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## Marriage of opposites: Darwin and his devout wife

By *Stephen Lowman*

This year has been dubbed the "Darwin Year." It was 200 years ago that Charles Darwin was born and 150 years ago "The Origin of Species," his momentous work of scientific literature outlining his theory of natural selection, was published. The number of texts written about him and his work could fill a large bookstore -- a bookstore visited only by the scholarly and scientific-minded among us.

Deborah Heiligman added to the literature on Charles Darwin when her book "[Charles and Emma: The Darwins' Leap of Faith](#)" was published earlier this year. This book, however, is shelved in the Young Adult section.

"Charles and Emma" is unusual in that its focus is not a survey of

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Charles Darwin's life or an examination of his research, but rather his marriage to the devoutly religious Emma Wedgwood. How the Darwins managed to reconcile their opposing world views during their long and deeply loving relationship fills the book with tension.

Earlier this month, "Charles and Emma" was named a 2009 National Book Award finalist for young people's literature. Appropriately enough, then, last week Heiligman was quizzed by young people from two fifth grade classes who visited the District's Politics and Prose bookstore.

Heiligman could be forgiven for feeling "just a little worried" prior to the event. There are few topics more combustible than evolution -- especially when children are involved. But this Q & A was free from the emotional outbursts and shouting matches that frequently occur when adults discuss faith and science.

They asked questions like: When did Darwin live? How did he die? What was his family like? How old was his daughter Annie when she died? If Heiligman met Charles Darwin today, what would she ask him?

The lesson Heiligman hopes to impart on her young readers is "that science and religion can coexist peacefully, that two people can have very different points of view and still really understand and respect the other person's point of view."

That peaceful coexistence is as true of Heiligman's marriage as it was the Darwins'.

She called the book "very personal" and dedicates it to her husband, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jonathan Weiner. They met when she had just graduated from college, having majored in religious studies. He was a young science writer.

"I was looking at the world from a religious perspective and he was all about science," she said. "He wooed me with science, and I was someone who had taken one science course in college - Biology for Poets."

Heiligman describes herself as an "agnostic towards the believer side" and her husband as "agnostic towards the atheist side." While the contrast between them is not as stark as it was between Charles and Emma, Heiligman said their differing views on religion have fueled many

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conversations throughout their relationship.

A few years ago he commented that he read something about Charles Darwin's wife being religious.

"Right away, I knew I had a story," she said.

Under deadline pressure to get the book out in time for the Darwin Year, Heiligman began writing it in 2007 and finished it in a year and half - a quick lick for such dense material.

"The first part of my research was really about them and their story," she said. "I kept putting off getting too much into the science because, first, I didn't want the science to take up their story, and second, I was daunted by it."

By reading Darwin's books and talking with scholars, Heiligman was able to teach herself the science.

"I had to write it simply enough so children would understand it, and I also didn't want it to get in the way of the story. So I had to weave it in to the story so the reader doesn't think, "O.K., now I have to read about the science."

One hundred and fifty years after "The Origin of Species," the subject of evolution continues to be a cultural and curricular hot potato. But the response to "Charles and Emma" has been overwhelming positive, from children and adults alike.

"It's my belief you can write about anything for children, you just have to do it the right way and at the right level," she said.

Heiligman has finished a young adult novel and is working on a picture book about the mathematician Paul Erdos. The year's National Book Award winners will be announced on Nov. 18.

By Steven E. Levingston | October 26, 2009; 11:55 AM ET

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