

Trials of the Monkey: An Accidental Memoir

By Matthew Chapman

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"When Darwin called his second book *The Descent of Man* instead of *The Ascent of Man* he was thinking of his progeny."

So declares Darwin's great-great grandson Matthew Chapman as he leaves behind his stressful career as a Hollywood screenwriter and travels to Dayton, Tennessee where in 1925 creationist opposition to the teaching of evolution in schools was played out in a famous legal drama, the Scopes Monkey Trial.

The purpose of this journey is to see if opinions have changed in the seventy-five intervening years. A defiant atheist, Chapman is confronted not only by the fundamentalist beliefs that continue to banish the theory of evolution but by his own spiritual malaise as the outward journey becomes an inward quest, a tragicomic "accidental memoir".

"First there was Charles Darwin, two yards long and nobody's fool. Then there was his son, my great-grandfather, Sir Francis Darwin, an eminent botanist. Then came my grandmother Frances, a modest poet who spent a considerable amount of time in rest-homes for depression From her issued my beloved mother, Clare, who was extremely short, failed to complete medical school, and eventually became an alcoholic. Then we get down to me. I'm in the movie business."

Trials of the Monkey combines travel writing and reportage, as Chapman records his encounters in the South, with history and the accidental memoir of a man full of mid-life doubts in a genre-breaking first book that is darkly funny, provocative and poignant.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
It seems like the perfect premise--Charles Darwin's great-grandson travels by bus from New York City to Dayton, Tennessee, to witness a reenactment of the infamous 1925 Scopes trial and see how--or if--attitudes toward evolution have changed. Call it "The Voyage of the Greyhound," if you will. But it didn't work out that way.

Matthew Chapman set out to write such a book, but ended up penning this "accidental memoir." *Trials of the Monkey* is remarkably compelling, given that the narrative wanders back and forth in time, across continents, and all over the place thematically. Descriptions of Chapman's youthful desires, his mother's alcoholism, and the world of Hollywood screenwriting are interspersed with tales of riding along with a Dayton cop on a Friday night, spelunking with Christian students, even sipping moonshine from a jam jar in a restroom stall ("To my surprise, it's excellent").

Those seeking a detailed account of the trial may be disappointed, though Chapman does offer up evocative glimpses, such as prosecuting attorney William Jennings Bryan--renowned as an orator--quietly telling attorney for the defense Dudley Malone, "Dudley, that was the greatest speech I ever heard." The book is at its best, however, when Chapman reveals his own feelings, such as his realization that though he came in part to "poke fun at [the] hillbillies," everyone had been "just as nice as all get out" to him. The intervening 75 years since the trial may not have changed Dayton very much, but they have seen a widening of the division between creationists and evolutionists. "If something like the Scopes trial was staged now," Chapman notes, "people would be afraid for their lives." --*Sunny Delaney*

From Publishers Weekly
A screenwriter and the great-great grandson of Charles Darwin, Chapman heads to Dayton, Tenn., the site of the Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925. As a longstanding atheist, he intends to write a sardonic cultural update of Southern Fundamentalist Christianity. But to his surprise, and the reader's delight, the book takes on a power of its own. This first-time author has written an honest, ironic autobiography that traces the development of a boyish wise guy into a complex man of letters. In an account that stands in favorable comparison to the best examples of eccentric English autobiography, such as the work of Robert Graves and Anthony Burgess, Chapman weaves the story of his life of advantage and distinguished intellectual pedigree in England, New York City and Hollywood with a travelogue into an unknown realm, misperceived to be inhabited by hillbillies. The incongruous encounters and anecdotes, moving between past and present, meld into an insightful study of a man trying to make sense of it all. Stories from the author's rebellious youth, unconventional family constellation and contemporary life are juxtaposed with images of caustic trends in modern society and Southern idiosyncrasies. The result is an absorbing and finely honed journal of courageous, often amusing self-awareness which moves from a posture of extreme skepticism regarding the possibility of the divine to a more open-minded, appreciative stance regarding the possible sacred meaning(s) of life.

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From Library Journal
This first book by a successful screenwriter is an odd but fascinating mix of history, science, religion, travel, and memoir, combining Chapman's heritage as the great-great grandson of Charles Darwin, his interest in the

Scopes "monkey" trial, and his "accidental" autobiography. Amazingly, he succeeds in the effort to convey the creation of a writer (himself) and his family as well as the world of creationism. The book alternates between autobiographical chapters and chapters covering trips Chapman made to Dayton, TN, site of the Scopes trial, prior to and following its annual reenactment. The people he encounters in Tennessee provide rich material for Chapman's examination of evolution and how the trial affected the original participants and, via fundamentalism, continues to influence people's lives. Despite a few sloppy geographical errors (Roanoke is in Virginia, not West Virginia), the writing is excellent, the story poignant, and the message complex. Recommended for larger collections in public and academic libraries. Michael D. Cramer, Raleigh, NC
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Annie Hendricks:

Reading can called thoughts hangout, why? Because when you find yourself reading a book especially book entitled Trials of the Monkey: An Accidental Memoir your head will drift away trough every dimension, wandering in every single aspect that maybe not known for but surely can become your mind friends. Imaging each and every word written in a e-book then become one form conclusion and explanation which maybe you never get just before. The Trials of the Monkey: An Accidental Memoir giving you an additional experience more than blown away your brain but also giving you useful details for your better life on this era. So now let us demonstrate the relaxing pattern this is your body and mind will be pleased when you are finished reading through it, like winning a sport. Do you want to try this extraordinary paying spare time activity?

Thomas Paris:

Trials of the Monkey: An Accidental Memoir can be one of your beginner books that are good idea. All of us recommend that straight away because this publication has good vocabulary that will increase your knowledge in vocab, easy to understand, bit entertaining but still delivering the information. The writer giving his/her effort that will put every word into joy arrangement in writing Trials of the Monkey: An Accidental Memoir but doesn't forget the main level, giving the reader the hottest and also based confirm resource details that maybe you can be one of it. This great information may drawn you into new stage of crucial thinking.

Alberta Jones:

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