



The Evolution of Jane

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THE EVOLUTION OF JANE, Cathleen Schine's fourth novel, is a witty and subtle story about a young New Englander, Jane Barlow, who unexpectedly encounters Martha Barlow, her cousin and former childhood friend, on a tour of the Galapagos Islands. Jane has never been able to understand why Martha abruptly broke off their friendship ten years earlier. Now that Martha is her tour guide on the islands where nineteenth century British naturalist Charles Darwin developed his theory of natural selection, the inquisitive Jane speculates endlessly about Darwin's theories and about her childhood relationship with Martha.

Jane is particularly fascinated by the classification of creatures into different species. How is it that apparently similar creatures can belong to different species? Who decides? Jane's mind switches back and forth from natural selection to human friendship. What was the splitting event that, so to speak, made Jane and Martha two species rather than one? Is there any evolutionary purpose to friendship?

Lurking in the background is a family feud which the young Jane never understood. By the end of the novel, when revelations come thick and fast, Jane has figured it out and also resolved her ambivalent feelings for Martha. There is also a subtle hint that although the universe is random, without plan or purpose, that may not be such a bad thing after all, for beauty and joy can still be found.

Sources for Further Study

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