of the Darwin industry is devoted to recounting, contextualizing, and analyzing these five years. Yet, despite the ample opportunities for storytelling and illustration afforded by the voyage, HMS Beagle, Aux Origines de Darwin (2016) is apparently the first graphic novel devoted to following Darwin around the world. Darwin: An Exceptional Voyage is its English translation.

The illustrator, Jérémie Royer, makes the most of his opportunities, using the ligne claire style familiar from the Tintin books of Hergé, with generally cartoonish characters against generally realistic backgrounds. Tall panels accommodate the layers of tropical rainforests; wide panels provide scope to seascapes and landscapes; a series of small panels reflects daring eyes and shifting attention in a tense social encounter. A number of the full-page panels are particularly memorable, such as Darwin standing wordless in the numinous Brazilian night amid a swarm of flies. Regrettably, the lettering throughout is not crisp, impeding the legibility of Fabien Grolleau’s text.

In his foreword, Grolleau warns that the book presents “a subjective, perhaps even romanticized[,] vision of Darwin’s voyage,” adding, in a note at the end of the book, “We made the choice to merge some characters, visits[,] and journeys in order to focus on others.” None of these editorial choices compromises the scientific and historical content, however. (A minor error worth mentioning: the description of the origin of species as the “mystery of mysteries” is misattributed to the Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt. It was coined by the British astronomer John Herschel, who actually appears in the book when Darwin visits him in Cape Town in 1836.)

Darwin’s early scientific interests are on full display here, from geology to palentontology to geography, with a few anticipations of his mature work on evolution. Cleverly, the narrative occurs within the frame of the forty-nine-year-old Darwin relating stories from his voyage to his children in 1858. Once he is through, the book ends with his receiving the letter from Alfred Russel Wallace sketching the idea of evolution by natural selection, which would prompt him to write On the Origin of Species in the following year. It is easy to imagine Darwin responding enthusiastically to this insight, possibly muttering something blithe, such as “firstname lastname was here first!”

Interestingly, social issues are as much in the foreground as scientific issues: slavery in Brazil, about which Darwin quarreled with Robert FitzRoy, the captain of the Beagle; the brutal military campaign against the inhabitants of the Argentine pampas by what Darwin described as a “villainous Banditti-like army”; and the status of the Yaghans, three natives of Tierra del Fuego whom FitzRoy had abducted on a previous voyage and was now returning to their home. The Yaghans are presented with insight and sensitivity, but teachers considering the book for their classrooms should be aware that there is a degree of nudity, though nothing salacious, in the scenes set in Tierra del Fuego.

Perhaps owing to the author’s or the translator’s unfamiliarity with nineteenth-century English, there are a few linguistic anachronisms in the dialogue on the Beagle: the word scientist was not even coined until 1833, maverick first appeared in print in 1867, and evolved is used where transformed or transmuted would have been more likely (although perhaps artistic license is to blame). Moreover, Darwin and FitzRoy, a notorious martinet, would not have addressed each other by their given names in front of the crew. But these are obviously minuscule flaws in what is overall a valuable resource for anyone looking for a lively and appealing introduction to Darwin and the voyage of the Beagle.


Norman Ellstrand’s informative book presents a detailed, and in places humorous, way of telling us how much of our food results from the sex acts of plants. As the title suggests, the author wants to educate while entertaining us by teaching us that...