

THIRD CULTURE

SHAKESPEARE MEETS
THE SELFISH GENE

According to Literary Darwinist Jonathan Gottschall, there's a malaise among literary scholars today that can be cured with a dose of the scientific method. "Almost 99.999% of literary hypotheses aren't tested in that way," says Gottschall, and as a result "there is no progress of knowledge because nothing can be wrong."

Interviewed by Jennifer Leonard

Gottschall, who is 33 and holds a Ph.D. in English, recently co-edited *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative* (Northwestern University Press, 2005), a collection of essays that unites humanists and evolutionary scientists, including luminaries such as novelist Ian McEwan and biologist E.O. Wilson. Together, they argue that an understanding of the evolutionary foundations of human behavior, psychology and culture can produce powerful new perspectives on storytelling.

How do you define Literary Darwinism?

All literary theory—Marxism, psychoanalysis, postmodernism—is ultimately based on a theory of human nature. A Darwinian literary approach takes its guidance from theories of human behavior and psychology that are now emerging in the evolutionary sciences.

How robust is the academic community of Literary Darwinists?

A better phrasing might be, "How anemic is it?" There are maybe two- or three-dozen people affiliated with the approach in the whole world. And, out of that, maybe a dozen viable contributors. We're a very marginal group.

What drew you into the field?

In my second year of graduate school, I walked into a used bookstore and came across Desmond Morris' *The Naked Ape*, an early attempt to look at the human animal the way a

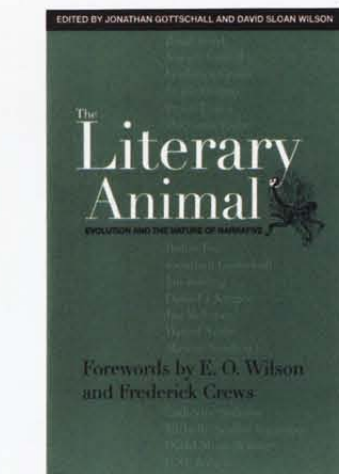
zoologist would. I found the idea of studying humans just like any other animal to be very powerful. Morris' book, although out of date, changed me. I started looking at literature in an altogether new way.

What did you find when you started reading literature through this new lens?

[*The Iliad*] was particularly significant for me because I was reading it while also reading Morris and other texts on sociobiology. As a result, Homer's evolutionary themes were jumping off the page. Right away I was seeing the drama of naked apes competing for social status and material resources; as well, they were competing directly and indirectly over women...You know, Einstein once said that theory defines what we can see. If Literary Darwinism has anything going for it we should start to see things in literature that weren't seen before, or seen as crisply before. I say this because I feel that I saw things in Homer that even 2,600 years worth of Homer scholars hadn't seen.

Do you expand on these insights in your forthcoming book, *The Rape of Troy: Evolution, Violence, and the World of Homer* (Cambridge, est. 2006)?

Yes, I use an evolutionary lens to flip conventional commentary on Homeric disputes. Instead of suggesting that winning women is merely a proximate goal masking competition for wealth, power and prestige, an evolutionary perspective suggests that honor, political power and social dominance are the proximate routes to the ultimate goal of women—for Homer's heroes and for ordinary men.

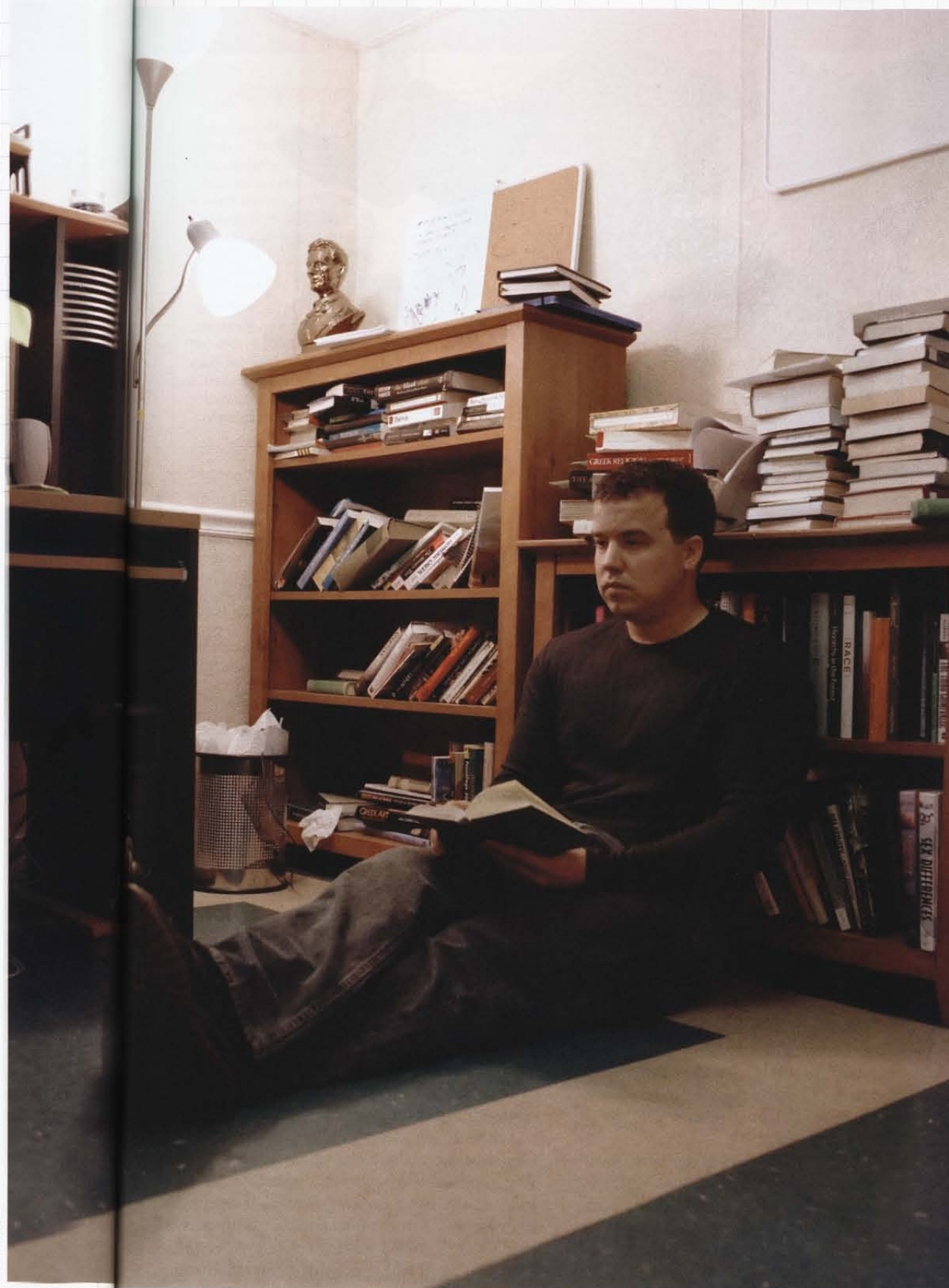


So, do Literary Darwinists tend to read books in search of innate or universal patterns of human behavior?

There's a lot of that, yes. But I hope that's not all. Ideally, Literary Darwinism will combine the biologically universal with the culturally particular. The idea of this approach isn't to demote

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BRIAN ULRICH



nurture. For me, it's a more balanced perspective that says nurture is very important but so, too, is nature. We have to pay attention to what the scientists have discovered, which is that there is a human nature.

Is human nature somehow made more fit—or biologically resilient—by way of storytelling?

This is one of the really big questions right now. Although yet to be tested scientifically, there are two camps of thinking on this. One, the human capacity to tell fictional narrative was designed into us for a specific reason; it enhanced our fitness and helped us leave behind more offspring. The second is that storytelling has no function whatsoever; it's just a side effect of human intelligence, an evolutionary byproduct. The human capacity for narrative is universal among human cultures, however, so most people think it has to have a function. But the jury is still out.

What are some of the misunderstandings about a Darwinian approach to literature?

First off, that it reduces everything to genes and suggests nurture is unimportant. Another is that it's deterministic—that it suggests that everything about humans is encoded in their genes and there's nothing we can do to change that. And the most recent feedback is that literary Darwinists have science-envy. I like this one! I mean, why not envy the sciences? The fact is that they've outstripped the humanities. They've been spectacularly successful at accumulating knowledge that's durable and testable. So I'm all for science-envy as long as the result is constructively building on the example of the sciences, rather than superficially aping them. ∞

