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Corner-books: A love story

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Deborah Heiligman knew it would make a great book: the idea that Charles Darwin's religious wife Emma was terrified that her beloved husband would go to hell for his theory of evolution.

"My first thought was, 'Has anyone else written a book about their relationship?' " Heiligman said during a recent talk to the Children's Book Guild of Washington, D.C. When it turned out that no one had yet focused on the Darwins' marriage, Heiligman says, "I got right on it."

But Heiligman also was daunted by the idea of writing about Charles Darwin and evolution.

"So many people have written about Darwin.... Not only that, but Darwin was Jon's story," Heiligman said, referring to her husband Jonathan Weiner, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book about Darwin, "The Beak of the Finch."

Fortunately, Heiligman, 51, was able to conquer her doubts and began to dive into the voluminous resources -- letters, journals and other materials -- that documented the great love story between Charles and Emma Darwin.

The result of Heiligman's labors is "Charles and Emma: The Darwins' Leap of Faith" (Henry Holt, \$18.95). The book, which is a finalist for the National Book Award in the Young People's Literature category, is a beautifully written, true-life love story showing how two strong-minded people refused to let anything -- even God and evolutionary theory -- extinguish their marriage. Despite their

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-- even God and evolutionary theory -- extinguish their marriage. Despite their own doubts, the two showed that religion and science can co-exist, Heiligman says.

But it wasn't easy, as Heiligman shows. While Emma Darwin loved and supported her husband -- even editing the first edition of "The Origin of Species" -- she worried throughout her life that the two would be separated for eternity because of Charles Darwin's theory.

For his part, Charles Darwin agonized about the pain he knew his ideas caused his wife. And in fact, he waited years to publish "The Origin of Species," both because he wanted to put off the inevitable showdown with creationists and because he wanted to be able to rebut every argument they could make.

"I think Charles Darwin's life would have been terribly different and his book, 'The Origin of Species' would have been an entirely different book without Emma," Heiligman said.

Heiligman, who majored in religious studies at Brown University, has written more than two-dozen children's books, mostly non-fiction. Her books have gathered awards for their thorough research and clear writing, but Heiligman says she still was unprepared for the news that her book was one of five National Book Award finalists in the children's/teen category.

"I've been screaming for a week," Heiligman joked. "This is such a book from my heart and the (National Book Award) nomination is such an affirmation of my work."

Interestingly, the book almost was stillborn. After getting over initial doubts about her qualifications for tackling Darwin, Heiligman spent a couple of weeks writing a proposal for a book focused on the Darwins' marriage.

She sent out the proposal to one publisher, who rejected it. A second publisher never responded to the proposal.

"So I stopped working on it," said Heiligman, who instead pored her energy into the National Geographic books she has written for children about major holidays.

When Heiligman finally decided to hire a book agent, he asked for some proposals. Heiligman told him about the idea for a book about Charles and Emma Darwin, and "his eyes lit up.

"He made me do it," Heiligman said. "I was pretty terrified during the entire writing of this book.... You just have to find a way to tell the story that is yours."

One of Heiligman's biggest challenges was trying to figure out how to open her book. Obviously, she needed a way to hook readers, and tried a couple of different ways.

Then, Heiligman realized that she had a "God-given beginning" because of Charles Darwin's penchant for making lists. This penchant led him to make a list of pros and cons for getting married, and Heiligman used the list as the beginning of her book.

As she researched the Darwins, Heiligman became attached to them. Writing the chapter focused on Charles Darwin was particularly gut wrenching for her.

"Every time I wrote about him dying, I sobbed," she said. "Each time I was hoping that maybe this time, Charles won't die."

(Karen MacPherson, the children's/teen librarian at the Takoma Park, Md., Library, can be reached at [Kam.Macpherson\(at\)gmail.co](mailto:Kam.Macpherson@gmail.com)

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