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Comics & Graphic Novels

Darwin: A Graphic Biography
Eugene Byrne
Simon Gurr, illustrator
Smithsonian Books
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At this point in history, the name Darwin is so loaded with meaning that it's tough to imagine anyone opening a biography without preconceptions. In *Darwin: A Graphic Biography*, Eugene Byrne and Simon Gurr have created an enjoyable account of Darwin's life and accomplishments that will resonate with young readers and clarify the often muddy waters surrounding the man and his contributions to science.

The book is framed by a conceit called "Ape TV," which consists of a production crew of talking apes who deliver information throughout. Luckily, "Ape TV" is used sparingly, because although it's an excellent vehicle for providing info and background, it can be excessively jokey, and it's debatable as to whether the book would suffer in its appeal to the target audience of ten to fifteen year olds without it.

The bulk of the book is masterfully done. Gurr's illustrations are detailed enough to convey slight differences in finch beaks and bone development, view cross-sections of Darwin's ship and maps of the ocean paths it traveled, and keep a large cast of characters distinct and easily recognizable, all while preserving a light and smooth flow—no easy task, given the complexity of some of the ideas discussed.

Byrne gives us Darwin's life story, a true biography with equal time granted to the childhood and personal life of the man and an appropriately lengthy focus on the development and importance of his theory of evolution. Not only is Darwin's theory easy to understand in this format, but it's clear why it was so important. It's also easy for young readers to relate to Darwin, with his demonstrated uncertainty, as a young man, about what to do with his life. Byrne puts Darwin's feelings into terms modern readers can better grasp: "A trip around the world even nowadays is a big adventure, but in 1831 it was almost unimaginable. Very few people had ever circumnavigated—traveled all the way around—the globe … Think of it in

modern terms as being given the chance to travel into space."

These few words take what could seem like a tedious, less-than-thrilling journey and reframe it so the reader can appreciate the excitement that young Darwin must have felt when embarking upon his famous voyage aboard the *Beagle*.

The book's primary audience may be children and teenagers, but Byrne doesn't dumb down the science; he simply gets to the core of it. As a result, *Darwin: A Graphic Biography* is fun and informative for readers of any age.

Peter Dabbene