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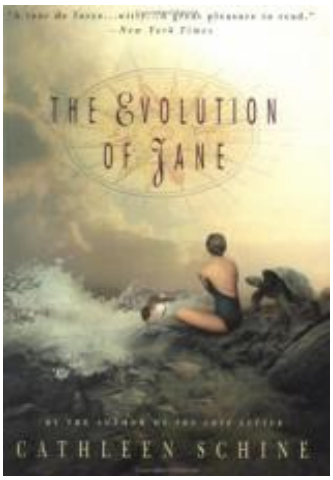
The Evolution of Jane

by Cathleen Schine



About the Book

Blending the romance of travel with memories of childhood, the national-bestseller The Evolution of Jane draws on unusual material from the literary realm?evolutionary history?while retaining the trademark slapstick and biting wit of a Cathleen Schine novel. In its setting, the novel marks a departure from Schine's traditionally urban environments, taking the characters to the remote Galapagos Islands six hundred miles off the coast of Ecuador. On that island made famous by Darwin's observations of curious species, Schine chooses to observe her favorite curious species, the human one, and one of its most puzzling habits?friendship.

Jane Barlow Schwartz is a twenty-five-year-old recent divorcée who is treated by her parents to a dream vacation in the Galapagos Islands. Meant to be a diversion from her failed marriage, Jane arrives in the islands only to find that the tour guide assigned to her eco-adventure group is the best friend she lost ten years ago, Martha. A distant cousin and next-door neighbor in the summer community where they grew up, Martha was Jane's best friend. A bit more savvy and brazen (she wintered in New York City), Martha introduced Jane to bikinis, matching tops-and-bottoms, and the joy of having a best friend. However, with no warning at all, Martha dropped the friendship. One day, it was over. Like a discarded lover, Jane was left to wonder what went wrong.

Jane sifts through the most telling memories from her summers spent with Martha, searching for clues to explain what happened. Was it something she said? Did she write something offensive? Was there a family secret Jane never learned of? The journey through the Galapagos Islands progresses and Jane's curiosity about the science of friendship becomes an obsession. As Martha blithely leads the random cast of characters through the nesting areas of the red-footed boobies and the murky waters of the sea lions, Jane can only wonder how Martha can so easily let go of such a strong bond as "best friend." Fueled by Darwin's The Origins of Species, Jane begins to treat friendship as an organism?one that requires a habitat tailored to its specific needs, one that is as easily destroyed as it is created.

With great ease, Schine takes us from the myopic world of girlfriends?where matching sailor suits inspire lengthy

conversation?to the supposedly mature world of adults on vacation?flirting, dining, sometimes politely tolerating each other. She asks the big questions and lets Jane, as well as the reader, muddle through the answers. Why does friendship exist if it doesn't perpetuate the species? Are friendships designed to fail, leaving its partners free to move on to other, more fruitful friendships? Most telling of all, Schine opens the novel with a question Jane demands of the reader, "Have you ever lost a friend?" From the very beginning, Schine promises provocative dialogues between Jane and the reader, Darwin and modern-day relationships. Hailed by The New York Times for its "vivid intensity" and noted for its lively synthesis of science and emotion, The Evolution of Jane appeals to both sides of a reader's brain?the deductive reasoner and the heart-felt empathizer of the human species.

Discussion Guide

1.Discuss the ways in which Jane and Martha are competitive. Do you think competition is necessary in any relationship? How is competition in friendship useful or harmful?

2.What significance does Jane's Cuban heritage have in the story? What are the economic and cultural resonances of it in her relationship with Martha?

3. Consider the Galapagos Islands. In many ways, they are populated by anomalies?species isolated for so long they have adapted to the very specific environment of Galapagos. How does that relate to people, surrounded by homogeneous friends and family?

4. The tourists have to hose off every time they get in the waters around the Galapagos to assure they do not pollute the local environment with foreign organisms. Do you think they've altered the environment just by being there? How have they changed the environment? How have the Galapagos changed them?

5. What other naturalist writers do you know of besides Charles Darwin? How has Naturalism changed since his time (1809-82)?

6.Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory states that animals and plants develop through natural selection. What does that mean? Besides physical changes through the millennium, how have humans developed through natural selection?

7. Consider friendship as a living organism. What environment does it thrive in? What slight variation in its habitat could destroy it?

8. What do you think social Darwinism is? Do you think it applies to friendship?

9. Why do you think Martha wasn't as concerned as Jane about their lost friendship?or was she?

10. Darwin kept his theories secret for twenty years. The Barlow family secret was also buried for decades. The Cornwalls had a secret, which they took to the Galapagos. Why all the secrets? What happens to all of these secrets?

11. Do you think friendship is inevitable, like procreation? Or is it an unnecessary human invention? Discuss.

12. Where do you think (or hope) Jane and Martha's relationship goes from here?

Author Bio

Cathleen Schine is the author of KÜNSTLERS IN PARADISE, THE GRAMMARIANS, THE THREE WEISSMANNS OF WESTPORT and THE LOVE LETTER, among other novels. She has contributed to *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Magazine* and *The New York Times Book Review*. She lives in Los Angeles.

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