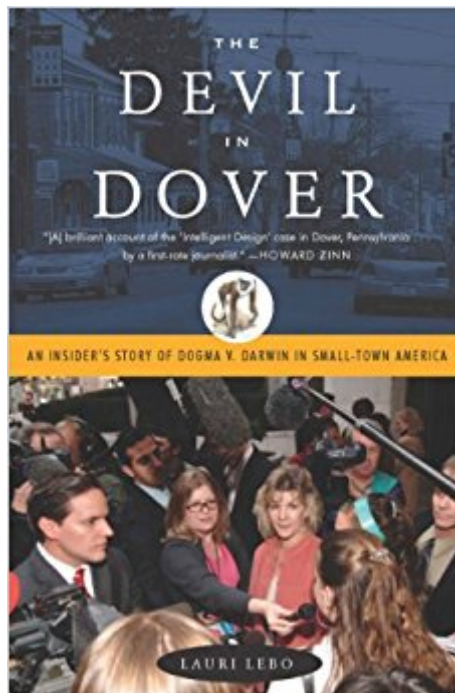


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The Devil In Dover: An Insider's Story Of Dogma V. Darwin In Small-town America



Synopsis

Local newspaper reporter Lauri Lebo was handed the story of a lifetime when the Dover (Pennsylvania) School Board adopted a measure to require its ninth-grade biology students to learn about intelligent design. In a case that recalled the famed 1925 Scopes "monkey" trial and made international headlines, eleven parents sued the school board. When the case wound up in federal court before a George W. Bush-appointed judge, Lebo had a front-row seat. Destined to become required reading for a generation of journalists, scientists, and science teachers, as well as for anyone concerned about the separation of church and state, *The Devil in Dover* is Lebo's widely praised account of a perfect storm of religious intolerance, First Amendment violations, and an assault on American science education. Lebo skillfully probes the compelling background of the case, introducing us to the plaintiffs, the defendants, the lawyers, and a parade of witnesses, along with Judge John E. Jones, who would eventually condemn the school board's decision as one of "breathtaking inanity." With the antievolution battle having moved to the state level and the recent passage of state legislation that protects the right of schools to teach alternatives to evolution, the story will continue to be relevant for years to come.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"A brilliant account of the intelligent design case in Dover . . . by a first-rate journalist." —Howard Zinn "Both fascinating and moving. . . . [Lebo] thoughtfully probes one of America's most divisive cultural conflicts; and the responsibilities journalists have

when covering such a controversial story." —Religion Dispatches "Engaging and richly textured . . . a compelling narrative. " —The Patriot News(Harrisburg) "[Lebo] took care with both the politics and the science of the Dover case." —Carl Zimmer, science journalist

"Lebo combines the dramas of family and courtroom into an engrossing story, trading illusions of journalistic objectivity for hard-won personal truths . . . paints a national pastime in living, local color." --Alternet

The strength and weakness of this book is that Lebo is a local--she knew all of the players, knew their neighbors, knew the reporters who were called liars and compelled to testify. That knowledge allows her to paint certain individuals (such as Buckingham, an oxycontin-abusing, authoritarian, religious zealot) with sympathy. I found myself feeling sorry for him towards the end of the book. She also uses the intelligent design trial to examine her relationship with her father, a fundamentalist Christian who sees the world so differently from her, and with whom she is constantly trying to obtain some acknowledgment that the world is more complex than fundamentalists portray. Her depiction of their relationship is poignant and moving. I also really liked her point that the new mantra that journalism should be "fair and balanced" ends up distorting the truth. There isn't real balance in the creationism/intelligent design v. evolution "controversy." The former "theories" are simply dogma; the latter is an actual scientific theory that is supported by the known evidence. To portray both sides as having equal validity undermines the one role of the media, which is to educate its readers about current events and issues. The importance of being objective and truthful, as opposed to some artificial concept of "fair and balanced," is particularly striking today, when so much of the mass media appears driven by ratings and the need to keep corporate owners and advertisers happy, but which is leading to an increasingly-uneducated and polarized citizenry. Where I thought the book was hampered by her insider status was in her depiction of the trial itself. I liked how she conveyed the energy of the courtroom, but I found her descriptions of the trial to be incomplete and sometimes disjointed. She reported the highlights but, I feel, without providing enough context to allow the reader to put the case together in his/her own mind. I shared her enthusiasm as she educated herself about evolutionary theory and came to enjoy the scientific testimony, but it was sometimes hard to put all of it together. I'm not sure that Lebo understood how it all went together, which would certainly hinder any attempt to explain it to someone else. Still, this is a fascinating and human account of one of the more interesting cases from the last 20 years, and well worth a read.

For Lauri Lebo, it was personal. She grew up in Dover, PA. Her father, whose radio station was on the brink of bankruptcy, became a born-again Christian when a local Christian group came in with cash to broadcast from the station. (This will cause a permanent rift between her and her father). She knew the people in the tightknit borough, as towns in the commonwealth are called. She is also a journalist, so her story of the trial is also professional. She will be vigilant about maintaining her journalistic integrity against the impulse of her personal convictions, pressure from her editors, and interactions with her father and neighbors. Personally, she will find common ground with the plaintiffs, their lawyers, teachers, and evolution. Her writing will reflect how townspeople drift apart, and form new circles and friendships as Dover becomes the epicenter of a landmark legal decision. Fire requires heat, air, fuel, and the right chemical combination. Alan Bonsell, creationist, and chairman of the local school board, Bill Buckingham, board member and also a born-again Christian, the Discovery Institute which promotes intelligent design (I. D.) which encourages teaching "the controversy," and Thomas Moore Law Center will provide all the elements for ignition that will divide a community like fire and water. The entire board will provide litigious combustion by voting for a mention of I. D. and the controversy in the classroom. The science teachers and a number of parents rebel. The ACLU and counselors from Pepper Hamilton in Philadelphia represent the plaintiffs pro bono. The plaintiffs' lawyers will have to prove that I. D. is creationism, not science, and that the board is willfully attempting to bring what they knew to be creationism in the classroom. With the apparent perjury and ignorance of Bonsell, Buckingham, other board members, they prove their case easily. During the trial, Bonsell and Buckingham will continue to prevaricate about what transpired at earlier meetings. Minutes from those meetings will go missing. They will accuse two local journalists, one a devout Christian, that they were lying when they reported what they had heard first hand. Judge Jones will refer these "Christian gentleman" to the local district attorney recommending charges of perjury for their contradictory depositions and testimony. Townspeople will not forget that those who accepted Jesus as their personal Savior, bore false witness against their neighbors time and again. The Discovery Institute, as predicted, will accuse Judge Jones, a Republican recommended by right wing Senator Santorum and appointed by George W. Bush, of judicial activism. With the new board, there will be no appeal. The issue is dead. Ann Coulter will claim that liberals found a court that would hand them their decision on a silver platter. Lebo shows the strain the trial takes on the community. Friends and neighbors of old barely notice each other in supermarket aisles. Four days after the trial ends, the people of Dover vote out every member of the board except Buckingham who resigned months earlier. They bring in an entire new slate of

"evolutionists," more to put the past behind them than for their scientific or religious inclinations. The real sadness, Lebo notes is how the defense abandoned one of I. D.'s staunchest defenders--Bill Buckingham because he mentioned Jesus Christ and creation in one of the earlier board meetings. They will characterize him as a drug addict and renegade. No one will visit Buckingham when he is hospitalized after the trial, not members of his church, not one minister, not one of his fellow former board members, not even Bonsell. Christian compassion will die with intelligent design. The author sees Bonsell and Buckingham as pathetic figures. Bonsell will insist that Lauri "doesn't get it," that evolution is a theory not fact, even though Bonsell sat through the entire trial listening to the overwhelming scientific evidence presented. The \$2,000,000 cost to the community will not dissuade him from being disruptive at future board meetings, or from acting as if he was somehow vindicated. Buckingham will insist that Jones knows nothing about the Constitution because it does not mention "separation of church and state." He will remain adamant. Lebo will remember Bonsell for his tenderness to his wife who suffered from breast cancer, and Buckingham for his love of the Philadelphia Phillies and bluegrass music. Intelligent Design will disappear from Dover and a number of other states and municipalities that were thinking of bringing it into the classroom. A new "Panda-style" book that once substituted creationism with I. D. is now being drafted substituting intelligent design with sudden emergence. The people of Dover will be left to mend their differences and animosities. Lebo quotes Romans 1:22 at the start of Chapter 9: Professing themselves to be wise, they become fools. It looks like they will always be with us. Coincidentally, it's April Fools Day--once again.

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