

The Darwins' Prenup

BY BRUCE BARCOTT

CHARLES DARWIN was nothing if not methodical. In the summer of 1838, two years after his round-the-world journey on the *Beagle*, the 29-year-old naturalist drew a line down the center of a sheet of paper. Topping one column, he wrote "Marry." On the other, "Not Marry." In the middle, he wrote "This is the Question."

Among the benefits of marriage: companionship, children and "charms of music & female chit-chat." The drawbacks: loss of freedom, adventure and time to pursue his scientific work (all that chit-chat). His famous conclusion? "Marry — Marry — Marry Q.E.D." Quod erat demonstrandum: Thus it is proved.

It wasn't quite so simple as that, though, as Deborah Heiligman reveals in "Charles and Emma," a delightful book about the question at the heart of the Darwins' marriage. Even before he wooed and wed the charming Emma Wedgwood, Darwin suspected that his growing religious doubts, fed by scientific discoveries that seemed to disprove the biblical creation story, might dash his chances for matrimonial harmony. "He knew that these doubts and his revolutionary thoughts about transmutation" — what we know as evolution — "and the creation of species would stand in his way of finding a wife," Heiligman writes. "Most women were believers and wanted their husbands to be believers, too."

The issue was especially close to the heart of his intended fiancée. Emma's beloved sister Fanny had died young, and Emma believed that leading a good Christian life would allow her to reunite with Fanny in heaven. The idea of being parted from her husband — for he, as a non-believer, would be heading south after death — might be too much for her to bear.

Darwin went to his father for advice. "Conceal your doubts!" Dad said.

The son, as sons are wont to do, heard Dad's advice and promptly did the opposite. In a fireside chat, he revealed all. Emma, the sharp-minded daughter of progressive, free-thinking parents, didn't see it as a deal breaker. She wouldn't insist on word-for-word biblical belief, she told Charles, just an openness to the love of Jesus. That, he could live with. Thus began an extraordinary marriage, one bound together by love, respect and a shared lifelong struggle with the question of God.

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One of the pleasures of "Charles and Emma" comes in watching Darwin, giant of science, grapple with the mundane challenges of marriage and day-to-day life. One day he's discovering a key to the evolution of species in the beak of a finch, the next he's buying a house and removing a dead dog from the backyard. When Charles mentions that he and a friend might wish to dine every evening at

CHARLES AND EMMA

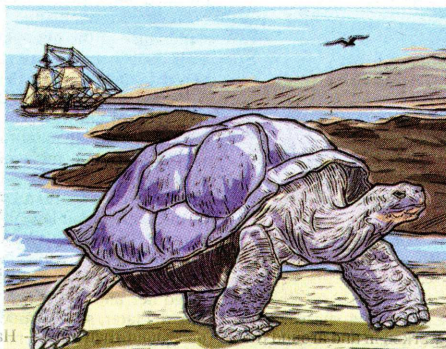
The Darwins' Leap of Faith.
By Deborah Heiligman.
Illustrated. 268 pp. Henry Holt & Company.
\$18.95. (Ages 9 to 12)

ANIMALS CHARLES DARWIN SAW

An Around-the-World Adventure.
By Sandra Markle.
Illustrated by Zina Saunders.
45 pp. Chronicle Books. \$16.99.
(Ages 7 to 10)

London's Athenaeum Club, his fiancée lets him know that if he plans to hit the clubs with his "excellent steady old friends" every night, he's got another think coming.

Theirs was a happy marriage built on compromise. He was tidy, she was not. Charles often walked the family



"Animals Charles Darwin Saw" includes a giant tortoise.

to church but didn't go in, preferring to stroll around the village while Emma and the children prayed. When the Darwins suffered the heartbreaking death of two children (they had 10 in total), Emma never read their suffering as punishment for her husband's lack of faith.

In today's climate of division between religion and science, it's instructive to read about a marriage in which the two cultures improved each for exposure to the other. Heiligman's most revealing insight comes near the end of the book, as Darwin, having developed his ideas in private for 20-some years, spends a feverish 13 months writing them up in "The Origin of Species." Without Emma, he might well have written a combative, antireligious treatise — "The God Delusion" of his day. Instead, his experience with his wife's tolerant, reasonable brand of faith led him to temper his tone.

"Had he spent more time with free-thinking, liberal intellectuals and less time sitting on the sofa with Emma," Heiligman writes, "perhaps then he would not have been quite so conciliatory and conservative in his writing of the book." Emma acted as her husband's first reader and toughest editor. As she read the manuscript, "there were parts that made her cringe; passages that she worried would move people farther away from God," Heiligman writes. "But she only criticized the argument to help Charles spell it out more clearly."

Though the church didn't exactly embrace Darwin's radical ideas, the clarity of his arguments and his even-handed tone disarmed critics who would dismiss his book as the ranting of a heretic. Thanks to Emma, the theory of evolution would have to be challenged on evidence and logic alone.

A FINAL note: To mark this year's 150th anniversary of the publication of "The Origin of Species," a raft of Darwin titles are on their way to bookstores. My two old favorites, David Quammen's "Reluctant Mr. Darwin" and Jonathan Weiner's "Beak of the Finch" (written by Deborah Heiligman's husband), are a bit beyond my 7-year-old son's reading level, but "Animals Charles Darwin Saw" is a wonderful picture-book introduction to Darwin and his dangerous ideas. Sandra Markle tells Darwin's story in clear prose spiced with interesting vignettes (like the time young Charles stored a bombardier beetle in his mouth — bad idea), and Zina Saunders brings the scenes alive with colorful woodcut illustrations. My favorite line: "Sometimes the idea of evolution still makes people angry." Kids, you don't know the half of it. □