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## Book Review

Mark Roeder

# Unnatural Selection: Why the Geeks will inherit the Earth

Reviewed by Nicola Gaston

Geeks and Nerds have enjoyed something of a renaissance in recent years: from the establishment of institutions such as Nerdnite, which runs monthly events in Auckland and Wellington to discuss matters of tech and science, to the increasingly common self-identification of people as 'beer geeks' due to their intense passion for craft beer. So what sort of people is this book about?

The title '*Unnatural Selection*', gives away something of Roeder's thesis: that in the modern world, the forces that once shaped human evolution through the process of natural selection have changed. The technology-rich environments that we live in have led to some human traits becoming more usefully adaptive. The case for the argument that Roeder is making is rather logical up to this point, and a topic that I find inherently interesting. However, it was in the author's insistence on *geekiness* as an essential quantity, which is now being selected for, that I lost some sympathy with the narrative.

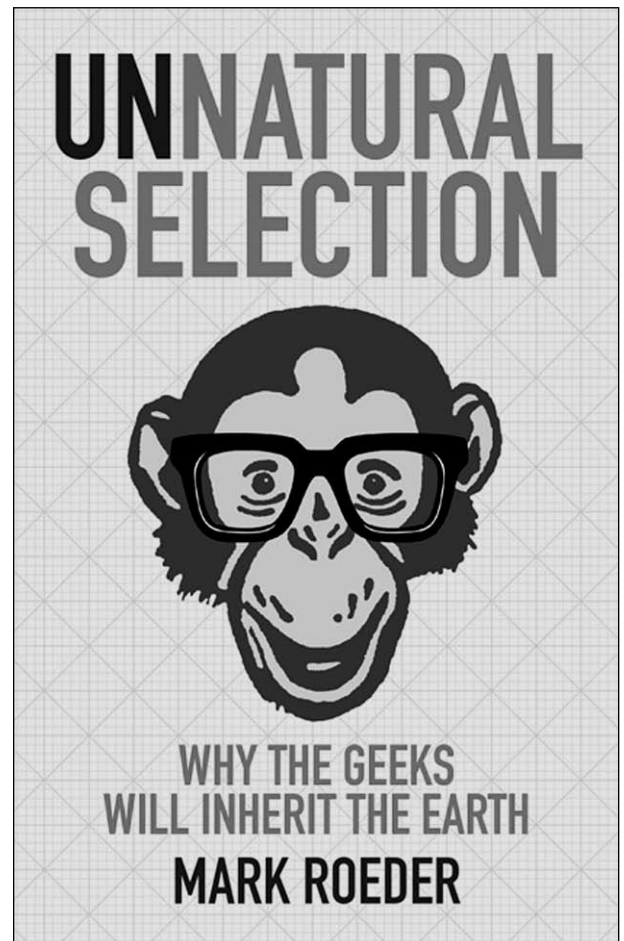
The origin of the word geek is traced for us back to Eastern European circuses, where *gecken* – translated as 'wild men' by Roeder – would bite the head off a live chicken or a snake and swallow it. This form of madness has been replaced in the modern usage of the term by an obsessive passion for a particular subject, and most usually, the obsession is technological in nature. The founders of Facebook, Google, Microsoft or Apple are identified as geeks early on, giving a sense of the extent to which this book is based on popular anecdotal data, as opposed to more general research.

In the third chapter, *The Rise of the Geek*, we are introduced to a number of species of geek. I am sure that the terms chosen were selected in the best intentions: e.g. *Findus algorithmius*; *Geekus maturum* – but this section of the book falls into a recitation of stereotype that does little to advance the book, although it does enable the names of Steve Jobs, Julian Assange, and even Susan Boyle to be worked into the story. For example, the description of *Geekus purizenicus* reads:

'The purist geek is the most single-minded, obsessive and ruthless geek of all. He or she will dedicate years, even decades, in pursuit of a singular vision. They will let nothing stand in their way, and will endure extraordinary hardship and privation to achieve their goal. Sometimes their personal zeal is so intense that it can take on an almost religious quality.'

I have a pretty healthy sense of humour, but at times I struggled to understand whether such descriptions were intended to be as tongue-in-cheek as they came across. Surely not, if this is what the book is based upon?

The use of narrative around real people, easily recognisable to the reader, to illustrate the case that the author is making is usually a successful tactic in that it can illustrate a complex phenomenon without technical detail. In this book, however, I was instead left feeling that Roeder's argument was superficial, reliant on an assessment of geeks



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as *non-neurotypical*, with an identification of particular people as geeks based on name recognition and the ability to poke fun at some aspect of their personal history. Significantly, the book neglects any discussion of or reflection on conditions, such as autism, which fall into the non-neurotypical category.

The later sections of the book develop into an assessment of what the future will hold for geeks. Despite having just spent a large part of the book telling us at length what inherent traits distinguish a geek from the rest of us, Roeder now blurs the lines as he discusses how technology may enhance human capabilities. Touching on the use of drugs such as Ritalin, genetic modification, and Google Glass, the discussion has some interesting elements, but fails to synthesise these into a coherent vision of what the future will look like. In a section titled *Precautionary Principle*, Roeder states of cognitive enhancement technologies that 'we should first consider the ethical and moral dimensions, not the scientific ones'. I couldn't help but think that he should have kept this in mind in earlier sections of the book, and been rather less prescriptive in his definition of a geek.

Despite the various criticisms levelled above, *Unnatural Selection* is an easy read, and touches on some very interesting subject matter. I don't think it lives up to the teaser on the back cover, asking whether Darwin's theory of evolution is out of date, but then I didn't really expect it to. If you are interested in what the ideas are, then by all means read it: but be prepared to do a lot of your own thinking. That's not the worst thing for a book to make you do, anyway.