



Evolution, Me & Other Freaks of Nature

Robin Brande

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I knew today would be ugly...

It's the first day of high school for Mena, and already her world looks bleak: she's an outcast, all her former friends hate her, even her parents barely speak to her anymore. And why? Because she tried to do the right thing. And then everything went wrong.

But can a cute, nerdy lab partner; his bossy, outspoken sister; and an unconventional, imaginative science teacher be just what Mena needs to turn her life around?

Or will the combination of all of them only make things worse?

As Mena is about to find out, it's the freaks of nature who survive...

**

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FAT CAT

PARALLELOGRAM series

Evolution, Me & Other Freaks of Nature Details

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Author : Robin Brande

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From Reader Review Evolution, Me & Other Freaks of Nature for online ebook

Diana Welsch says

I picked this up because I was curious to see what angle the author took on the controversial subject of fundamentalist Christians and their taboos. The verdict: it pleases me, but would sharply divide parents looking for a Christian book for their teen.

Mena Reece was raised a fundamentalist Christian in a lifeless, sterile home. She is involved in the youth group at her local Megachurch and is forbidden by her parents to pursue secular interests.

Her youth group decides to wage a campaign of harassment against the one supposedly gay kid in their school, who later tries to commit suicide. Mena writes him a letter to apologize. This Christlike act of compassion soothes her conscience but rubs the church the wrong way, especially when the boy's parents sue the harassers for millions of dollars. Mena is kicked out of the congregation, harshly punished by her parents, and villified by her former friends.

Our story begins as she starts high school a veritable pariah and is frequently treated in a very unchristian manner by members of her former church. Her only ally in this situation is her new biology lab partner, a sweet and geeky boy named Casey Connor.

Naturally, Mena is glad to have a friend. She deceives her parents in order to spend her afternoons working on a biology project at Casey's house, which she knows would be forbidden since not only is Casey a boy, he is not a fundamentalist Christian. He stokes her interest in forbidden secular pleasures such as The Lord of the Rings movies, puppies, science fiction novels, and later, smooching.

When her former church begins a disruptive protest against her wacky, loveable biology teacher's lessons on evolution, Mena finds herself drawn into a counter-campaign led by Casey's politically inclined older sister.

The book comes to a climax when both Mena and her parents are publically humiliated by the Megachurch's pastor, causing her parents to split from the church and finally begin to understand what Mena is going through with these people. The conclusion finds Mena trying to convince her parents to allow her to attend a more liberal church and un-forbid her to spend time with Casey.

The verdict: I really enjoyed this book despite not being religious at all. In fact, I finished it in one night. Although it was about Christianity, I don't consider it a "Christian" novel, because it did not wrap up with the all Mena's problems being solved because she decides to turn everything over to God. I would recommend it to liberal Christians who have no gripe with evolution and don't think that Harry Potter amounts to witchcraft. However, fundamentalist Christians would surely be offended at the nasty (yet believable) treatment they are given in this, and the book's accepting attitude towards the secular pleasures Mena becomes interested in.

Leela says

One of my favorite books I have ever read. It has something for everyone, romance, humor, conflict, and food for thought. While it centers around a religious topic, I think anyone of any religion should read this. It is definitely worth reading, and while I at first thought it was going to be a cliché "high school girl" story, I was pleasantly surprised.

It is the story of a girl who just entered high school. She is responsible for the sueing of half the people in her church, including her parents. Her friends have abandoned her, her parents refuse to talk to her, and her only friend is her quirky lab partner, Casey (boy), his sister, and her strange Biology teacher.

I loved this book and think everyone should give it a shot!

Katy says

Brande leads with a bit of a mystery: why, exactly, has Mena been banned from her church and ostracized from all of her old church friends? She's miserable, friendless and even her parents are giving her the cold shoulder... and yet she's not about to apologize for doing what she thinks is right. The new friends she makes, starting with her cute/geeky lab partner, Casey, are cool, smart, pro-active and exactly the kind of people her parents would forbid her to hang out with, if they knew. When she finds out that her old pastor is plotting to drive her favorite science teacher out of town for teaching evolution, this time Mena won't stand by and watch it happen. She finds herself assisting Casey and his sister, a journalist, with her own thoughts about how to interpret the Bible's teachings about science.

Though Mena is presented with a number of ethical dilemmas throughout the story, she follows what she's been taught and manages to navigate a wonderfully nuanced path between belief and science - and not a bit of it is preachy. I would absolutely recommend this to any teens who are struggling to understand the arguments on both sides, or who might be a bit more conservative but also willing to be enlightened; but also to anyone looking for a well-told story about someone struggling to find their beliefs among the many fighting for their attention.

BethAnn says

I wanted to like this more than I did. I am one of those people who happens to believe that science and faith should not be mutually exclusive. I believe in God, believe that this world was CREATED, didn't just happen... but I believe God used scientific principles to do that creating. Do I know HOW he did it? Of course not, but I think it is far more likely He "used" science than fought it. But besides that, I believe in evolution within the species, natural selection, etc. I also don't think LotR is evil. Or Harry Potter.

But despite the fact that the subject and issues are familiar, I couldn't really care about Mena. I should have been able to relate to her, but I couldn't. She felt only slightly more complex than the other flat characters in the book. So many annoyances... Seriously? ALL of the Christians are horrible little jerks? They all mercilessly pick on the gay kid and hip check Mena in the hall? And what kind of person is MENA that she was EVER friends with the biggest b***h of them all? Anyway, not great writing, but it was okay and moderately entertaining.

Chantel says

I wasn't sure how I was going to feel about this book in the end. Some personal background...I'm a Christian with a degree in Zoology whose favorite class at the Christian University I attended was Evolution. So, I suspected up front, that I'd either love or hate Evolution, Me and Other Freaks of Nature.

For the first half of the book, I felt like the characters were too one dimensional... (evil, uptight, judgmental Christian pastor and kids... smart, cool, savvy science teacher... mean, controlling religious parents... kind, open-hearted nonreligious parent.) Even though I was skeptical during the beginning of the book, I ended up loving how Robin Brande tied everything up at the end of the book. The characters are not as one-dimensional as they seem at first.

I loved the main character, Mena. She's a good girl, just trying to do what she believes is right. I appreciated that she wasn't a push-over but still struggled with balancing all of her beliefs.

I'd recommend this book to any older teen. (I'd give it 4.5 if I could.) This is a subject that most kids will grapple with in one way or another. It's a good book to back up with parental discussion.

Joanne says

I just finished this book, devouring it in one sitting. I loved several things about Evolution, Me and other Freaks of Nature: first, that it made me think, second, that I could relate to it and third, that there was a cute, funny, nerdy guy in it. But this wasn't just a light teen book-this book had real stuff in it-stuff that makes you think and question your own beliefs (always a good thing, in my opinion) so you come to understand WHY you believe what you believe in. All the characters in this book are 3D and a lot of fun and I always like reading about smart, caring and inspiring teachers who take the time to make sure students are not just fed information, but are active participants in their own learning. Great job by author Robin Brande and I can't wait to see what she comes out with next.

Inhabiting Books says

For those who haven't read the book, here's a very brief synopsis: Mena, an Evangelical Christian on the outs with her own Church, for reasons not made clear at first, starts high school as a social outcast, but getting assigned to Ms. Shepard's biology class starts to change her world.

The book deals with themes of evolution vs. creationism, bullying, and prejudice. I was fascinated with Mena's character growth in this very readable book. Sadly, I can foresee some Creationist-minded Christians trying to get this book banned from school libraries, which would be a shame, because Brande created characters who are ethical, caring, interesting and realistically normal at the same time. Some other reviewers on GoodReads have complained about the one dimensional characters of the religious kids, when the reality is that the attitudes and behavior displayed by the religious kids makes them seem pretty one dimensional, just as it does in real life when people behave similarly. Having witnessed first hand the mass ignorance and bad behavior displayed by so-called "intelligent" design (aka Creationism) fans toward those

who disagree with them, I found the book very realistic in its portrayal of the characters and situation. (And yes, I'm aware that the situation could be reversed as well, but that has not been my experience.)

The part I thought wasn't fleshed out well was Mena's relationship with her parents. She obviously loves them, but never seems to question why they wouldn't support her or show more empathy toward her. Surrounded as she was by hate and vitriol on all sides, I'm surprised she seemed so calm (relatively speaking) and accepting.

Janina says

Robin Brande has definitely become one of my favourite authors with this book. I loved her second novel, **Fat Cat**, and her debut, **Evolution, Me & Other Freaks of Nature**, was great as well.

Mena believes she did the right thing - but the right thing got her kicked out of church, made her former friends hate her and caused her parents to stop talking to her altogether. Not the best situation to start your first year of high school.

The only bright spot is Mena's biology class and her lab partner Casey. But just when Mena believes she might have the chance for a fresh start, new issues arise as the class starts to discuss evolution ...

I simply loved the characters in this book. Mena and her struggle to belong somewhere again, not knowing anymore what is wrong and what is right. Casey and his lovable family who made Mena feel at home right away (and of course the adorable puppies who came to be the stars of Mena's and Casey's biology project). And Brande even did a great job at making me hate Mena's so-called former friends, who believe they do others a favour by trying to convert them.

Although I'm not a religious person at all myself, I could understand Mena's struggle to unite her belief in God on one side and her interest in science on the other.

Also, despite the fact that this novel addresses somewhat controversial issues, it always left the reader to form her/his own opinion about them and it never got preachy in any way. I found it interesting to read about the fact that evolution versus creationism is still an issue at many American schools, as it is something we almost don't deal at all with here in Germany.

And I simply love the fact that Brande's main characters are into maths and science, something I've rarely encountered in YA fiction before.

The only thing I wished would have been developed a bit more was Mena's realtionship to her parents.

Altogether, a great read and I can't wait to read whatever Robin Brande comes up with next!

Danielle says

I really wanted to like this book.

I thought that it was going to be so much more then what it was...

But it wasn't.

You see, I was hoping for this nice story about how a (seemingly) Christian girl found a way to defend her faith and what she's believed all her life. You know, like, Live Out Loud or something! Instead, I watched as Mena (who overall was a very believable character to be sure) learned about and then believed in something that I absolutely do not agree with.

As far as characters go, I didn't like the portrayal of Mena's old church friends because while there are of course some people out there who are like that, most aren't. Really, they aren't. Certain characters that I did like and actually came close to adoring were her science partner, Casey, and his older sister Kayla and her boyfriend Josh. They were really intriguing and realistic characters. I think that quite a bit of thought went into making them believable.

Other aspects of the book that I liked were how the plot and drama were built up. I completely agree with the other reviewers who said that the time right before the climax was the most exciting part of the entire story—it really was! Another small detail that I liked were the puppies, which sounded absolutely adorable!

Overall, if you believe in evolution, but you also believe in God then you will love this book. If you're like me and only believe in one or the other, you may have difficulties enjoying this book as you'll constantly feel like your guard is up against what you're reading.

Kristy says

I loved this book. So much so that I'm planning to buy it so I can reread it often. It's a YA book about a Christian girl and her struggles to reconcile what she believes about God and what she learns about evolution in her high school biology class. Since I love science and I'm religious, this has always been an interesting subject to me.

My favorite passage came towards the end. Mena (the main character) is talking with someone about religion and evolution.

"I believe that God created the universe and everything in it, and that evolution is the best explanation of what systems He used to effect it.

...there is a natural order to the universe. It's beautiful in its simplicity and logic. Evolution is part of that natural order. Evolution is simply true. There's nothing evil about it.

...quantum physics tells us that at the same time there's this beautiful, perfect order to all things in a very large sense, there is also a part of our universe--down at the smallest level--that will never EVER be predictable. There are just some things we cannot control.

...What it means, in a nutshell, is this: The future is not set. Which tells me there will always be room for the miraculous. God left Himself some slack in the rope. As a scientist, I may try to know everything about this universe there is to know, but even then I will never be able to touch that part—that mystery—that lies at the heart of all things.

To me, that's where God is. And it's also proof that I have free will. If the future isn't set, I can affect my course. My prayers can matter. How I live my life matters. I'm not just some computer living out my program.

That is the God I believe in. It's the God who created a universe so vast and wonderful for me to explore and test and observe, and yet I have the pleasure of knowing some mysteries will have to wait until I can ask Him face to face."

I breezed through this little book in an afternoon; I couldn't put it down, so we had a very simple dinner! I'd recommend it to anyone.

John Egbert says

I recognized the cover of this book at the library and decided to pick it up. I didn't have anything else to do, so I read it immediately.

I, ack, love this book. Love it like "I would propose to this book if it was a person" love. But that's just it, *I* loved this book, which is why *I* gave it five stars. I think it's amazing. But...alas, it's not *that* great of a book.

There is lots of lecturing, first of all. Which didn't really bother *me* because what the book was lecturing wasn't bad, but it's still lecturing all the same. Which doesn't have a place in a book -- unless, you know, it's like a textbook, where you're supposed to lecture, I believe.

However, I would not consider this book to be anti-Christian. *What Would Emma Do?*, another book I believe I rated five stars and loved, seemed actually quite anti-Christian. (That didn't stop me from loving it, but still.) This book isn't...at least to me. The main character, Mena, who I keep wanting to call Mara, starts out believing in God and continues to do so. At first I thought the author was going to play the whole "Mena finds science and learns the truth" thing, but she doesn't. To me, she handles the entire situation quite well. But I have to admit that at times the lecturing can come off as anti-Christianish and eye-roll worthy.

Note to self: whatever you do in your novel, *don't lecture*. Good lecturing or not it always brings down a book.

Anyway, the backstory of the book, SPOILERS SPOILERS SPOILERS DON'T CLICK TEH BUTTON IF YOU DON'T WANT TO BE SPOILED (view spoiler)

Mena, as a main character...she's okay. Just okay. She's really paranoid and insecure and she doesn't use her little inkling of a backbone against the right people. There are times when I wished she would suddenly turn violent and punch the people that were bothering her in the face. But, sadly, she never did. There wasn't one time in the book where Mena stood up to her ex-friends and told them that she didn't have to take any of their bullshit anymore. And that was a tragedy, because I feel it's what would have made her really grow.

She also has this thing about telling the truth. Which, considering half of the books I've read this year, was some change. But having no backbone often conflicted with her telling the truth, as people around her (more specifically, Casey's sister) would just bully her into lying.

Casey is one of the best love interests I've read *all year*. He wasn't angry, a jerk, overtly condescending, rich, a jock or playboy and he wasn't even jaw dropingly handsome. (Although Mena did keep mentioning his hair and eyes, which kind of grated on my nerves after the first five times she did so.) Casey is a nerd. A Lord of the Rings and science nerd who often put on a fake British accent to amuse Mena, if only for a moment. A breath of fresh air.

And their romance felt built up. It wasn't love at first sight, and I felt that it was realistic the way Mena fell for him. And vice versa. And guess what -- it didn't take over the story, either! It was almost like a *balance* of the romance and the actual, you know, story. A feat I've rarely seem accomplished before.

All in all, I'll say this -- Evolution, Me & Other Freaks of Nature is a book I'll always love in the deepest pits of my black heart. It is also a book with flaws. Many flaws. But it never gets boring, and it's definitely worth reading.

Tatiana says

In case you don't know this about me, I am agnostic. It is beyond my understanding why so many people think that it is impossible to be a religious person and accept science. I can roll and roll my eyes at those who relentlessly assert that the Earth's age is 6000 years and people walked the Earth along with dinosaurs. I am sorry, I understand there is a lot of unexplained about our Universe and some choose to attribute this unexplainable to a God's grace, but denying scientifically proven facts is the height of ignorance and narrow-mindedness IMO. This novel addresses exactly this issue - how to reconcile religious believes and science - and should be right up my alley. Alas, it didn't work for me.

Here is why - to put it simply, Evolution, Me & Other Freaks of Nature lacks subtlety and reads like anti-religious propaganda. Even I, with my agnostic believes, can't appreciate uniformly one-dimensional/off-putting/LOTR-denouncing Christian characters in this book.

Trevor says

This totally takes a spot in my top 5 for 2007! (This coming from the guy who doesn't seriously practice a religion or affiliate himself with any church, herd, or mob!) Absolutely amazing, touching, funny, thought provoking..wow. Brande presents us with a girl's struggle to remain faithful to her personal Christian beliefs while:

- a) learning for herself that science and religion can mix.
- b) coming to terms with the fact that the Christian clique at her school (her old gang) certainly doesn't act Christian at all (but they wear all the right Jesus t-shirts while physically assaulting or belittling others)
- c) that doing the "right thing" can cause an unbelievable amount of turmoil.

And it's this "right thing" that lands Mena Reece in a ton of trouble entering her freshman year of high school

It's an extremely timely, important, and even fun book to read that I hope will have a lot of appeal, regardless of religious affiliation!

Jennifer says

Before I start my rant, let me give credit where credit is due.

The main characters are fairly interesting. There are churches like the one portrayed in the book (though I've only heard of them). There are Christians (or at least professing Christians) who believe in Evolution.

That being said, here are my problems with this book. (Now, I waited some time before writing this so it didn't turn into a flame review, so some details may now have escaped me.)

1. The false dichotomy. Brande sets the story up and basically gives the reader two options. The crazy cult church who believes in Creationism (as taught in the Bible) but who are inept at defending their beliefs and who in many ways does not act like a Christian should. OR The rational, good, kind Christian evolutionists. In this book, there's no in between. Creationism in this book is equated with unbalanced, unbiblical believers.
2. It would be nice if Brande did her homework on such things as the fossil record. Now, I'm not a scientist by any means, but I know enough from a couple college classes to know that Brande casts broad generalizations and completely ignores the evidence pointing to Creation as shown in the Bible. She doesn't address the problem of having Evolution begin before the Fall and she doesn't address the lack of fossils to support Evolution. A lot is just presupposed. Now, I understand this is a work of fiction, but that's not a good excuse for shoddy research. And since the main plot is her struggle with this topic, these things should be addressed.
3. Now, this one made me really mad... taking the Bible out of context. Several times the main character takes Scripture out of context to erroneously support Evolution.

Note: I am a believer, and I fully believe in Creation as it is given in the Bible. Microevolution, which we see among species, can be seen and proven and is supported by Scripture ("kinds" in Genesis). Macroevolution is a theory and a worldview and in many ways a belief system (or religion). Many evidences in creation can be read through this lens or through Creationist lens (for instance, Evolutionists and Creationists have different views on such things as the Grand Canyon). Either way, you're reading your own view onto the evidence.

Jessica says

My friend Janina recommended this to me after I had read Brande's other book Fat Cat and absolutely loved it and I must say that this was a really nice read as well. I didn't love it as much as Fat Cat but still, I enjoyed it thoroughly.

You can see from the blurb what the story's about so I won't go into that any further. Evolution, Me and Other Freaks of Nature does have an awww-worthy romance included but it's not the thing the story mostly revolves around. IMO, the main topic is how to reconcile facts and beliefs. This was extremely interesting for me, since I'm very conflicted about this subject myself.

I definitely recommend this book, the writing is flawless and I like Brande's sense of humor and overall the

story is really enjoyable but if you're simply looking for a contemp YA romance, Evolution, Me and Other Freaks might not serve this purpose since the story does not focus on it.

My favorite quotes:

Lying is for the weak-minded. If you can't think of a truthful way to solve your problems, you're not thinking hard enough.

That's what it takes to survive – the freaks shall inherit the earth. Hell yeah!

In science the word theory doesn't mean what it does in everyday conversation. It's not a guess or a hunch. It's a well-reasoned, PROVABLE explanation for something we see in the natural world.

In science, it's not a theory's job to become a fact. Theories are there to EXPLAIN facts. To tell us why we're seeing what we see. That's the beauty of a unifying theory like evolution – it gives us a structure so we can understand our world.

The future is not set. Which tells me there will always be room for the miraculous. God left Himself some slack in the rope. As a scientist, I may try to know everything about this universe there is to know, but even then I will never be able to touch that part – that mystery - that lies at the heart of all things. To me, that's where God is.
