

The REALL News

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." — James Randi

Volume 14, Number 2

March 2006

Darwin, Kurtz and Kids in the Hall

Life at CFI-West, Part 2

by Bob Ladendorf

As everyone knows by now, Charles Darwin shares the same birth day and year as Abe Lincoln — February 12, 1809. In recent years, more and more skeptic and humanist groups from around the world have been celebrating Darwin Day. Even some churches supported evolution this year by celebrating Darwin Day.

At the Center for Inquiry-West in Hollywood, where I became the chief operating officer last year, Darwin Day is celebrated, too, most often with a speaker and a Darwin Day birthday cake. By January, we were having a hard time attracting a local speaker, but we would certainly have the cake.

One night as I walked past my bookcase in my

studio apartment, I glanced at my copy of *The Origin of Species*. It popped into my head at that moment — “Why don’t we read the whole book?”

From that bit of mad inspiration, I checked out the idea with a writer friend, who enthusiastically

supported it, and then proposed it the next day to Executive Director Jim Underdown, who also was enthusiastic and gave it the green light.

A Gathering of Readers

What we then talked about was gathering together many readers, from writers and artists to filmmakers and celebrities. Through Jim’s comedy and film and TV

contacts and mine with writers and screenwriters, we rapidly started getting readers. With the additional help of M.G. Lord, an author and writer who had spoken at the Center in October, we were able to get professors, film directors and screenwriters and artists through her membership with the Los Angeles



Kurtz with Tabash and Cake: CFI Founder and Chairman Paul Kurtz gave a major speech to a sold-out crowd of more than 150 people at the Center for Inquiry-West on Feb. 19. The lecture was part of a celebration of the 10th year for CFI-West, which has been at its new location for more than three years. CFI-West Chairman Eddie Tabash, a constitutional lawyer and first amendment specialist, introduced Paul before the lecture.

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Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land is a non-profit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe-science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL does not reject paranormal claims on *a priori* grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

Annual Membership Rates: Regular, \$20; student, \$15; family, \$30; patron, \$50 or more; subscription only, \$12.

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REALL Contacts

Chairman, Wally Hartshorn chairman@reall.org
Editor, Clark Olson editor@reall.org
Web Site www.reall.org

From the Chairman

Wally Hartshorn

Are we done with winter yet? I know I have no right to complain, given how mild the weather has been so far, but I can't help it. I enjoy the change in the seasons, but I'd be content if winter lasted about 3 weeks. We could take the 10 unused weeks and split them 60-40 between spring and fall. (I prefer spring!) All in favor?

Our annual Darwin Day event went pretty well. We had a nice turnout, good food, and good conversation. I'd call that a success! We didn't get any pre-event publicity done this year, in part because we didn't have anything special planned, but maybe we can come up with something notable for next year (which will be Darwin's 198th birthday). Bob Ladendorf's article shows that CFI-West certainly had something notable planned for this year! I'm not sure I'm up to 18½ hours of reading *The Origin of Species* out loud, but maybe we can come up with something a bit less grandiose.

This month's meeting will be a little bit of everything. Read about it on the back page. I particularly want to draw your attention to the part about bringing a book that you are reading. I'm currently reading *Why Intelligent Design Fails: A Scientific Critique of the New Creationism*, edited by Matt Young and Taner Edis. It's a very interesting examination of the scientific arguments against Intelligent Design. So what's on your bookshelf? Bring it to the meeting and tell us about it! ♥

A Nod to Our Patrons

REALL would like to thank our patron members. Through their extra generosity, REALL is able to continue to grow as a force for critical thinking in Central Illinois. To become a patron member of REALL, please use the membership form insert. Patron members are:

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Institute for the Humanities at USC.

On the advice of Jim's friend, Julia Sweeney, who appeared as Pat on Saturday Night Live and developed her own solo act about drifting from religion, we downloaded *The Origin of Species* from the Internet, then double-spaced, boldfaced and enlarged it. We ended up with about 1,000 pages that I produced and placed in six binders for reading. I made two more full copies because we had to keep the readers with copies for continuous reading, and I had to follow and tell readers where to stop and start.

I estimated that it would take about 17 hours to read, but we finished after 18½, starting at midnight and reading continuously through the night, sometimes with just one person in the audience. One listener was there the whole time and gave us a stand-

ing ovation at the end when Julia Sweeney gleefully finished at 6:30 p.m.

Jim started off the reading followed by me and about 60 others over the course of the night and day.

Each reader read for approximately 15 minutes until the middle of the afternoon when we scheduled 30 of the most well-known readers to read marked sections of about five minutes each for the last two chapters.

Here are some of those 30 readers: Sweeney; Robert Forster, Academy Award nominated actor; Prof. Joseph Manson, anthropology, UCLA; Alan Katz, pro-

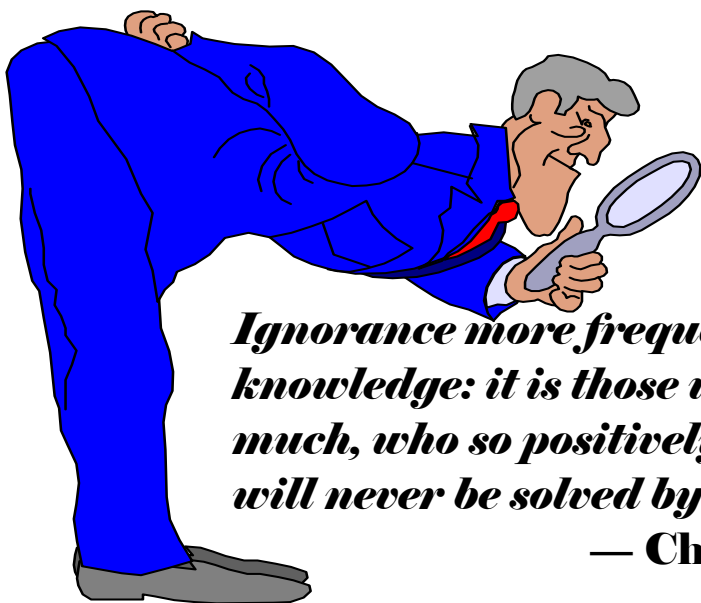
ducer; Mike Reiss, writer, "The Simpsons"; M.G. Lord, author of *Astro Turf: The Private Life of Rocket Science*; Robin Swicord, screenwriter, *Memoirs of a Geisha*; Jonathan Lynn, filmmaker, director of *My Cousin Vinny*; Judith Freeman, novelist; Prof. Leo Brady, Bing Professor of English, USC; Brian Flemming, documentary filmmaker, *The God Who Wasn't There*; David Pieri, geologist, Jet Propulsion Laboratory; and Margaret Wertheim, writer and author of *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*.

After the cheers went up from the crowd at the end, we had Darwin birthday cake and enjoyed seeing a squirrel monkey that a handler brought for all to see and learn about. No press actually showed up

("CFI-West" continued on page 4)



After the Reading: Actors Robert Forster and Julia Sweeney were the final readers of *The Origin of Species* on Feb. 12. CFI-West Executive Director Jim Underdown (right) was the first reader at midnight. After the reading, they helped celebrate with a Darwin Day birthday cake.



Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge: it is those who know little, not those who know much, who so positively assert that this or that problem will never be solved by science.

— Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*

(“CFI-West” continued from page 3)

despite Jim’s attempts to attract print and television. But we later received glowing praise from CFI founder and chairman, Paul Kurtz, who indicated that it was an important event to honor the father of evolution who’s been under relentless attacks from the proponents of creationism and Intelligent Design. He encouraged others to consider readings such as the one we did.

After being up for 36 hours, I went home that night and slept for 10 hours.

A Turning Point for Secular Humanism

Several days later, Paul Kurtz came to Los Angeles for a series of meetings with our staff and to

make a major speech about encouraging planetary ethics. The lecture on Sunday, February 19, was sold out, actually oversold, with more than 150 attendees listening to his 1½-hour talk followed by a box lunch. The event took a lot of planning, and we gathered together 10 volunteers to help out.

In an announcement before the talk, Paul said, “Many freethinkers, atheists, and secularists have spent the lion’s share of their energy refuting religion. Although important, this does not go far enough. It is far too negative.

“Theists declare, ‘If you do not believe in God, you cannot be moral.’ We need to demonstrate that this is *not* the case, that secular humanists *can* express positive values and constructive principles. We face dangerous forms of repression, even a



Darwin Day Reader - M.G. Lord: Author M.G. Lord was one of 60 readers, some of them walk-ons in the middle of the night, who read **The Origin of Species** to honor Charles Darwin on his 197th birthday.



Darwin Day Reader - Robin Swicord: Robin Swicord, screenwriter for *Memoirs of a Geisha*, was one among many artists, writers, scientists and regular citizens who read **The Origin of Species**.

theocratic state in America. It is urgent that we take new directions. We need to create new Humanistic Ethics that are planetary in scope.”

Paul went on to explain that skeptics and humanists believe in the fullness of life in the here and now, the right of privacy and building relationships, pleasurable enjoyment and creative fulfillment, sexual freedom and loving others, personal friendships and others. “We need to develop new Planetary Ethics over and beyond the racial, religious, nationalistic, ethnic, or gender barriers of the past — that focus on the dignity and value of every person in the planetary community.”

After lunch, Paul lingered with the crowd and signed many of the books that we sold there.

In addition, he helped us to set our sights in bringing even more academic lectures, seminars and debates to the Center. We will be adding a reading room to our library that is currently being organized by a volunteer who plans to get a degree in library science. We’ll also have more open houses and start up a coffee house to attract more



Darwin Day Reader - Mike Reiss: Mike Reiss, who writes for “The Simpsons,” was one of the final 30 readers to end the marathon reading of *The Origin of Species*.

people to stop in and engage in open discussions or reading the latest publications. Centers also will feature art exhibitions, and we expect our first on in May by a glass ceramic artist who will donate a piece to the Center.

In the meantime, theater shows, such as comedy groups, continue in our Steve Al-

len Theater under the creative direction of Amit Itelman. In fact, the day after Paul Kurtz’s lecture, the first reunion of the 1990s popular comedy group, the Kids in the Hall, came to the Center for three sold out performances.

As the Center plans to expand its activities, we are also starting various committees to increase donations and programs. There are a lot of people to attract in the Los Angeles area, and these major events illustrate how critical thinking is alive and well in Southern California.

Bob Ladendorf, who has been working at the Center for Inquiry-West in Hollywood since last year, is a co-founder of RE-ALL, and travels between his home in Springfield and Los Angeles. ☹



Darwin Day Finale: As Julia Sweeney read the final sentence, the crowd of listeners and readers applauded. The man standing in the back was there for the whole reading.

Gleanings

by Clark Olson

There was no creationist activity in the State J-R this month. I didn't notice much in the national media either but NCSE did report various legislative activity around the country. The Feb 06 issue of *Harper's* has an article about witnessing the Dover trial by Matthew Chapman, Darwin's great-great-grandson.

The *New York Times* Science

Times section of Feb. 21

had an article about the Discovery Institute and its list of 514 scientists supporting the following:

"A Scientific Dissent From Darwinism. We are skeptical of claims for the ability of random mutation and natural selection to account for the complexity of life. Careful examination of the evidence for Darwinian theory should be encouraged." Those signing had to have a PhD in engineering, math, computer science, biology chemistry or other natural science. Discovery admits only one quarter are biologists. I looked up the web site for the list and noted a few things. Perhaps a couple dozen signers were from foreign institutions including South Africa, Poland and Mexico. There was one member of the NAS (a chemist). There were a number from MIT and other big schools. I found a few from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Chicago. The *NYT* article profiled Gregory J. Brewer of SIU-Springfield, who wrote one of the letters to *State Journal-Register* last year supporting Intelligent Design.

If one looks critically at the statement it seems that signers could have a range of scientific attitudes. Unfortunately no one has tried to get more detailed responses from any signers. However, the *NYT* called up 20 randomly selected signers and reviewed public

statements by 12 others. This effort suggested that many were of conservative religious persuasion.

I attended an evolution for teachers event at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) annual meeting in St. Louis on the afternoon of Feb 19. The event was co-sponsored by over 35 local and national science organizations.

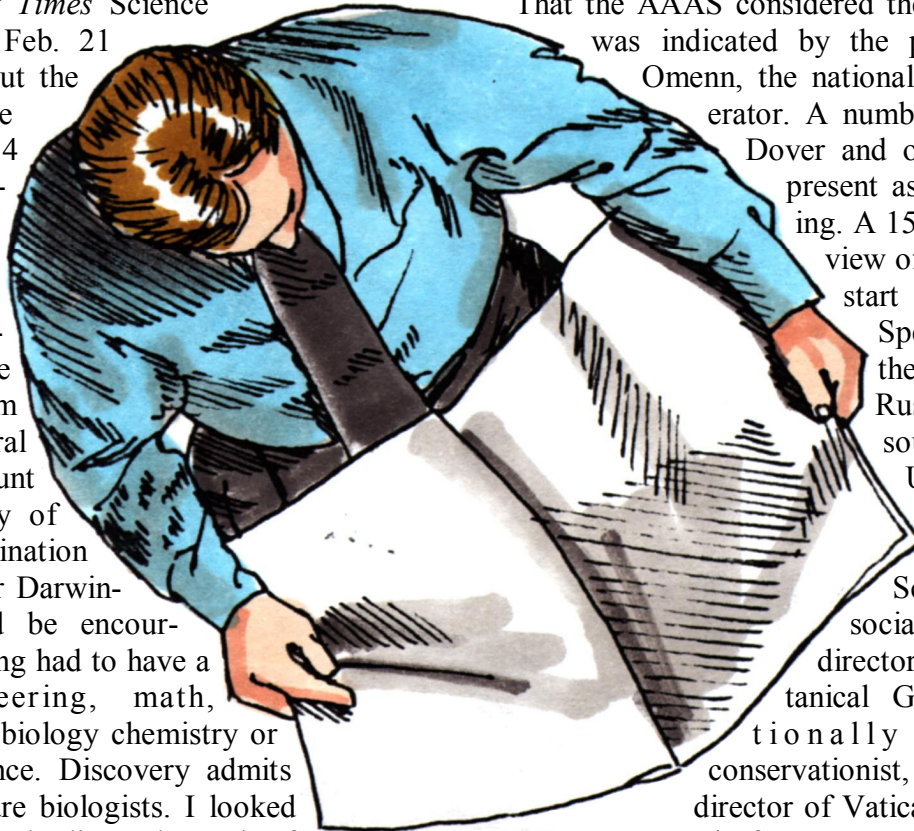
That the AAAS considered the meeting important was indicated by the presence of Gilbert Omenn, the national president, as moderator. A number of teachers from

Dover and other localities were present as guest of the meeting. A 15-minute video interview of them was shown to start off the meeting.

Speakers for the rest of the session included Russ Carnahan, Missouri representative to US Congress, Linda Froschauer, president of National Science Teachers Association, Peter Raven, director of the Missouri Botanical Garden and internationally known bio-conservationist, Fr. George Coyne, director of Vatican Observatory, Jeff Corwin from TV's "Animal Planet", and

Ken Miller and Eugenie Scott plus several others for a Q/A panel session. I'd have to congratulate the organizers for getting so many prominent speakers together and all the planning involved.. However, in the end it seemed a little superficial, and the main result was mostly a big pep talk session for the teachers, which I suppose is okay. On the one hand a lot of teachers showed up, but they were not given much of a chance to interact with the panel since the session was late in the afternoon and only about a half hour long.

Before the evolution event I visited some exhibit booths and had an interesting conversation with a biology teacher from a local college who is doing curriculum development for high schools. He said he



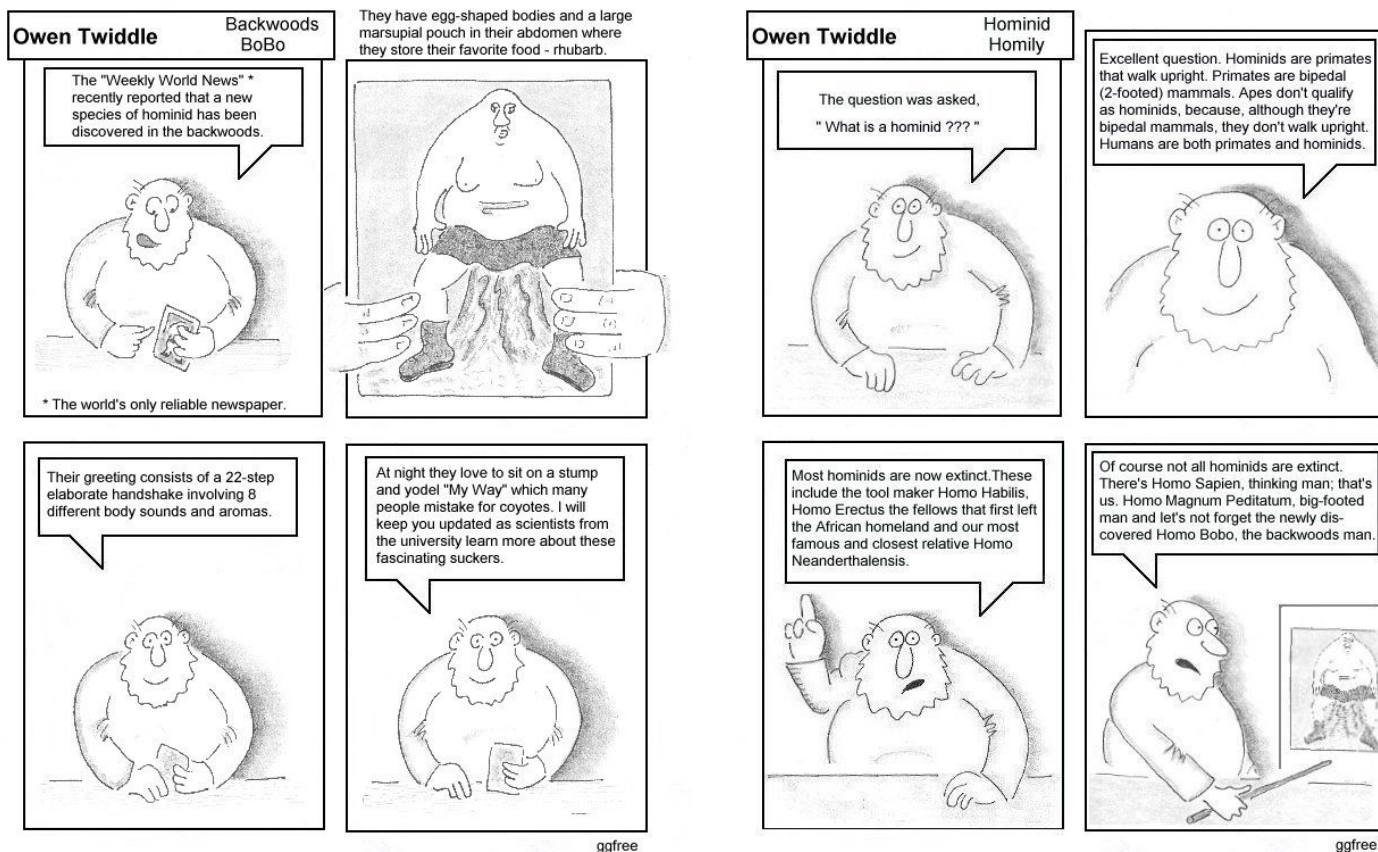
was being pressured by the local school superintendent to leave out the subject of evolution in the plans he was developing. This conversation was at the NCSE booth and the representative there told him to let them know and they would get in touch with reporters to air the problem. So REALL should think about ways we can support evolution in such situations. Also this teacher did not know we existed, so we need more publicity.

The *St. Louis Post Dispatch* covered the event at the top of p1 in the Feb. 20 edition. The reporter interviewed a teacher from Springfield who had had adverse experiences with teaching evolution. The article also noted other activities which I had missed at the general meeting, including launching of a new organization to support science called "Alliance for Science", which should be described somewhere on the AAAS website.

Science magazine (Feb. 10, 2006, p769) had an article about creationism on college campuses around the country as discovered in interviews with two dozen college professors in many universities. As usual the news is pretty depressing with up to a third or so of students professing young earth crea-

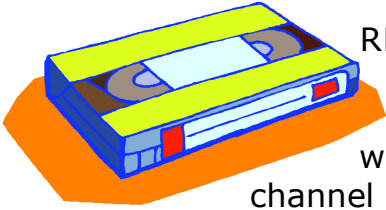
tionism, even in some biology/geology classes, as determined by teacher questionnaires. Slightly optimistic results were obtained from polling taken before and after an introductory biology course at West Virginia University in Parkersburg for the question "Do you accept that modern man and modern great apes had a common ancestor several million years ago?" "Yes" went up from 40 to 47% and "no" went down from 37 to 29%, with "maybe" increasing by 1%. An encouraging development is that several universities were reported as developing inter-department programs and also lecture programs for outsiders, including high school teachers.

The above article also quotes Ken Miller of Brown noting that even though students are resisting evolution in class "evolutionary concepts are dispersing in other ways, in emerging fields such as rational drug design, comparative genomics, and computational biology." It seems to me *Science* magazine has had an increasing number of mentions of evolution in various articles over the years. Also the idea is spreading to literary analysis (*Science* Feb. 3, 2006, p612) as analysis of human behavior! 🐼



Our Next Meeting

A Skeptic Potpourri



REALL Board member Clark Olson recently appeared on a program called *Works in Progress, World in Progress*, which appeared on Springfield's cable channel 4 (a community access channel). In his appearance, he discussed the recent challenges to evolution. The program is only 30 minutes long, so what else can we do? Well, a British program called "Creature Comforts" recently featured some "man in the street" opinions about evolution — with a twist. If you haven't seen the show before, you'll just have to come to see what I'm talking about. That will leave us plenty of time to talk, so **bring along a book that you've been reading and share your thoughts!**



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Springfield, Illinois
Lincoln Library (7th & Capitol)
Tuesday, March 7, 7:00 PM

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to the Public

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