



# Charles Darwin

Books Reviewed:

[Charles Darwin](#) [1]

Issue:

[174](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Margaret Mallett](#) [3]

Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

This book, which marks the bicentenary of Darwin's birth, uses the device of a diary written by a ship's boy to interest young readers in the great scientist's travels on HMS *Beagle*. The boy and his pet are fictions, but the events related are based on what actually happened. It was during these journeys that so many of the specimens were collected that led to Darwin's ground-breaking scientific theory of evolution.

The narrative keeps up the pace and excitement of the journey. Young readers will gain insight into Darwin's new paradigm which explains the development of human beings through a process of adaptation from simple single celled organisms.

The first person 'voice' is appropriate for providing answers to the sort of questions a pupil might wonder about. How do you keep plant and animal specimens fresh to work on when you return? Darwin used alcohol. The story form also makes it possible to describe how Darwin went about his work, first collecting specimens and observing the plants and creatures in their natural environment, and then preserving them and cataloguing them meticulously for careful study.

The artist complements the written text by showing the many plants and creatures collected and the awe inspiring environments: huge waterfalls on Tahiti, volcanoes on the shores of Chile and the rocky habitats of the many tortoises and iguanas on the Galapagos island that show no inherited fear of human beings. There are useful maps, showing Darwin's journey round South America and its environs; the cut-away drawing of the boat gives a sense of how the space on a ship was organised.

The device of a fictional diarist somehow energises social commentary. A strength of the text is that it shows that different people took up particular positions on the issues of the day. The captain of the ship and Darwin did not agree about the morality of slavery. The diarist records Darwin's horror at the actions of the woman who used a thumbscrew on her female slaves.

The additional sections are a treasure store of information. We have details on what happened next and facts about Darwin's specimens, about ship life - jobs, health, punishments and food - and about the publishing of **On the Origin of the Species** in 1859. Darwin's life is also put into context by the mention of other scientists like Faraday the physicist and Maria Mitchell, the first professional woman astronomer.

There is a comprehensive index and useful glossary ? as there should be.

It is important to point out that the continuous and, at times, copious prose makes considerable demands on the young reader. But older children need to be stretched by books like this, in addition to reading postmodern information books, in paper form and on screen. The latter tend to work through using excellent design and the sort of illustrations that benefit from advanced technology. Their written text, however, is often quite brief.

There is a lot an imaginative teacher and class could do to reflect on all that is here. Such an exciting text would be satisfying to read aloud to the class, perhaps asking some children to read prepared passages. It could also be adapted for drama work, using a narrator, and could lead to script writing thus enhancing English and literacy programmes as well as science. In short, a fine addition to every primary school library.

Running Order:

25

---

**Source URL (retrieved on *May '20*):** <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/174/childrens-books/reviews/charles-darwin>

**Links:**

[1] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/charles-darwin>

[2] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/174>

[3] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/margaret-mallett>