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Books Related to Different Types of Giftedness -- Reviews, Comments and Re-Readings

Naturalist Intelligence

Life: A Natural History of the First Four Billion Years of Life on Earth (1997, Knopf) by Richard Fortey is a fascinating account of the origins and development of plants and animals. The author is a senior paleontologist at the Natural History Museum in London and is England's equivalent in communicative style to the American paleontologist, Stephen Jay Gould. Fortey presents a comprehensive and humorous account of the evolutionary process beginning with the formation of the Earth more than four billion years ago, and ending with the origins of *hominids* approximately five million years ago. He peppers this story of evolution with many humorous and interesting anecdotes about some major debates in the scientific community such as the most efficient and valid method for mapping relationships between species (*cladistics* versus trees of descent), and disputes over the meaning of life forms discovered in Canada's Burgess Shale.

It is particularly enlightening to read this book from the perspective of what was known about the evolution of life 10, 20, 50 or even 150 years ago. Fortey shows that enormous knowledge has accumulated in such areas as the: (1) origins of single cell organisms and bacterial mats, and the differentiation and subsequent organization of cells into more complex animals and plants; (2) influence of plate tectonics on the distribution and combination flora and fauna across continents; and (3) increased ability to understand the stories of life embedded in sedimentary layers and rock formations as the result of technological advances in carbon dating and electron microscopy. The skills required of present day paleontologists go far beyond those of the early "rock-choppers" to advanced areas of biology, geology, nuclear analysis, microbiology, physical anthropology and structural analysis and organization.

As Fortey indicates in Chapter One, his initial work in this field was determined by luck and perseverance. (His field work for his dissertation research at Cambridge University started by collecting fossils on the Island of Spitsbergen near the Arctic Circle.) He shows throughout this book that paleontology and evolutionary biology continue to expand knowledge of the origins and development of life through the insights and work of scientists endowed with high levels of Naturalist intelligence. Charles Darwin (1809-1882), the intellectual father of these scientists, provided the historical and motivational basis for many of the current advancements in these fields. This is why his essays should be read in conjunction with *Life* and books by Stephen Jay Gould (e.g., *Ever Since Darwin*, 1977; *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*, 1990). The Penguin Books' volume, *The Portable Darwin* (1993), is an excellent starting point for gifted students who have an interest in the study of evolution. Darwin's writing is impressive because of the clarity of his argument and his use of evidence from thousands of species he collected in South America and England. He was indeed a masterful writer and meticulous collector who carefully used these skills to propel his work to the forefront of scientific and religious debate. He said: "When on board H.M.S. 'Beagle,' as naturalist, I was much struck with certain facts in the distribution of the inhabitants of South America, and in the geological relation of the present to the past inhabitants of that continent. These facts seemed to me to throw some light on the origin of species -- that mystery of mysteries, as it has been called by one of the greatest philosophers. . . ." (From *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 1859). Darwin worked on this book for 22 years from his return home in 1837 until the first edition was published.

Students and teachers should also read books on the life of Darwin to learn about the background and character of this genius. Two that we recommend are: *The Survival of Charles Darwin* (1984) by Ronald W. Clark, and *Charles Darwin's Letters: A Selection* (1996) by Frederick Burkhardt, Editor. He was a fascinating individual (in addition to his scientific and naturalist abilities) who was descended from a family of country squires and eccentrics with a long history of involvement in England's intellectual life. As a lifelong observer of nature, his curiosity was further awakened when he became the Naturalist on the H.M.S. Beagle during its voyage to South America (1831-36). Here, Darwin collected thousands of plant and animal specimens that later helped him to develop the Theory of Natural Selection. Despite many physical illnesses and a hypochondriac disposition, he pursued his life's work with zest and determination. He was very fortunate in having one of the best minds in England to defend his theory against vicious attacks: Thomas H. Huxley, through his strong and determined arguments, became "Darwin's bulldog" in numerous public debates.

The study of personalities such as Charles Darwin, and reading his books and those of Richard Fortey and Stephen Jay Gould, will provide teachers and gifted students with descriptions of Naturalist intelligence in action. There are many children in the public schools who need more opportunities to develop their own Naturalist intelligence through opportunities to organize specimens, make systematic observations of plants and animals, and engage in supervised field work with mentors trained in biology, geology and paleontology.

Musical Intelligence

Music Talks: Conversations with Musicians (1987, McGraw-Hill) by Helen Epstein presents vignettes of the working lives of great classical music performers, teachers and conductors. The accounts of Vladimir Horowitz, Leonard Bernstein, Dorothy DeLay and Yo-Yo Ma are particularly helpful in understanding the dynamics of motivation, ability, background and interpretation that work together to produce outstanding performances, masterful compositions and wonderful teachers.

The Greatness of Charles Dickens: Author, Humanist and Prolific Observer of Human Society

by Michael E. Walters

Center for the Study of the Humanities in the Schools

"Wegg is a splendid example of how Dickens' magical inventiveness could create a vitally attractive character out of the meanest material." Introduction to Our Mutual Friend (1865) by Stephen Gill (Penguin Books, 1985, p. 12).

Recently PBS presented a three-night miniseries based on the novel, Our Mutual Friend by Charles Dickens. This was an occasion to appreciate the genius and giftedness of this world famous author. The New York Post review (January 2, 1999) said that one of the outstanding qualities of this miniseries was that it compels the reader to go and read the book. Our Mutual Friend was the last full novel that Dickens published. This book so thoroughly engages the reader's attention that one is almost unaware of its great length (more than 900 pages). Reading it is like being at an ongoing literary buffet for stimulating the mind and psyche.

It is universally accepted that next to William Shakespeare, Dickens is the second greatest writer in the English language. In a manner similar to Shakespeare, there is a continuing interest in his writings. For example, in 1998 a film version of Great Expectations (1860-61) was released that updated the events in this book to correspond with the United States in the latter part of the 20th century and New York City (substituting for Victorian London).

Charles Dickens is an obvious example of the linkage between giftedness and sensibility. He did not possess an education beyond grammar school and he was not economically secure as he was growing up. Moreover, there was little intellectual stimulation from immediate family members. His giftedness derived from his own innate sensibility as expressed by the urge to capture the human condition through the written word. Throughout his entire life, he was stimulated by a love of reading and interpersonal observations.

Dickens created characters that remain within the reader's psyche for a lifetime. His concept of a plot involves studying and analyzing the development of human character. Even his villains are given a humanity that permits one to comprehend the reasons for their malicious behavior. His humor and satire were rooted in love rather than hate for humanity. In Our Mutual Friend the theme is: the ability of the main characters to transcend the dominant values of their society, and to achieve a higher level of human development based upon spiritual and humanistic values. The predominant value of Victorian England was the money nexus. The only mutual friends that most Victorians sought were ones that benefitted them both socially and economically. However, this book emphasizes that human mutuality is based upon love, respect and kindness. The main characters discover that they can become human only when they achieve the values of decency and sensitivity.

This tension concerned with money and social status is the crux of the novel, and is very relevant to our present day society. The reason that Dickens or any other great writer from the past is still popular is because the situation and characters they describe are crucial to the present time. In this sense, Our Mutual Friend is a contemporary novel. The sensibility of gifted students is highly responsive to the contemporary features of this novel. And there are many social issues and conditions discussed by the author they can easily identify with. For example, the main industry in Dickens' book is waste management. The problem of urban pollution that results from the dust heaps (landfills) is of major concern for today's society.

The main theme of this book is illustrated in the last chapter when a discussion occurs at a dinner party concerning what is meant by the term "gentleman." The majority of people at this dinner believed that a man was a social misfit if he married a woman from the working classes. The novel ends with a discussion of how true love is based upon an awareness of the authentic worth of a human being.

L L Maurice D. Fisher, Publisher, Copyright © by Gifted Education Press, February-March 1999 7 7