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Science

The Evolution of Everything: How Selection Shapes Culture, Commerce, and Nature
Mark Sumner
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Charles Darwin never uttered the phrase "survival of the fittest." That was, in point of fact, Herbert Spencer, in his 1864 book, *Principles of Biology*. Spencer was more interested in serving personal philosophical goals than biology, and actually rejected the idea of natural selection in favor of Lamarckism (the inheritance of acquired traits), which conveniently lent biological weight to classist attitudes.

In *The Evolution of Everything*, Mark Sumner attempts to explain the origins of evolutionary theory itself, tracing the conception of Darwin's ideas across history, as well as the misconception of Darwin's ideas that has passed down to the modern age.

The author has written several novels, and has been a contributing editor at Daily Kos since 2006; he has written for *The Nation* and appeared on both NPR and the BBC. His book, *Devil's Tower*, received nominations for both the Nebula Award and the World Fantasy Award.

For one that claims to cover the evolution of everything, Sumner's book is surprisingly slight. That said, it does cover a staggering breadth of material. Herein lies a grand, bracingly brisk tour of selection theory and the various ways it intersects with everyday, "unnatural" life.

Sumner cannot be faulted for lack of ambition: he dives into subjects as diverse as island dwarfism in mammoths and the economic principles behind "late mover's advantage." All of it serves to point out problems with the modern American perception of natural selection. In essence, he's trying to free Darwin from the Social Darwinists once and for all.

All this should be unwieldy, but Sumner excels at finding interesting parallels, interweaving, for example, the story of the evolution of the Ford Mustang with the evolution of equine mustangs ("mustang mustangs," as he calls them). He jumps between biology, geology, history, and economics with uncommon nimbleness.

Given that Sumner's book handles broad swaths of biology, history, and economics, it has an equally broad appeal for any armchair biologists, historians, and economists. Regardless

of where the reader's knowledge lies, he or she is bound to find interesting parallels in other fields. Furthermore, Sumner stays away from technical language, providing a very accessible overview—readers should not stay away for fear of jargon.

Few science books cover this much ground in so little space. *The Evolution of Everything* opens up dozens of avenues for further inquiry—and asking questions is, after all, how Darwin (and science itself) got started.

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