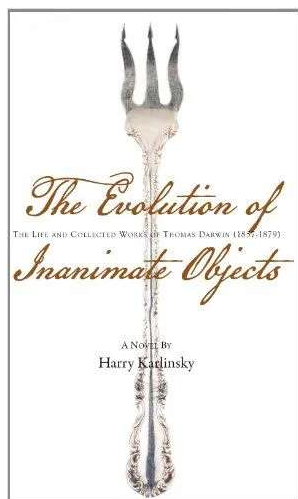


The Evolution of Inanimate Objects is inspired

By [Douglas Todd](#)

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The Evolution of Inanimate Objects is a novel fueled by an inspired concept, which has been pulled off with aplomb by Dr. Harry Karlinsky, a Vancouver-based neuro-scientist and psychiatrist.

The Evolution of Inanimate Objects (Insomniac Press) is an extremely convincing fiction exploring one of history's most evocative figures, **Charles Darwin**. Yet it focuses mostly on Darwin's youngest son, the mentally ailing **Thomas Darwin** (1857-1879).

The plot revolves around Thomas Darwin leaving England for Canada, where he is eventually involuntarily committed to Ontario's London Insane Asylum, where Dr. **Richard Bucke** is the medical superintendent.

The Evolution of Inanimate Objects is low-key and restrained, full of the technical and scientific language of the Victoria age. But it's also a page turner, based primarily on difficult letters (which probably never existed, but the reader is not meant to worry about that) exchanged by Charles Darwin and Bucke. Once Thomas becomes a patient of Bucke, his detailed journal notes and correspondence with Darwin provide thought-provoking insights into Thomas' mind and the

innovative psychiatric care he receives. Karlinsky, whom I have met on several occasions, has woven together this fascinating tale of history and real-life figures with an artist's imagination and immense creativity. Reading through the novel, one often yearns to know which elements are fact. But that desire drops away as the bittersweet psychological tale develops.

I was drawn to *The Evolution of Inanimate Objects* in part because Bucke is one of the main characters. I once wrote a column about Bucke, who was a friend of the poet **Walt Whitman** and a visionary and mystic in his own right. Bucke wrote the book, ***Man's Moral Nature***, based on Darwin's theory of natural selection.

In a subsequent book, ***Cosmic Consciousness***, Bucke expanded on evolutionary theory by arguing that man has progressed "from simple consciousness to self-consciousness," and was on the verge of a new level of awareness, which Bucke termed "cosmic consciousness." Bucke was admired by famous philosophers such as **William James** and **Peter Ouspensky**.

The Evolution of Inanimate Objects doesn't spend much time on Bucke's spiritual theories, which are still being studied today. But the correspondence between Bucke and Charles Darwin stimulates the imagination of anyone fascinated with the famed British biologist's work, and particularly with what he may have been like as a private and family man, married to Emma.

In the Evolution of Inanimate Objects, Charles Darwin appears highly conscientious, bordering to the obsessive. So are several of his children. They are not a robust family.

Karlinsky's clever tale depicts a devoted and inquisitive father keenly observing his children's development.

It conjures up many parents' dilemma of sensing something is far from "right" with their child, yet wanting to protect that child from shame and ridicule.

{Mental health professionals will no doubt be interested in the perennial ethical challenge involving the role that family members should take in an adult patient's psychiatric care.}

One highlight of the novel occurs when the editor of the prestigious science journal, ***Nature***, delicately writes to Darwin

about needing to reject the scientific manuscript sent in by his son, Thomas.



Thomas' manuscript (from which the book's title is taken) is about how dining utensils, such as a fork, mate through a process that Thomas calls "spontaneous mechanical fusion."

They do so, according to Thomas, while in utensil drawers — and as such produce increasingly adaptive "hybrid" utensils such as the oyster fork-spoon.

In the novel, the editor of *Nature* writes to Darwin about Thomas' manuscript, saying that "although it contains a number of valid observations, I am seriously concerned that the majority of its content reflects the reasoning of an unsound mind. I say this most respectfully and seek your counsel."

The novel depicts Darwin responding to the *Nature* editor on May 23, 1879, saying: "In no way do I question your estimation of my son's effort. But whether it is wise to be forthright with Thomas I cannot say. A father's grief clouds my objectivity. "

The Evolution of Inanimate Objects is full of such moments. Poignant. Erudite.

Understated.

It is a first novel signaling the arrival of a serious and inventive new writer on the Canadian scene.

[Read my earlier piece on Dr. Richard Bucke's groundbreaking evolutionary worldview](#)

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