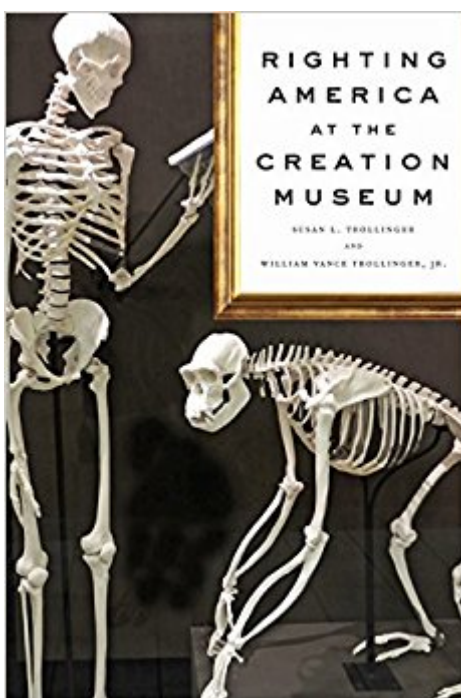


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Righting America At The Creation Museum (Medicine, Science, And Religion In Historical Context)



Synopsis

On May 28, 2007, the Creation Museum opened in Petersburg, Kentucky. Aimed at scientifically demonstrating that the universe was created less than ten thousand years ago by a Judeo-Christian god, the museum is hugely popular, attracting millions of visitors over the past eight years. Surrounded by themed topiary gardens and a petting zoo with camel rides, the site conjures up images of a religious Disneyland. Inside, visitors are met by dinosaurs at every turn and by a replica of the Garden of Eden that features the Tree of Life, the serpent, and Adam and Eve. In *Righting America at the Creation Museum*, Susan L. Trollinger and William Vance Trollinger, Jr., take readers on a fascinating tour of the museum. The Trollingers vividly describe and analyze its vast array of exhibits, placards, dioramas, and videos, from the Culture in Crisis Room, where videos depict sinful characters watching pornography or considering abortion, to the Natural Selection Room, where placards argue that natural selection doesn't lead to evolution. The book also traces the rise of creationism and the history of fundamentalism in America. This compelling book reveals that the Creation Museum is a remarkably complex phenomenon, at once a "natural history" museum at odds with contemporary science, an extended brief for the Bible as the literally true and errorless word of God, and a powerful and unflinching argument on behalf of the Christian right.

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Customer Reviews

"The material unfolds engagingly because the Trollingers confront and rebut pseudoscientific zealotry...so readers emerge from our deep exposure to this culture feeling triumphant, sane, as we

align with the authors in the camp of science and reason." (Times Higher Education)"[T]he most compelling elements of the book focus on the history, evolution and construction of the museum as a cultural space and then explore how the Creation Museum fits into that history. As the Trollingers show repeatedly, Creationism has evolved a posture that steadfastly sidesteps any kind of serious debate. The book is at its best when it situates the Creation Museum within the longer history of how we present objects and organize knowledge." (Los Angeles Times)"More than a tour, *Righting America at the Creation Museum* is about as thorough and detailed a text-based analysis of the Creation Museum as anyone could want. This book is a perceptive critical analysis of the museum's purposes, methods, and potential impact." (Free Inquiry)"A multidimensional approach to the topic of the Creation Museum, this superb book combines ethnography with discursive forays into history and theory in an attempt to understand an important cultural phenomenon. The authors deftly move from description to historical vignettes to theory as they seek to explain the museum." (Randall Balmer, Dartmouth College, author of *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*)"This carefully researched, engagingly written book takes readers on a virtual tour of the Creation Museum, the first of its kind. This book is, to my knowledge, also the first of its kind. No one else has devoted such meticulous attention to the messages of the museum or done so in such a lucid, even-handed manner." (Ronald L. Numbers, University of Wisconsin-Madison, author of *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design*)

Susan L. Trollinger is an associate professor of English at the University of Dayton. She is the author of *Selling the Amish: The Tourism of Nostalgia*. William Vance Trollinger, Jr., is a professor of history at the University of Dayton. He is the author of *God's Empire: William Bell Riley and Midwestern Fundamentalism*.

I love comedy writing and this book is a hoot. It should get a New York Times award for best fiction writing. I especially enjoyed the life-sized Noah's Ark which I hope they will try to float sometime and see what happens.

I may have been under the wrong impression when I bought this. It is an incredibly fascinating description of the Creation Museum. I had just hoped that they would go into more detail about the religious right and how they are able to create such a movement.

Thoroughly researched, enjoyable writing, very helpful in understanding Fundamentalism.

There's a ritualistic form to the arguments about creationism and evolution that renders reasonable argument problematic. Since Aristotle first postulated that rhetoric is the producing of all the available means of persuasion, humanity has been busily engaged in that very enterprise. We have now had 157 years of argument about Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution. On both sides, the arguments are well-worn like an old poker chip, and no one pays attention to the counter-arguments. There's a sense that we are all going through the motions. For example when Ken Ham debated Bill Nye, I was sure that Nye won because I don't believe any of Ham's assumptions or arguments. The conservative Christians were so sure that Ham won the debate they believe that Ham had successfully wiped away the disgrace of their defeat at the Scopes Monkey Trial. I find it odd how deeply conservative Christians bear grudges. It's as if the Scopes Monkey Trial is on a repeating loop that replays every day even though it actually happened in 1925. The repetition of the arguments seems to lose more and more force with the passing of each year and yet they refuse to die. Unhappily we are not yet finished with these protracted debates because the alternate universe of evangelical Christianity keeps feeding the grudge and repeating the arguments. The level of frustration that this loggerhead produces leads to a meaner spirit among the debaters. Our rhetoric departs from the ancient shores of reasonable, gentle persuasion for the rough seas of emotional arguments accusing our opponents of being stupid, immoral, or both. Just as I despaired of ever hearing new and powerful arguments about creation, there was a new entry in the debate. Enter Susan L. Trollinger and William Vance Trollinger, Jr. both professors at the University of Dayton. Their new book, *Righting America at the Creation Museum* happily gives us new arguments. After suffering through decades of oversimplifications and constant accusations by creationists and scientists, we now have a scholarly, reasonable, and nuanced account of what is actually at stake. I apologize in advance if my own arguments are more strident and my words more dipped in vitriol than those of the Trollingers. They are nicer people than me, and I have been anticipating their book since they first conceived the idea. My only disclaimer: My conclusions are my responsibility and not that of Susan and William. The most powerful argument the Trollingers present, in my view: The Creation Museum is a rhetorical creation "a house of being for creationists and their preferred world view rooted in literalism and a young earth. While there is an abundance of scientific evidence in the presentations of the Creation Museum, there is disconnect between the evidence of science and the meta-claim that all this science proves that the earth is only about eight thousand years old. The

Museum plays out more as a pep rally for those already convinced and yet in need of constant reassurance. The Trollingers make a powerful argument that there's the illusion of science at the museum but there's no connection between the "hard" science and a literal, six-day creation. The Creation Museum turns out to be the gaudy, glitzy, high-tech version of 19th century American fundamentalism. The science in "scientific creationism" is flawed; the religion is bad; and the politics are dangerous to our democracy. The Creation Museum is a theological Land of Oz. The man behind the curtain is Ken Ham. Yet no matter how many Dorothy's make the trip to the Creation Museum, there's no way back to Kansas. This is a dream land of false hopes that has a repeating cycle of insisting on belief in a literal six-day creation. The Trollingers have pulled the curtain back and revealed the underbelly of the beast. That they have done so eloquently, gently, and precisely is to their credit. The Creation Museum is thus more political than theological or moral or ethical. It has been uncritically shaped by the political considerations of late 19th century fundamentalism and the convictions of the Christian faith are strangely absent " especially note the absence of Jesus. In a world where Genesis 1 " 11 is granted the throne as perhaps the most redacted and reduced " canon" of Scripture in history (Even Marcion would be embarrassed by "Answers in Genesis"). For example, I sampled reviews by conservative bloggers and found that they assume that *Righting America at the Creation Museum* was written by and for liberal Christians and unbelievers. This is a form of character assassination by which the Christian authors, the Trollingers, are basically accused of being unbelievers. Bloggers dismiss the careful arguments of the Trollingers as being simply wrong and deceptive and not true. No evidence is offered. There are simply claims that are accusatory and the arguments of the book, rhetorical, historical, and scientific, are simply dismissed out of hand. Conservative writers assume that scientific positions that question creationism are completely false and are responsible for the immorality in our culture. Evolution has become conservative Christianity's "F" word. The big "E" has been blamed for everything from the measles to gay marriage. I commend the Trollingers for helping sort out the truth from the error in this debate. Their willingness to undertake such an effort pits them against a tsunami of conservative opposition and will probably not even make a dent in the armor of the bastions of conservative strongholds. What might happen, however, is that Christians, without a horse in the creationist debate, now have arguments that make sense and arguments that are persuasive. Why might happen is that the tide may turn in the cultural war that swirls around creationism and its equally dangerous ideologies of dispensationalism and Americanism. The Creation Museum doesn't actually utilize science in making the argument

for creationism. Instead they use science. They are like people who try to get in the photo shot of a famous person in order to be associated with the fame. They manipulate the evidence of science as a ploy to make their unprovable claims of a young earth have more credibility. It is a strange dance between creationism and science. This compelling book shows how the creationist claims are like Ground Hog Day. The same old arguments are repeated daily at the Creation Museum as if the Scopes Monkey Trial is still in session and only the actors have changed. In this case, Ken Ham is the modern version of William Jennings Bryan. The contested claims about creation persist with an amazing tenacity. Chapter 1 considers the idea that the Creation Museum claims to be a museum. This is a powerful rhetorical claim and is at the heart of the creationism movement. It is the deep desire of creationists to be accepted as mainstream, intelligent, reasonable people who happen to hold to a different set of truth claims. Surely this is disconcerting for a people so determined to be certain about everything religious and biblical. How hard it must be to have this need to be accepted, to kowtow to scientific evidence in an attempt to make the creationist argument more attractive. How it must gall the true believers to muck around with liberals, atheists, agnostics, scholars, and other assorted sinners. Whether or not this is really a museum turns out to be the crucial question. Chapter two, "Science," considers whether or not there is actually any scientific evidence for creationism. Kenneth Miller, in *It's Not Just a Theory*, says, "Those who defend science are regarded as godless atheists who wish the worst for our young people and seek to undermine both faith and traditional American values. When defenders of mainstream science strike back, they're often tempted to describe their tormentors as Luddites, fools, or worse, all because of their opposition to evolution. It's not a prospect that makes for reasoned discussion nor pleasant discourse." The creation museum is a visual phenomenon that gives conservative evangelicals a rhetorical weapon as powerful as their control of television. Miller admits that he hoped "that there might be something of value in the intelligent design movement." His conclusion, however, was that the value is simply not there. As John Vance Garner once said of the office of the vice-president, creationism, "isn't worth a bucket of warm spit." Museum or not, the Creationists are at the forefront of a withering Christian attack against all that is not literalistic and conservative. Bill and Sue Trollinger have pinpointed that this is about science, the Bible, and politics. In the final three chapters of the book, the argument unfolds that led me to the conclusion that the Creation Museum is unbiblical, untrue, and dangerous to science and democracy. From my perspective, the Christianity that has produced creationism and its twisted relatives "dispensationalism and "Americanism" is not actually Christian. It is a

bastardized form of American individualism, American disrespect for scientific scholarship, and American chip-on-the-shoulder about authority and diversity and differences. Ironically, creationism is, on the one hand, thoroughly modern as it insists that there is only one meta-narrative – the creationist version of truth. At the same time, creationism is post-modern, in insisting that science is not the meta-narrative and that are other truths that are just as important. Creationists can decide if they want to dethrone science or join it in a kind of co-regency. Both dreams are impossible to achieve. We are a scientific nation and creationism can never wear the crown. The Creation Museum is a meta-narrative swimming against the current of postmodernist assumptions that all meta-narrative are power plays and political ploys. The Creation Museum gives credibility to the charges made by postmodern philosophers. The Creation Museum's reduced literalism places a burden on creationists that it simply can't sustain. Several conservative evangelical scholars have produced a withering array of evidence for the deficiency of literalism. The Creation Museum's claim that scientists embrace creationism or its better-dressed cousin (something like a pig with lipstick and a bow) intelligent design has produced less than stellar results. Even the proponents of creationism admit to their inability to produce a master scientific theory. The evidence against creationism is overwhelming and has little to do with actual science. After all, creationism is just a theory, one of at least ten theories that Christians hold about the creation of the universe. At the Creation Museum it is a theory masquerading as the only truth, a truth found in the first 11 chapters of Genesis. If something happened to erase Genesis 1 – 11 from the Bible, our faith would not be in danger of disappearing. After all, the answers are in the gospels, my friends. My final take on Righting America at the Creation Museum is that the charges the Ken Ham makes against evolution are true of his own philosophy of creationism: It is unbiblical, untrue, and dangerous. For example, the idea that "nonnaturalistic" causes or a religious-based "science" should be accepted as science would be the dismantling of science and the scientific imagination. An earthquake, under this theory, might be caused by the shifting of tectonic plates, but it might also be a punishment for the sinfulness of those now suffering in the destruction. Such a view would make Ken Ham and Pat Robertson scientists. Why conduct an exhaustive molecular search through simian virus genomes to find the source of HIV when clear-thinking Intelligent Design scholars have concluded that it was sent as a divine warning against deviant lifestyles? Why worry about the physics of light when the mystery of the rainbow might just be, as ID theorist William Demski claims, a phenomenon presented to us by a whimsical designer? Sue and William Trollinger take us on a detailed and delightful tour of the creationist "Land of Oz." The money I spent on the book was about the same as a ticket to the Creation Museum.

That will save me from taking the trip to the "Land of Oz" and sustain me in my ongoing attempts to argue against the literalism of the Museum. At the end of our journey, the "wicked witch" may not be killed, but she is seriously diminished. And more to the point, the guy behind the curtain, pulling the strings, setting off all the bells and whistles, is shown to have a literal Bible, a greatly reduced truth, bad politics, even worse religion, and a fake science. I eagerly anticipate more efforts like this from Susan and William Trollinger. Surely, a book on the new Noah's Ark that has been added to the portfolio of the Creation Museum should be next.

This is a complicated book. It is an analysis of the Creation Museum, its techniques and goals, and is also a scholarly rant against the Creationist "Young Earth View." The prose is academic style, but readable. It does use a few academic constructs that the casual reader might not be familiar with, but those can be skimmed over--the informational content is worth it. The analysis is based on thorough study of the Museum (with multiple visits), the web site, documents and other materials related to the organizations running the museum (and its soon-to-open Ark Encounter). The Young Earth (that is, following the Genesis account of creation, seeing the earth as 6,000 years old, Bible inerrancy, and so on) is well explained in the book, at considerable length and fully--and also criticized. In this sense, this book may be of use to both sides in the culture wars, as a way to look at the assumptions and arguments of the other side. In contemporary American society, true believers on either side hold the other in contempt, one seeing the other as corrupting America and headed for eternal punishment, and the other side responding with equally forceful rhetoric (me, I side with the evolutionists). The authors see the Creation Museum as an extremely well-done institution, a major tool in the culture wars (and the book is of course another tool in the culture. At the time of the authors' visits, the Museum had attracted 2.4 million people since its opening in 2007, and at \$29.95 for an adult for a day, and along with spending, meals and accommodations the overall economic impact in that part of Kentucky is large. The Museum is fairly large as well--75,000 square feet. Some of the exhibits feature animatronic creatures, and show dinosaurs and people living at the same time--which solves for the Museum the issue of fossil dinosaurs and at the same time attracts children. The book is broken into several chapters: Museum, Science, Bible, Politics, Judgment and Epilog. Chapter 1, on the museum, is perhaps the best section on the museum as such. Chapter 2, on science, largely examines whether it is in fact a museum, and probes what a museum is and should be--this chapter strays into academics more than the others. The chapter on the Bible looks at the biblical underpinnings of the Young Earth point of view, and does a bit of biblical analysis. The

chapter on politics (4) is one that any American interested in these issues should read; it's not fair in the sense of being quite biased, but provides good information on the intricacies of the political aspect of the social wars--and make no mistake about it, the stakes are rather high. The book's conclusion is that the Creation Museum articulates a binary view of the world--literally Us and Them. There's one Truth and people who do not share it are the Enemy and are destined to eternal torment in the lake of fire. Evolutionists and others have nearly destroyed America and only a return to godly values (such as the wife subservient to the husband, prayer and Christianity back into the schools) can save the nation. The Museum is sophisticated but its basic message remains fundamentalist.

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