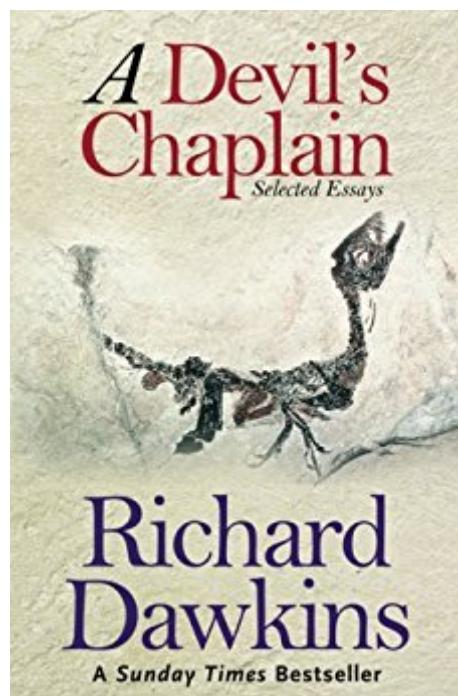


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A Devil's Chaplain: Selected Writings



Synopsis

Richard Dawkins is one of the finest minds in science, and in this superb collection of essays and letters, he demonstrates the depth of his knowledge and the rich variety of his interests. Whether he is examining postmodernism or the Human Genome Project, penning a letter to his daughter, or writing a moving eulogy to Douglas Adams and e-mailing Stephen Jay Gould, Dawkins writes with an intellectual vigour and grace that is second to none. This is a very human collection that shows not only the acuity of Dawkins' scientific mind, but also his sense of humour and the warmth of his relationships with friends and family.

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Customer Reviews

Charles Darwin said that there was grandeur in his view of life produced by natural selection, but it was not all a pretty picture. He wrote his friend Joseph Hooker in 1856: "What a book a Devil's Chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horridly cruel works of nature."

Richard Dawkins has taken the quotation for the title of a collection of his writings, *A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love* (Houghton Mifflin). Darwin also wrote of a particular wasp: "I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living

body of caterpillars." But as Darwin (and Dawkins) would remind us, the evolutionary process has produced wonderfully designed creatures, and a wasp who cares for its young by letting them hatch within a hapless caterpillar is simply doing a competent job of getting the young off to a good start. It might be distasteful to us (and should have been to a supreme being), but nature just doesn't care. It isn't kindness of the mother wasp, or cruelty to the caterpillar, but simply amoral nature. But as chaplain, Dawkins notes that while wasps and caterpillars can do nothing about such amorality, we can. "At the same time as I support Darwinism as a scientist, I am a passionate anti-Darwinian when it comes to politics and how we should conduct our human affairs." There is no inconsistency here any more than in the physician who studies cancer, but is bent on eliminating it. And as devil's chaplain, Dawkins urges us to use our evolution-given brains, reject the pacifiers of faith in immortality, and rejoice in our short lives because they are all we have.

One of the wonderful things about this book is the sense that one gets of a distinguished scientist letting his hair down, as it were, and discoursing informally on a number of interesting subjects including some outside his area of expertise. In the game of "Who would you invite to dinner if you could choose anybody?" Oxford University Professor Richard Dawkins, author of *The Selfish Gene*, and other important works on evolution, would be near the top of my list. Not that I agree with everything he says. Indeed, that is part of the fun. Dawkins is adamant on some subjects, religion being one of them. A goodly portion of this book is devoted to letting us know exactly how he feels about the "God hypothesis," "liberal agnostics," and the so-called miracles recognized by especially the Catholic Church. The title of Chapter 3.3, "The Great Convergence" (of science and religion), for example, is used ironically. He sees no convergence; in fact, he calls such a notion "a shallow, empty, hollow, spin-doctored sham." (p. 151) Clearly Dawkins is not a man to mince words. But his insistence on a restrictive definition of "God" as "a hypothetical being who answers prayers; intervenes to save cancer patients...forgives sin," etc., is really the problem. He considers the "religion" attributed to scientists like Einstein, Carl Sagan, Paul Davies and others (and even himself!) to involve a misuse of the term, calling such a definition "flabbily elastic" and not religion as experienced by "the ordinary person in the pew." (p. 147) But what Dawkins is really railing against is the illegitimacy of believing in the supernatural and science at the same time.

Richard Dawkins is one of the most influential and controversial essayists of today. A renowned evolutionary biologist, he currently holds the Charles Simonyi Chair at Oxford University. In his book *A Devil's Chaplain* he brings together 25 years and some of his best and most polemic essays

(some previously unpublished) with subjects dealing with everything from love to evolution. He employs his analytical passion to raise some mind-blowing questions and does not back down from challenging what many people consider as fundamental truths. He analyzes very intricate topics and situations through a scientific lens and is able to do it with clarity and simplicity. Although he has been criticized for some strong anti-religious standpoints and instances where his bias affects his writing; I believe that his work, even if you don't agree with it, is worth reading for he definitely makes some very valid points. I believe Richard Dawkins is one of the elite essayist because of his ability to take on such complex beliefs, break it down systematically and with the use of some philosophy prove his point; all while keeping a clear and simple style. He displays mastery in several subjects including, but not restricted to physics, biology and philosophy. This book is divided into seven sections, each with a preamble. These sections are themselves made up of short and varied articles enabling reader is also able to jump from section to section and read different pieces since the order is not overly central. This complemented by his concise style making for a very easy read. This book is not only a great read but it could change the way you think about some of the most basic things in your life and will force you to re-analyze several aspects of today's society.

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