

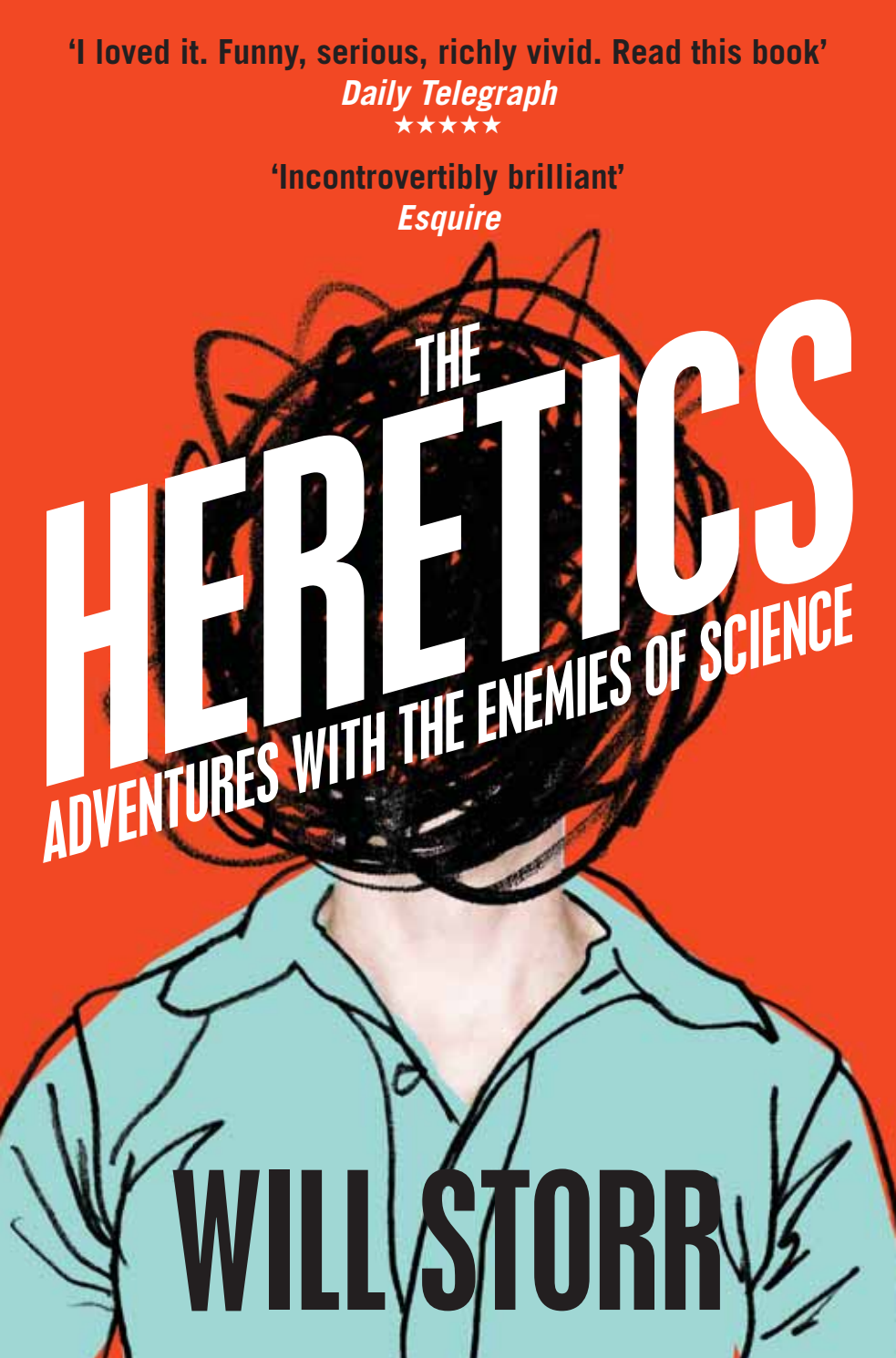
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THE
HERETICS

ADVENTURES WITH THE ENEMIES OF SCIENCE

WILL STORR

THE HERETICS

Will Storr is a longform journalist and novelist. His features have appeared in various publications, including *Guardian Weekend*, *The Times Magazine*, *Observer Magazine*, *GQ*, *Marie Claire* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He is a contributing editor at *Esquire* magazine. He has been named New Journalist of the Year and Feature Writer of the Year, and has won a National Press Club award for excellence. In 2010, his investigation into the kangaroo meat industry won the Australian Food Media award for Best Investigative Journalism and, in 2012, he was presented with the One World Press award and the Amnesty International award for his work on sexual violence against men.

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‘It’s like treason’

It is Friday night in a town called Devil and the community hall is full. Over two hundred people are gathered here in shuffling, expectant silence. There are elderly couples and clean young families, their prams parked squarely at the end of rows. A modest distance away from the front sits a line of pale women in Amish headwear. Their sturdy patriarch is planted beside them, his forearms crossed in front of his starched white shirt. Above our heads, suspended from the ceiling, two huge fans chew the heavy tropical air.

A local elder stands up and shuffles his way to the microphone. He is in his eighties, at least, and looks pale and fragile, like a drift of smoke. There is a squeal of feedback. He clears his throat. The sound of it bounces off the parquet floor.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he says. ‘Without further ado, it gives me great pleasure to, er, be able to introduce to you a man whose work I’m sure you’re all familiar with. We’ve been looking forward to his talk for a long time now. He’s, er, travelled a long way to see us tonight, so please give a very warm welcome to Mr John Mackay.’

Proudly, down the centre aisle, I watch him come: the man we all want to see. With his white prophet’s beard, charismatic glimmer and wide-brimmed bushman’s hat, he clutches in his

right hand a thousand pages of visions, violence and lore, of science, sects and sorcery, all the wisdom of all the worlds, everything anyone needs to know about anything. Mackay walks slowly through applause, takes his place at the front of the hall and waits for the crowd to settle. Once silence is regained, he finally begins.

‘Charles Darwin wrote a book,’ he announces. ‘Does anyone know what its name was?’ His sparkly eyes scan the rows. ‘The name of his book was *The Origin of the Species*. I have another book here.’ He holds up his leather-bound volume, its pages, weary at the corners, flop open. ‘It’s called the Bible. Tonight, the choice you have to face up to is this – do you put your faith in Darwin, who wasn’t there? Or God, who was?’

As Mackay speaks, the hands of the church clock, down in the town centre, clunk to 8.30. By now, the place is almost entirely deserted. That is what it is like up here, a hundred and sixty miles north of Brisbane, Australia, on the humid banks of the Mary River. It is a place of early closing and close community; of pineapple plantations, clapboard churches, empty roads and old Holden utes rusting in silent fields. The landscape itself is lush and strange, with its sinisterly christened creeks, monster cacti growing in gas-station forecourts and vast rock formations that jut out of the land like ancient tumours. The locals – dairy farmers, timber men and the descendants of gold-rush pioneers – know the town as Gympie, an Aboriginal word meaning Devil. It is actually named for a freakish native tree, a murderous hermaphrodite called the gympie-gympie, whose flowers are simultaneously male and female, whose fruit is a lurid, tumescent purple and pink and whose pretty heart-shaped leaves are covered with hairs that contain a toxin noxious enough to kill dogs, horses and sometimes men. The gympie-gympie is a hysterical night-

mare of nature; evidence, I believe, of the conscienceless magnificence of biological evolution. But, right here, right now, I am in an intimidating minority of one. Because all of these people and tonight's main attraction – an international Creationist superstar and tireless prosecutor of the diabolical trinity Darwin, Dawkins and Attenborough – believe the gypie-gypie's malevolence to be a direct result of Adam eating forbidden fruit and introducing sin, death and nasty prickles to a perfect world.

Mackay clicks a button. An image of an enormous bird flashes on to the overhead projector.

'What's the name of that funny little chicken?' he says.

Nobody responds.

'Emu!' he says. 'They can't fly, but they can run like crazy. The interesting thing is, if you dig up their fossils, they used to be twice the size they now are. That's change, but it's not evolution.'

He allows the last sentence to unfurl slowly in the sweating air above him.

'If you take your Bible seriously you will notice that Genesis is emphatic that when God made the world there were no killers. Everything only ate plants. Now that is different to Charles Darwin's picture of evolution. Genesis one and two are dogmatic. God made everything very good. Do you realise that means there was a world where even broccoli tasted good? Can you believe that? That's what it's talking about. It meant no killers, no carnivores, no competition and no struggle to survive. But what is that catchphrase you learned in biology at high school? Survival of the . . . ? Fittest. But no such competition occurred back in God's world. There was no struggle to survive at all. Everything survived.'

Mackay presses his little button again and the famous silhouette depiction of 'the evolution of man' appears.

‘You see the chimpanzee on the left?’ he asks. ‘You see the man on the right? That’s the history of the world according to most high-school textbooks. You and I are just hydrogen and somehow or other we turned into people. But if you look at your Bible, it says that everything started perfect and went *downhill*. Man sinned, God cursed the ground and death entered the world.’

He turns to face his screen.

‘Let’s put that in diagram form.’

On the screen, a bar graph appears, consisting of biblical names and numbers.

‘Do you know that Adam lived until he was nine hundred and thirty years old? Noah lived until he was nine hundred and fifty? Abraham drops off at a hundred and seventy-five. Anyone here a hundred and seventy-five tonight? No? Big difference in the world. That’s change, but it’s not evolution. We live in a world where life-spans are influenced by stress in the environment. I’m old enough to remember when the Vietnamese first turned up in Australia. They were tiny. They’d come from a nasty place. All they’d had to eat for fifty years was bullets and Americans.’

I shift restlessly on the hard wooden seat, my eyes settling for a moment on a blank page in my reporter’s notepad. I see the lines there, ready to be filled with the descriptions and the strings of overheard dialogue and the thoughts that I’ll think about these Christians, these *crazy* Christians; the words that will make up the story that will eventually be read by people just like me. I see the lines, and I already know what they’re going to say.

Sighing, I glance down the row. I really am a very long way from home. It is as if I am in a rural town of the early 1950s, listening to the shibboleths of men from the 1400s. Strange to think that we are comfortably inside the twenty-first

century, and John Mackay is neither a time traveller nor an idiot of the fringes. Rather, he is a famous Christian figure-head who has just flown in from a tour of America and Britain, where he has spoken to thousands of fellow believers and appeared on mainstream television shows. A veteran evangelist for the literal truth of Genesis – the book of the Bible that describes God building the earth in six days – he has come to north Australia to give a talk on the obsession that has run through his life like a burning wick: evolution and all the reasons it is wrong.

For Christians like Mackay, this is the Armageddon debate, the row to end all rows. Its logic is stark and indestructible: to accept evolution, they say, is to call the entire Bible a lie. Anyone who successfully proves that God didn't create the earth in six days is setting off a chain of explosions that starts at the very base of all Christian thought, bursts up through the architecture of its parables, prophecies and gospels, and ultimately blows off its roof in a vast Satanic mushroom cloud. 'How do you get rid of God?' Mackay asks. 'You can't shoot him dead. So you attack his authority – and his authority is that he created the earth.'

Indeed, Mackay believes that if Lucifer himself didn't come up with the theory of evolution, he is certainly behind its wild successes. 'You have to look at the theory of evolution as the basis of all anti-God morality in the West,' he says. Later, when I ask him whether he considers *The Origin of Species* to be 'a kind of Satanic version of the book of Genesis', he brightens, pleased by the analogy, and says, 'Yes, definitely. That's exactly what it is.'

Mackay's organisation, Creation Research – whose stated aim is 'to seek evidence for the biblical account of creation' – has offices in the US, Canada, New Zealand and the UK and his annual speaking tours have made his name notorious

among those familiar with the debate. In the last few years, he has earned attacks from august scientific bodies such as the Royal Society and the British Centre for Science Education, which has even gone so far as to publish an MI5-style dossier on Mackay ('Appearance: Mackay likes to play the larrikin. His dress style could best be described as "outback casual".'). In 2006 the National Union of Teachers demanded new legislation to outlaw the Mackay-style school creationism lessons, which the National Secular Society described as 'verging on intellectual child abuse'.

When I sat myself down in the community hall, I was unaware of the full strangeness of the creationists' theory. Luckily for me, Mackay proves to be an excellent teacher. I learn that around six thousand years ago, when God made the earth in six days, the environment was perfect and, as a result, Noah had metre-long forearms. There was no suffering, struggle, illness or sorrow; there were no carnivores; all living things grew enormous and the temperature was permanently pleasant. But ever since the day that Eve allowed a snake to talk her into eating the apple and then shared it with Adam, the world has become harsher, its inhabitants have got smaller and sicker and human society has been thrashing about in ever more desperate throes. God tried to teach us a lesson when he made it rain for forty nights. We didn't learn. We are incapable: ever since Eve's crime, we've been born this way – outlaw failures, fucking and sinning with callous abandon as the planet we've been given withers around us.

As his talk progresses, two further facts become apparent about John Mackay. One, he likes to speak in questions. Two, he has a bit of a *thing* about David Attenborough. 'I know a question David Attenborough wouldn't ask,' he says at one point. 'If creation is true, what would the evidence be?'

Of all the questions ever, this is probably John's favourite

because he believes that the evidence is on the side of God. By education and by thinking, Mackay considers himself to be a scientist. And it is by these rigorous and testable methods that he has promised to prove the creation hypothesis to me.

When his talk is over, the Gympie Christians begin to bumble out of the double doors, with a few getting snagged on small-talk and lingering in chatty knots here and there. It is obvious that nobody had a real problem with John's presentation. He was, literally, preaching to the converted, and his audience reacted to what he had to say in exactly the manner you would expect of a people who were, in effect, sitting through a six thousand-year-old news report. The only person I can find in the crowd who isn't wholly convinced is a young woman named Catherine Stipe. She admits to doubts about some aspects of creationism before quickly adding, 'But as long as God made everything I'm happy.' When I ask if she believes in evolution, she looks baffled. 'I wouldn't quite go *that far.*'

As the hall empties, Mackay patrols his merchandise – books, DVDs and fossils and crystals which are, according to a sign, useful both for demonstrating 'God's engineering genius' and 'combating new age lies'. Several of the DVDs are of debates with evolutionist academics, which poses an interesting question: If evolution is so demonstrably true, what is he doing debating with academics and then selling the resulting showdowns in sumptuously produced DVD twin packs for \$50 a go? What is he doing behaving like a man who is winning?

'We frequently win public debates,' Mackay tells me when we sit down later on. 'In fact, for a long while it was impossible to get debates because the academics didn't want to be shown up. But then word went around, "They're making too much progress, we've got to debate them again." So in the last

few years we've had quite a lot and the reason they always fail to beat us is they presume they're fighting against theologians with no science degrees.'

Mackay, a geologist and geneticist who seems to possess an eager and audacious intellect, has most recently crossed ideologies with iconic atheist Professor Richard Dawkins – who, not incidentally, once told the *Guardian* newspaper, 'People like Mackay thrive by drip-feeding misinformation . . . we cannot afford to take creationism lightly. It's not an amusing diversion, but a serious threat to scientific reason.'

John recalls the meeting with a contemptuous sigh. 'He was trying to be David Attenborough,' he says. 'I think it's because he's been getting so much flak. People are sick of him. Do you know, if Dawkins is speaking at a university before me, the evolutionists get so disgusted with him they'll double my crowd? But I led him to a point where he said, "Evolution has been observed, it just hasn't been observed while it's been happening." And that's just a stupid statement. If it's not been observed, it's not science. And if it's not science, what is it? So I said, "This is your faith starting-point versus my faith starting-point, let's not pretend any different." He didn't like that.'

*

I saw the lines, and I knew what they were going to say. My role here in Gympie is the one that I have been playing for years. It is to be a counter of weirdnesses, a catalogue of wrongs. I am to list them in a newspaper; to upload them to a website; to send these Christians' errors soaring across the planet, so that the peoples of far continents can read them and . . . well, what?

A confession. Most of the time, I provide no real answers; no solution to the mystery of how these false beliefs have emerged. Every now and then, I might unbury an insight into

how my subject has come to be the person they are. Mostly, though, the thing remains a mystery and I find myself gazing at my subject, as if through a window in a distant building, thinking: *I have no idea how you ended up there*. The only thing that I have really understood was that we are divided by an inscrutable void and that, in being unable to bridge it, I have failed.

And yet there I go, again and again, on stories just like this one – small adventures with men and women whose beliefs about the world I find strange. I have explored the company of Furies, cryonicists, cult members, swingers, mediums, body-builders, vampire-detectives, a suicide cult and a couple who believe they once met the yeti in some woods outside Ipswich. I like to write about these people – it is like being a tourist in another universe. There is something noble about their bald defiance of the ordinary, something heroic about the deep outsider-territories that they wilfully inhabit, something comforting – in a fundamental, primeval way – about their powers of cognitive transport. They are magic-makers. And, beneath all of that, a private undercurrent: I feel a kind of kinship with them. I am drawn to the wrong.

These are things that I am not supposed to admit. The journalist poses as a clean, smooth mirror, reflecting back undistorted truth. To serve the reader, I must be unbiased, sane. I am not permitted to take sides, or to confess that the reason that I enjoy interviewing people is that I find simple conversation so difficult. Journalism gives me the comfort of rules: permission to ask whatever I want, without concerning myself with making offence. I can stand up and leave whenever I like, without risking my wife's frequent and bruising complaint that I cannot be trusted in social situations. I am also probably not supposed to tell you that the only other situation in which I have experienced this kind of relief is in

therapy, of which I have had plenty. Or confess the suspicion that, if I am drawn to the wrong, it is because that is exactly how I feel most of the time, and that I have done so since I was a child.

It is a background state; a vague, non-specific kind of wrongness. It is like radiation – an instability that underscores everything; my entire life. It comes, I suppose, from my unconscious. And yet, in the overt world of my opinions, I am as outspoken as anyone. I experience my beliefs with a measure of certainty that, as I grow older, I find myself becoming increasingly suspicious of.

I consider – as everyone surely does – that my opinions are the correct ones. And yet, I have never met anyone whose *every single thought* I agreed with. When you take these two positions together, they become a way of saying, ‘Nobody is as right about as many things as me.’ And that cannot be true. Because to accept that would be to confer upon myself a Godlike status. It would mean that I possess a superpower: a clarity of thought that is unique among humans. Okay, fine. So I accept that I am wrong about things – I *must* be wrong about them. A lot of them. But when I look back over my shoulder and I double-check what I think about religion and politics and science and all the rest of it . . . well, I know I am right about that . . . and that . . . and that and that and – it is usually at this point that I start to feel strange. I know that I am not right about everything, and yet I am simultaneously convinced that I am. I believe these two things completely, and yet they are in catastrophic logical opposition to each other.

It is as if I have caught a glimpse of some grotesque delusion that I am stuck inside. It is disorientating. It is frightening. And I think it is true to say that it is not just me – that is, we all secretly believe we are right about everything and, by extension, we are all wrong.

All of my beliefs cannot be right, and yet the effects that they have had on my personal life have been costly. Hardly spoiled for friends, I recently dropped contact with a colleague whom I liked and admired after he told me that he believed the US should invade Iran. I overheard another friend, this one Jewish, proudly announce that she would never share a taxi with an Arab. That was six years ago. I haven't spoken to her since.

I don't view these acts with any sense of pride. I know, logically, that there must be good arguments for these individuals' strongly held points of view, but when I think about assessing them carefully and fairly, I feel incapable. I don't fully understand this reaction. It is as if I am too angry, too weak to bear the challenge of it. And there is a fear there too, lying secretly among all the bluster: what if they're right? What if the truth alters me; fractures something essential?

So I am left with the lonely consolation of my righteousness. That is all that I have. And what does righteousness prove anyway? I hold my beliefs with absolute conviction – but no less conviction than John Mackay. These views have created ruptures in my life, painful states of estrangement.

I have watched as these personal battles have manifested in the wider world. The decade of terrorism we have just lived through had its roots, of course, in mismatched beliefs that are both political and religious. Those same years saw what has the appearance of an increasing suspicion of science. The white-coated priests of the laboratory, to whom we have granted custody of the truth for so long, are seemingly being treated with growing levels of doubt. We don't trust the MMR jab, we don't trust climate data, we don't trust genetically modified wheat or 'conventional' medicine or supermarket-bought beef. One response has been the cultural rise of the radicalised rationalists: celebrity atheists who have written bestselling

books and sponsored anti-God advertising on the sides of London buses; groups of self-declared ‘Skeptics’ who toured sold-out concert venues like rock stars, defining themselves in opposition to the kind of anti-scientific thinking that they declared dangerous. Every one of these people, convinced they are right. None of them convincing the other.

John Mackay got me reflecting on all this when he recounted his conversation with Dawkins. ‘This is your faith starting-point versus my faith starting-point.’ As I sit alone in my Gympie motel room, with its cracked plastic kettle and its stained sachets of sugar, I decide to go back to first principles: why do I believe that Mackay is mistaken about the origin of our species in the first place? Well, I suppose I believe him to be wrong because people I admire, such as Richard Dawkins, tell me that this is so. But, honestly? All I really know about evolution, aside from the basics of natural selection, is that man is descended from the ape. Like so many people who hold strong opinions about it, I have never studied evolution. I have exercised no critical thinking on the topic whatsoever. I have simply put my trust in the people that culture has directed me towards. I have run to Richard Dawkins because I believe in his credentials as a scientist, and because his views coincide with mine – with my ‘faith starting-point’, in other words.

I lie back and open the pamphlet that Mackay handed me earlier. It describes what the fossil record would look like if evolution were true. It says that what we should find, as we dig through the earth’s strata, is simple organisms gradually becoming ever more complex and diverse, sprouting wings and legs and hair and all the rest of it. Instead, what we apparently find are fully formed species suddenly appearing and then disappearing with no intermediate, semi-evolved beings at all. (If frogs turned into monkeys, goes a common argument, why aren’t we digging up ‘fronkeys’?) This, says the text,

accurately reflects the creationist vision of God magicking creatures abruptly into existence. It also apparently echoes the concerns of Charles Darwin himself, who is quoted as pondering, 'Why then is not every geological formation and every stratum full of intermediate links? Geology assuredly does not reveal any such finely graduated organic chain; and this, perhaps, is the most obvious and serious objection which can be urged against the theory.'

*

The next morning, we meet up in the property of a Gympie mechanic. It is here that Mackay intends to prove that the biblical creation account represents the true history of the world. Currently, though, the land in which his evidence is buried is flooded. It will be another half an hour before the water is pumped away. As we wait in the mud, with the warm rain soaking our hair and the sound of the weather playing the gum trees like a ghostly instrument, Mackay begins to tell me something of his story.

It begins in 1947, the year he was born in Australia to Scottish migrant parents. He was raised outside Brisbane in a family whose father he describes as 'strongly pro-evolutionist and anti-Christian' and, as a boy, he became a budding scientist with evolution his central passion. At sixteen, he was reading yet another book on Darwin's epochal idea when he came across a chapter on why there is no God. Its inclusion outraged the young science fan. It felt like crude propaganda, an article of burning faith shoved into a book that should consist solely of cold reason. 'I was offended intellectually', he says. 'So I deliberately picked up a Bible and began at the beginning.'

Somewhere around this time, the quick conversion of John Mackay took place. Talking to him, it is impossible to isolate

the precise moment that belief struck him. It seems as though the boy, for some reason, simply became bewitched by faith.

Mackay tells me that God's existence is scientifically testable, 'because he promises to dwell within his people and that's a testable thing.'

'But how, exactly, can you test it?' I ask.

'He says, "I will make myself known to you," and he did. I know Jesus Christ personally. It's something in me.'

'Is it something you feel?' I ask.

'It's not just a feeling, it's intellectual too. It affects the way you think. It affects everything.'

Whenever and whatever happened to alter the boy's view of the world so radically, from the moment that it happened, Mackay's story becomes one of subservience to the contrary will within him that he calls God. He sacrificed his life's ambition to be a practising scientist when he felt 'called' to become a teacher. Having studied geology and genetics at university, he joined the staff at the prestigious Brisbane Grammar School, where, after deciding that 'nine out of ten' students abandon Christianity after deciding that Adam and Eve never existed, he managed to inveigle creationism into his classroom.

'Brisbane Grammar was private,' he explains. 'So you have a lot of freedom. You can innovate all sorts of education programmes that would take reams of paperwork to get approved elsewhere. I said to my colleagues, "I've found a way to teach creation." They said, "You can't do that." I said, "Yes I can."'

Mackay formulated a lesson that he called 'How do we know what we know in the first place?', the official purpose of which was to explore the methods we use to separate fact from fantasy. The example he used was creation versus evolution and he used it to help the children answer his

favourite question ever: If creation is true, what would the evidence be?

Word of Mackay's unit spread, and he was invited to teach it at church groups. He was a hit. He circulated class notes to like-minded colleagues and impressed many, but most portentously an ambitious young teacher called Ken Ham.

I am surprised to hear mention of Ham in all this. He is a Queensland-born scientist who is now resident in the US, where he has become famous for his creationism museum and his daily radio show *Answers . . . with Ken Ham*, which is syndicated nationally to over a thousand stations. I am interested in Ken Ham because he and Mackay co-founded the Creation Science Foundation in 1979 only for Mackay to be kicked out after making some unusually bracing allegations about a senior member.

'I wasn't actually *kicked out* of the CSF,' Mackay corrects me, when I mention it. 'But it was getting to that stage.'

'I heard you accused someone of witchcraft.'

'I did accuse a lady of being a "divisive Jezebel",' he says, carefully. 'Jezebel was a lady full of rebellion and the Bible says rebellion is the sin of witchcraft.'

'And did you also accuse her of necrophilia?'

'That wording comes from somebody else,' he says.

'But did you—'

'Yes,' he says, reluctantly. 'I did communicate that as well.'

'And was it true?' I ask.

'I couldn't say,' he says, wiping some drizzle out of his beard. 'I mean, how could you know?'

We pause to check upon the progress that has been made with the water pump. We are here to see a set of fossilised conifers which apparently contain crucial evidence for creationism. As we make our way through the sticky mud

towards the gradually emerging treasure, John explains how the petrified remains of dinosaurs challenge the basic tenets of evolution.

‘The first dinosaurs look like dinosaurs,’ he says. ‘The last ones look like dinosaurs too. So within that timeframe – even if you did put it at millions of years – they produce their own kind, just as Genesis says.’

‘But hang on,’ I say. ‘If humans have been here since day one, that means we must have existed at the same time as dinosaurs.’

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘When you look at so-called mythical stories of dragons, they’re real. St George really did fight a dragon.’

‘But there are no dragons in the Bible.’

‘There are quite a few dragons in the Bible. Go to Job 41:14. It talks about a creature with huge teeth and a terrible mouth that breathed fire.’

‘Does that mean that Noah had dragons on the ark?’

‘Obviously.’

By now, enough water has been sucked out of the pit that working geologist Liam Fromyhr can use the scene to tell me why he is convinced that the majority of his colleagues are mistaken in their belief that layers of earth or ‘strata’ are laid down over millions of years. For creationists, of course, these trees and the strata that they lie in will probably be around six thousand years old.

Liam points to a fossilised tree, a beautiful coppery piece of rock in which it’s still possible to make out individual rings in the ancient wood.

‘This is a polystrate fossil,’ he says, ‘which means it sticks through several strata at once. This means the layers must’ve been laid quickly enough to cover the tree completely before it decomposed. We’ve got three metres of strata here. So conventional thinking would assume they were laid over three

hundred thousand years. But as you can see, we've got a log sticking right through them.' Liam gives me a long, steady look. 'Now, logs don't hang around for three hundred thousand years.'

I turn to John.

'So if these fossils are six thousand years old, this must mean they're actual trees from the garden of Eden?'

He considers for a moment.

'Well, this is a tree which, due to some circumstances, has been catastrophically pulverised into sections. You can see another one over there that has gigantic cobbles up against it. The size of the cobbles tells you that the water has been going pretty fast.'

'Hang on,' I say. 'Are you telling me these trees were knocked over during Noah's flood?'

'Basically.'

I bend down again to look at them. These old conifers, I can't help but notice, are normal sized and not – as they should be, according to John's theory – gigantic trees, grown to an awesome monstrous splendour in a nutritionally, atmospherically and environmentally perfect Eden.

'They're not particularly massive, are they?' I say.

'Oh, these are just fragments,' says John. 'Is this a small tree trunk or a branch from a big tree? You just can't tell.'

'You do expect to find some gigantic trees, then?' I ask, vaguely. 'At some point?'

His eyes scan happily over the trunks.

'Eventually.'

*

'I'm going to say some things that might stretch your little brains today,' John says from his lectern in front of the altar. It is Sunday morning and he has invited me to watch him preach at the Gympie Community Church. 'I'm going to be

talking about homosexuals. Open your Bibles at Leviticus chapter 20 verse 13. “If a man lies with the male as with a woman, both men have committed an abomination, they shall surely be put to . . .? Death.”

Either side of John’s head are large banners, painted in happy colours by the neighbourhood’s children. One says ‘Love’. The other ‘Joy’.

‘Isn’t it true that today we have gay bishops?’ he says. ‘Isn’t it true that we have lesbian preachers? But in the Bible it says homosexual bishops, lesbian preachers, thieves, extortioners, adulterers, murderers and revilers will end up where?’

On an adjacent wall are their companions, ‘Gentleness’ and ‘Kindness’.

‘Hell.’

The woman in front of me highlights the relevant Bible chapter in pink ink.

‘Do you know what’s going to happen to our moral basis?’ he continues. ‘There will be a shift. If homosexuality used to be wrong and now it’s right, why not paedophilia? You watch. That’s what you’ll see.’

I look around at the congregation of young families, elderly couples and children. I am expecting expressions of outrage; at the very least surprise. But everyone appears benignly accepting, as if they are watching clouds drifting over sunny meadows. Their Bibles have special weatherproof jackets with pockets and zips and pen holders.

‘You ask what gives God the right to determine what’s moral or immoral? He made the world. No argument applicable after that point. God is an absolute ruler and he’s not interested in your opinions. There might be a non-Christian here . . .’

Mackay looks out over the congregation. His eyes seem to lock on to mine. My heart gives a single, powerful thud.

‘Do you realise the Bible is emphatic that you’re going to hell?’

Today, he even looks different. The sun has reddened his skin and the two clumps of hair on the side of his balding head give a regrettable horn-like impression. As he finishes, his voice deepens and rings with fiery portent. ‘When a homosexual bishop meets up with a lesbian preacher in hell and they’re asking why they’re there, the demons will laugh and say, “We didn’t obey . . . *and neither did you.*”’

The congregation murmurs their approval and John is replaced at the lectern by the pastor.

‘Just a reminder that Charlie and Beryl and celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary this week, they’d love you to join them for tea and cakes in the meeting hall.’

*

After the service I canvas the Gympie faithful for their opinion of John’s sermon, hoping that perhaps, after all, John Mackay will turn out to be on the fringes of an otherwise pleasant and accepting country community.

‘It was good,’ says a kindly looking father. ‘I believe what he was saying, as controversial as that is in the world today.’

‘But I’m thinking most people around here wouldn’t agree with it?’

He looks confused.

‘Oh, yes,’ he says. ‘Yes they would.’

‘I expect *you* didn’t agree with what he was saying,’ I say, smilingly, to a nearby eighteen-year-old named Levi.

‘I agree very much with what he said,’ he replies. ‘It comes straight from the Bible.’

‘But you probably have lots of friends who wouldn’t agree?’

His companion Charlotte interrupts primly, and with raised eyebrows.

‘Most of our friends would be just as against gay people.’

I give up.

Later, I find Mackay enjoying a cup of tea and some cake, down at Charlie and Beryl’s do in the canteen. I decide to take the opportunity to get the entry conditions of hell straight, because he seemed to be saying that it is only unbelievers who end up in the abyss. So wouldn’t this mean that lesbian nuns go to heaven?

‘No,’ he says. ‘Because lesbian nuns are living in public disobedience to their creator.’

‘So it’s the fact that the lesbian nuns are refusing to repent by being straight that’s sending them to hell?’

‘That’s what’s sending them to hell,’ he nods.

‘So a lesbian nun who repents a week before she died would be okay?’

‘As a nun, she cannot plead ignorance of the Bible.’

‘So lesbian nuns are doomed?’

‘Basically, yes.’ He takes a nibble of his fruit cake. ‘It’s like treason.’

The conversation moves further into morality. John tells me 9/11 was a ‘classic case’ of God punishing a sinful nation, a comment which brings to mind a personal calamity that John and his wife suffered a few years ago.

‘What about your miscarriage?’ I ask him. ‘By the same logic, could that be a punishment for your sins?’

‘No,’ he says. ‘Because you and I reap the results of the things that went before us that are sometimes beyond our control.’

‘Is gluttony a sin?’ I ask.

‘Yes,’ says John.

I point to his belly, which rises into view from beneath his shirt like a mountain summoned by God.

‘You’ve got some repenting to do, then.’

He replies slowly, ‘I’ve got a thyroid problem.’

I close my eyes and try to absorb the irritation.

‘Come on, John,’ I say. ‘Isn’t this all just . . . just . . . *stupid?*’

He looks baffled. He crosses his legs. I go on.

‘What I mean is, you claim there is a legitimate scientific theory that says there’s a magic superhero who has created a planet full of people to tell him he’s great and who get tortured by demons if they’re naughty.’

‘I don’t think it’s stupid,’ he says. ‘You have to have penalties for those who do injustice.’

‘It’s not just the hell bit,’ I say. ‘It’s also the egotistical superhero.’

‘Stop there,’ he says, crossly. ‘You’re attributing your human nature to God. There’s no reason to accuse him of being egotistical.’

‘What’s his motive, then?’

‘Why does he need a motive?’

I have a sudden and overwhelming urge to whimper. What can you do when common sense doesn’t work? When reason’s bullets turn out to be made of smoke?

‘When I sat there listening to you today going on about gay people,’ I tell him, ‘I thought you were evil.’

‘That doesn’t surprise me,’ he says. ‘It was tough stuff.’

‘But can’t you see, the people you’re attacking – the equality lobby – sincerely want to make the world a kinder place? If everyone decided you were right, there’d be a genocide against gay people.’

‘Okay then,’ he says. ‘Let me make a prediction too, based on creation. The end result of all this will be an *increase* in

turbulence. Homosexuals will get into a position where they'll start to impose their values.'

'We'll be forced to be gay by gays?' I say.

'Yep,' he replies. 'That's where it will go.'

'And do you seriously believe that acceptance of homosexuality will lead to an acceptance of paedophilia and necrophilia?'

'Even in the churches.'

'Priests having sex with dead people?'

'That's right.'

'But, John,' I say, 'the view that homosexuality is a sin is illogical, because it's not a choice. It's a state of being that you're born into. You can't be tempted to be a homosexual. I've been tempted to steal, I've been tempted to lie, but I've never been tempted to kiss a man.'

'They have made a choice, whether it's paedophilia or homosexuality or necrophilia. They are all in a rainbow of that which is an incorrect choice about sex.'

I tell John that I am completely convinced that he is wrong. Apparently, though, I only believe this because I have been fooled by Satan. 'The Bible warns that the devil is a liar and is out to trick us,' he explains. 'When God says something's wrong, the devil's out to do anything to convince us it's right.'

'But if you follow that logic,' I say, 'any thought we have that goes against the Bible is the devil. So we're not allowed to think for ourselves.'

'We are allowed to think for ourselves,' he says. 'Your first step is thinking that God's wiser than me so I will accept what he says, even if I don't understand it.'

This, it seems to me, is a remarkable admission for a man who considers himself to be a scientist.

‘So that’s all the thinking for yourself you’re allowed?’ I say.
‘The decision to believe everything God says?’

‘Yes.’

*

Two weeks later, I discover that the only thing I know for sure about evolution is completely wrong. I find this out in a back office at Sydney’s Australian Museum, the place I have come to for the end of my story. Playing the white knight, the truth teller, the good guy is Nathan Lo, a thirty-five-year-old doctor of molecular evolution. Lo is going to assess Mackay’s assertions and offer a counter-creationist perspective on who built the gympie-gympie tree. We talk at a bare wooden table, beneath a framed picture of an aphid and behind a sink full of bottles marked ‘glycerol’ and ‘H₂O’.

I begin by telling Nathan about the puzzling lack of betwixt species ‘fronkey’ types in the fossil record. But, apparently, this isn’t how evolution works at all. ‘One very common misconception is that we evolved from things that are on the earth now,’ he says. ‘We didn’t. Humans, for example, didn’t evolve from chimps. They both evolved separately from things that have shared characteristics, and that don’t look like anything that exists today.’

‘Oh,’ I say. ‘Right. And are these things in the fossil record?’

‘There are many, many fossils that have characteristics that are like both chimps and humans,’ he says.

I ask about the claim that the fossil record doesn’t show creatures getting steadily more complex.

‘That’s completely wrong,’ he says. ‘Yes, things are relatively complex for three or four hundred million years, but before that they’re much simpler. Fish start approximately four hundred million years ago and if you keep going back, you get

to things like worms and then if you go back about eight hundred million years, there's nothing that has any complexity. Everything was single-celled.' And so it carries on: the polystyrene logs can be explained by the earth – and therefore the strata – moving around; dinosaurs do not suddenly appear in the fossil record fully formed, and so on.

Nathan, it turns out, is the un-John, his life-story being an uncanny polarised version of the creationist's. Where Mackay was brought up in an anti-Christian house and read a book in his teens that turned him godly, Nathan was sent to a fundamentalist Christian school and read a book that turned him rational. Its author? Richard Dawkins.

'There are middle-class suburbs everywhere that are full of people like John Mackay,' he warns as we walk down the echoing corridors. 'I know. I went to school with them.'

He explains that scientists are especially infuriated with creationists because of their determination to have the subject taught in schools as a scientific theory that's the equal of evolution. And as Lo explains, it is creationism's very simplicity that makes it dangerously seductive to children.

'The main problem,' he says, 'is that creationism is a really easy explanation to understand, whereas evolution is complicated and takes a lot of time to get. Sometimes, people just want to go with the easier one. But they're being led down the wrong path in terms of the truth. And you also have to ask why people like your creationist do it. They feel threatened by rationalism and science. They want to keep their numbers up so they can stay rich. All preachers need to be paid.'

'No,' I say. 'I don't think you're right on that one. I think John and people like him really do believe they're correct.'

Nathan gives me a doubtful look.

'They believe they're doing the right thing,' he says, 'but ultimately their motive is to make more money.'

I thank him politely and walk to the exit, towards the blaze and stress of the midweek city morning, feeling itchy and irritable and disappointed.