

February 12, 2011

Today is Charles Darwin's 211th birthday, and you could mark it by having a go at this delightful, playful (and sad) novel, built around a clever conceit: that the (entirely fictitious) 11th and youngest child of the great biologist ended life in an asylum for the insane in London, Ont., believing, among other things, that pipes and utensils have an evolutionary life of their own. His "history" is uncovered by a psychiatrist named ... Harry Karlinsky. Now, Karlinsky is, in fact, a psychiatrist. He is also, apparently, mad for Darwin, as witness his easy mastery of Darwin's life and works and the novel's Victorian ambience. This jeu d'esprit has the feel of a real case study.