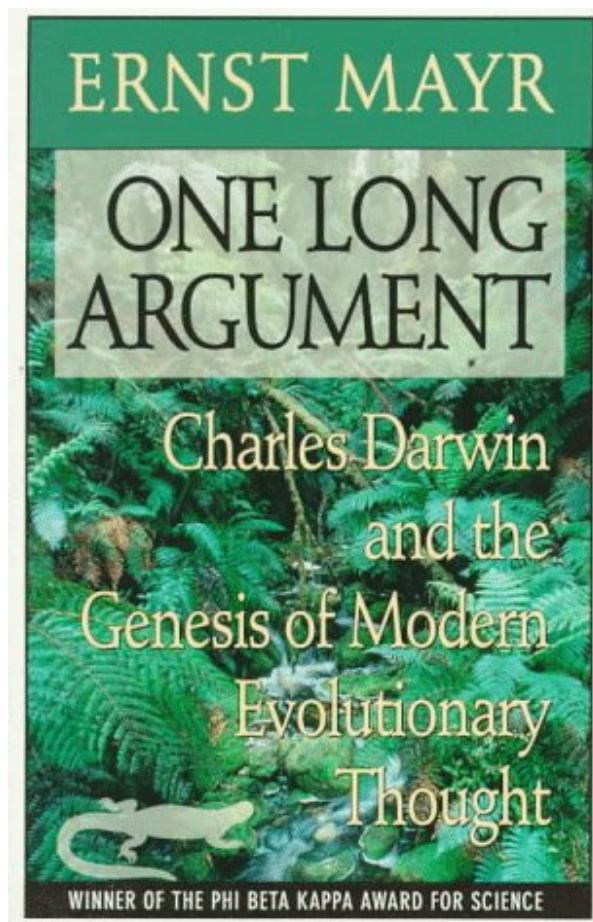
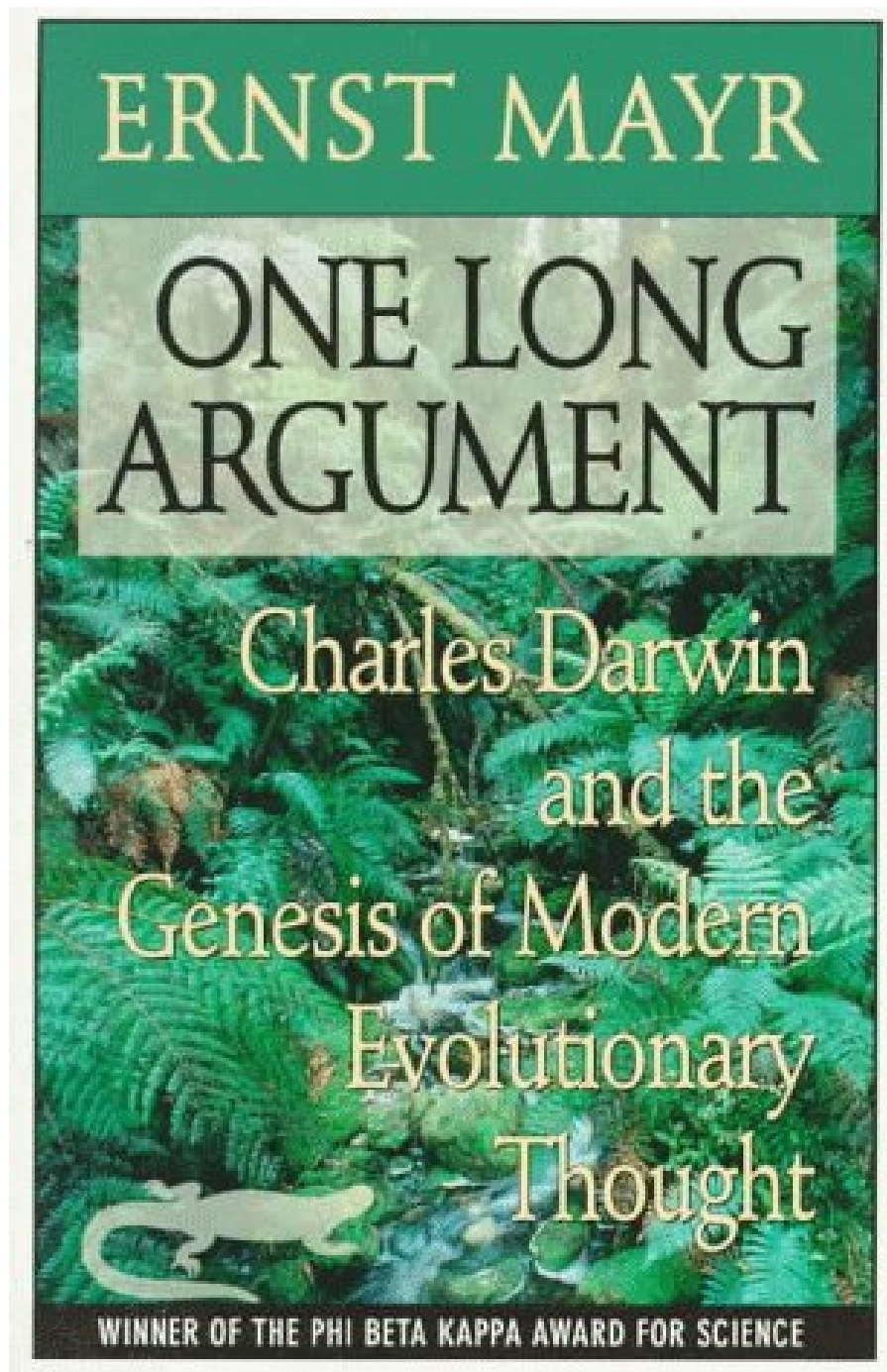


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From Library Journal

Mayr has written a clear, concise, and insightful book about those major issues surrounding the theory of evolution: extinction, finalism (teleology), essentialism, creationism, determinism, neo-Darwinism, and sociobiology. He argues that it was Darwin's unique genius, scientific research, and rational speculation that founded the ongoing mechanist/materialist open-ended but complex (five subtheories) paradigm of organic evolution by common descent through genetic variation, natural selection, and population dynamics. In this historical and critical survey, Mayr also examines the influential ideas of Aristotle, T.H. Huxley, Thomas Malthus, A.R. Wallace, and especially August Weismann (among others). In particular, he points out the far-reaching significance of ornithologist John Gould's study of speciation among those mockingbirds (not finches) on the Galapagos Islands; it greatly helped to convince Darwin that evolution is indeed a fact of nature. Highly recommended for informed laypersons, students, and scholars.

- H. James Birx, Canisius Coll., Buffalo, N.Y.

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Review

Scientific theories...like living species, have forerunners and descendants, and they exhibit subtle changes over time...One Long Argument succeeds admirably in pinpointing the bits of evidence and inference that seeded Darwin's grand vision, and it illuminates his errors along with his insights. (Geoffrey Cowley New York Times Book Review)

You will read this book with great pleasure...Mayr simply admires Darwin to the hilt... Mayr's awe of Darwin is both illuminating and stimulating. It is also profoundly authoritative. Who else can present himself so effortlessly as a living symbol of the breadth of evolutionary thought in the twentieth century? (Jeffrey Levinton BioScience)

This short book should be read by anyone with an interest in the development, impact, and meaning of Darwinism. It is well written and accessible, without skimping on scholarship. (Robert Schoch Science Books and Films)

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Evolutionary theory ranks as one of the most powerful concepts of modern civilization. Its effects on our view of life have been wide and deep. One of the most world-shaking books ever published, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, first appeared in print over 130 years ago, and it touched off a debate that rages to this day. Every modern evolutionist turns to Darwin's work again and again. Current controversies in the life sciences very often have as their starting point some vagueness in Darwin's writings or some question Darwin was unable to answer owing to the insufficient biological knowledge available during his time. Despite the intense study of Darwin's life and work, however, many of us cannot explain his theories (he had several separate ones) and the evidence and reasoning behind them, nor do we appreciate the modifications of the Darwinian paradigm that have kept it viable throughout the twentieth century. Who could elucidate the subtleties of Darwin's thought and that of his contemporaries and intellectual heirs--A. R. Wallace, T. H. Huxley, August Weismann, Asa Gray--better than Ernst Mayr, a man considered by many to be the greatest evolutionist of the century? In this gem of historical scholarship, Mayr has achieved a remarkable distillation of Charles Darwin's scientific thought and his enormous legacy to twentieth-century biology. Here we have an accessible account of the revolutionary ideas that Darwin thrust upon the world. Describing his treatise as "one long argument," Darwin definitively refuted the belief in the divine creation of each individual species, establishing in its place the concept that all of life descended from a common ancestor. He proposed the idea that humans were not the special products of creation but evolved according to principles that operate everywhere else in the living world; he upset current notions of a perfectly designed, benign natural world and substituted in their place the concept of a struggle for survival; and he introduced probability, chance, and uniqueness into scientific discourse. This is an important book for students, biologists, and general readers interested in the history of ideas--especially ideas that have radically altered our worldview. Here is a book by a grand master that spells out in simple terms the historical issues and presents the controversies in a manner that makes them understandable from a modern perspective.

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Most helpful customer reviews

17 of 18 people found the following review helpful.

You must understand the title to not be disappointed

By Matthew Borr

The title "One Long Argument", it is a reference to part of Darwin's introductory description to The Origin of Species (appearing within Origin itself). This book is not about arguing with Creationists (Thank God ;). I suspect the above reviewers were misled to the point that they felt rating stars must be subtracted. Don't be fooled by title bashers. This is an excellent history and theory primer for the novice and a nice knowledge gap filler for those well-read in the science of evolution and biology.

22 of 25 people found the following review helpful.

Perhaps the best discussion of Darwinism yet

By John Anderson

This is definitely THE book to give friends, students and even enemies who are interested in the theory of Evolution by Natural Selection. Ernst Mayr, one of the foremost architects of our understanding of the ecological nature of evolution draws on his immense scholarship to bring us a highly readable text on the many facets of Darwinism. I have given this book to graduate and undergraduate students, we have fought over it in seminars, and in general it holds a premier place in the library of anyone with a genuine interest in understanding one of the key elements of modern biology.

26 of 33 people found the following review helpful.

A great history, not an argument

By RW

As an introductory work in the history of science, this book offers an excellent overview. Mayr was a pre-eminent evolutionary biologist and one of the authors of the "evolutionary synthesis" of the 1940's. This book is an excellent and succinct history of the development of the theories of common descent and natural selection among the biological community from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

I recommend it for the novice, however. For those interested in a more thorough examination of the sociological, and not just biological, history of Darwinian theory, I would suggest Bowler's "Evolution", which is commonly assigned in post-Newton history of science survey classes. As a biologist, Mayr tends to view the history of evolutionary thought, to which he contributed so much, in a triumphalist manner, which is out of step with most scholarly historiography on the subject. As a biologist, one can hardly blame him. As a historian, he should know better. I would also note that he gives short shrift at the end of the book to all the recent developments in evolutionary research. For instance, he barely mentions the "rediscovery" of the power of sexual selection in the 1970's and 1980's, an idea originally proposed by Darwin himself, and which dominates so much contemporary research.

That brings me to my second point. While an excellent brief history, this book is not a detailed argument describing all the current evidence and thoughts on natural selection, as the title somewhat implies. For that, one should turn to any of Mayr's several other works.

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