



Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion

Edward J. Larson

[Download now](#)

[Read Online ➔](#)

Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion

Edward J. Larson

Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion

Edward J. Larson

The 1925 Scopes Trial marked a watershed in our national relationship between science and religion and has had tremendous impact on our culture ever since, even inspiring the play and movie, both titled "Inherit the Wind." In addition to symbolizing the evolutionist versus creationist debate, the trial helped shape the development of both popular religion and religious freedom in America. Yet despite its influence on the 20th century, there are no modern histories of the trial and its aftermath. This book fills that void not only by skillfully narrating the trial's events, but also by framing it in a broader social context, showing how its influence has cut across religious, cultural, educational and political lines. With new material from both the prosecution and the defense, along with the author's astute historical and legal analysis, "Summer for the Gods" is destined to become a new classic about a pivotal milestone in American history.

Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion Details

Date : Published November 15th 1998 by Harvard University Press (first published June 26th 1997)

ISBN : 9780674854291

Author : Edward J. Larson

Format : Paperback 318 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Science, Religion, North American Hi..., American History, Politics, Law



[Download Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America' ...pdf](#)



[Read Online Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion Edward J. Larson

From Reader Review Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion for online ebook

Matt says

It seemed a propitious time to read Edward Larson's *Summer for the Gods*. This past February, Bill Nye made the (unfortunate, lose-lose) decision to debate young earth creationist Ken Ham at the Creationist Museum . Four months earlier, Texas – which has enormous sway in the textbook industry – once again began working on legislation to “teach the controversy,” a euphemistic way of saying “teach creationism” alongside evolution.

This is all well and good, because there is literally nothing else going on in the world that demands our attention.

The evolution controversy (manufactured and for-profit) is not a new phenomena. It has been brewing ever since Charles Darwin wrote his impenetrable classic, *On the Origin of Species*, which sits unread on my bookshelf, right next to Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*.

One of the first– and undoubtedly most famous – salvos in this ongoing (and thoroughly ridiculous battle) was the 1925 case of *State of Tennessee vs. John T. Scope*, more familiarly known as the Scopes (or Scopes Monkey) Trial. Undoubtedly you've heard of the case. Perhaps, like me, you sometimes drink wine and watch *Turner Classic Movies* and saw part of *Inherit the Wind* before passing out one night.

Summer of the Gods is the brisk (266 pages of text), readable, Pulitzer Prize winning story of this seminal case. And if you're like me, and your knowledge about this event is restricted to imbibing Yellow Tail chardonnay and watching Spencer Tracey spar with Frederic March, you will be surprised by what you learn.

Most surprisingly, perhaps, is that the Scopes Trial began as a publicity stunt. Whenever a controversial law is passed, opponents of that law will look for a test case to challenge the law's constitutionality. Tennessee's law, the Butler Act, forbade the teaching of evolution in public schools.

(The Butler Act made teaching evolution a jail-able offense, a fact that made even supporters of the law uncomfortable. Marinate on that, for a second. A law that would put teachers in jail for teaching a subject. In America. Jailed in America for teaching. It boggles the mind.)

The American Civil Liberties Union offered to provide the defense of anyone charged with violating the Butler Act. This would allow them to get the case before the State – and ultimately – United States Supreme Court, where they hoped it would be struck down as a violation of the First Amendment.

In Robinson's Drugstore in Dayton, Tennessee, an entrepreneurial coal company manufacturer and several other conspirators – including the school superintendent – decided that a trial on the law would be great for tourism. With that in mind, and with all parties colluding, including the prosecutors and local judges, a teacher named John Scopes (with minimal local ties, for obvious reasons) was recruited to serve as the defendant. He was indicted, went before the judge, and was released without bond pending trial.

(It is unclear that Scopes ever actually violated the law. In later years he denied teaching evolution

subsequent to the Butler Act. At his trial, the students called to testify against him – with Scopes’ blessing – were vague in the extreme. If Scopes ever taught them evolution, he didn’t teach it very well).

The run-up to the trial promised everything the Dayton chamber of commerce could’ve hoped for. The prosecutors brought in William Jennings Bryan, a former secretary of state, presidential nominee, and ardent creationist. The defense countered with a controversial choice (even among other defense attorneys): Clarence Darrow, a latter day cross between Richard Dawkins and Barry Scheck.

The defense eventually settled on a strategy of arguing that evolution and the Bible were compatible. After the prosecution staged its case-in-chief, showing that Scopes taught evolution in violation of the law, Judge John Raulston suddenly tired of the spectacle. He ruled that the defense’s proposed experts were irrelevant to the narrow question of whether or not Scopes taught evolution.

To preserve a record for appeal, the defense made an offer of proof outside the presence of the jury. Darrow also shocked everyone by calling Bryan to the stand (and Bryan shocked everyone by taking the stand). The Darrow-Bryan examination is the most famous aspect of the Scopes trial, the part you’ve heard of even if you don’t know anything else about the case. Interestingly, Judge Raulston eventually determined Bryan’s testimony irrelevant and had it expunged from the record.

With its strategy thwarted, the defense conceded Scope’s conviction. Scopes was fined \$100 and the defense appealed to the Tennessee Supreme Court. The high court upheld the conviction, but overturned the sentence (the fine) on a technicality. Then, in an extremely unusual bit of dicta, they recommended that the prosecution *not* retry the case. The purpose of this suggestion was to keep the defense from appealing to the United States Supreme Court.

Larson tracks these many twists and turns in clear and transparent prose. He is a law professor, but writes for laypeople. He is good at explaining the different legal strategies and nuances of a fairly convoluted proceeding.

The tone of *Summer for the Gods* is restrained. This is not by any means a polemic. Larson does not have an axe to grind. Of course, I’m sure there are certain readers who will find Larson’s lack of bias to be a bias in and of itself. (It might also have made the book a bit more lively. Objectivity is fine; subjectivity is more fun).

If there is a bias, it is the bias of fact and history. Neither Darrow or Bryan come out looking very good. Darrow is portrayed as something of a jerk, gravely disliked by his putative colleagues (the ACLU tried its best to get him off the case). Bryan simply looks like a fool. Darrow’s decision to call Bryan was a sublime strategic move. Even though it did not change the trial, it hurt the creationist cause. Bryan’s steadfast reliance on a Biblical interpretation led him to deny natural realities. When you read the transcript of his examination, Bryan seems an ignorant buffoon.

(Bryan died in his sleep shortly after the trial. Darrow stated he “died of a busted belly.” H.L. Mencken allegedly remarked, “We killed the son-of-a-bitch!”).

Maybe the most stunning thing about *Summer for the Gods* is that it was written in 1997. It feels like it came out yesterday. It is disheartening, to say the least, that this issue is still alive in 2014, and that we’ve walked in a large circle since 1925, ending right back in Dayton where we started.

Due in part to Supreme Court rulings on the First Amendment, the nature of the debate has changed. It is no

longer about keeping evolution out, but of allowing alternate explanations in. The “competing theories” movement is far more subtle and nuanced than anything propounded by William Jennings Bryan. That’s what makes it so perfidious.

I don’t pretend to know with any certainty how the world began. On most days, I don’t even care. But I do know that in science, “theory” does not mean something scribbled on a napkin during happy hours at Applebee’s. It is an idea that gets put through the scientific method, that is verified through observations and experiments. Evolution rightly belongs in public school science classes. Creationism does not.

I went to Catholic schools from fifth grade all the way through law school. I learned a couple things from that. First, Catholic schools are expensive. Second, that the separation of church and state works, even within a parochial school. The math classes I went to taught math. The science classes taught science. The theology classes taught theology. It worked.

My experience does not point the way to an answer. It’s obvious that the solution is to maintain separation, to have different spheres for science and faith. It’s equally obvious, as Larson notes, that huge numbers of people view the Bible as authoritative on matters of science (and on every other aspect of life). For certain church leaders, the controversy is the giving tree, inspiring activism and donations and publicity. Larson is probably correct in noting that the Scopes Trial is not the trial of the century, but more aptly the trial of the centuries.

A verdict is not expected any time soon.

Erik Graff says

I've been going up to NW Wisconsin for several years now with members of the Gregory family to stay in the house once occupied by an ancestor and now used as a vacation retreat. Knowing the area, I can now go up there without a book, confident that the Hayward Public Library twenty or so miles away will have titles worth purchasing. That is where I purchased this history a few days ago.

This writer, both a lawyer and an historian, has long specialized on matters pertaining the themes treated in this history of the Scopes Trial. Author of several books about evolutionary theory, Larson brings his expertise to bear on the legal issues of the case pertaining to such matters as the separation of church and state, the first amendment to the Constitution and the gradual extension of federal liberties to the states by means of the fourteenth. As an historian, he puts the trial in context, discussing not only the facts of the case, but also the context within which it occurred and the cultural repercussions it has had up to the present day. In so doing, many common misconceptions are exploded.

Like many cultural histories, this is a fun, and often amusing, read. Larson writes well, certainly much better than the average academic historian and much, much better than one could reasonably expect of a lawyer. Even if constitutional issues don't excite, even if the scientific issues of creationism versus evolutionism seems irrelevant, even if the political conundrums of individual liberties versus majoritarian rule seem inscrutable, this book will still serve as an entertaining page-turner.

Helga Cohen says

Larson's Pulitzer Prize winning book "Summer for the Gods" was a very enlightening book. I really like reading about the conflict between science and religion and getting the true story of this famous "Trial of the Century".

This book gave a great history of the Scopes Trial or the well-known "Monkey Trial". He describes the run-up to the trial and the trial and the outcome and what it has meant for American society and American culture. We get an intriguing picture of some of the key players, Clarence Darrow, the defense attorney and John Scopes a young teacher teaching Evolution thrown into the trial as a test case, and Williams Jennings Bryan the attorney for the prosecution and proponent for the emerging Fundamentalist movement. There is a good overview of the evolving status of creationism and evolutionism over the past century, especially in relation to school curriculum and religious revivals. We also learn about the role of the ACLU which was interested in this case on the grounds of civil liberties for education, speech and expression.

There is much court room drama described and thoughts and actions of the locals and the events following the decision. We see the passion people have regarding scientific and religious beliefs. And the debate that still exists today, now the term Intelligent Design is regularly used and debated.

This book is highly recommended for those who have heard the legends of the Scopes trial and for the younger generation who might not have ever heard of it except in passing. It helps to understand history and the path it takes today.

AC says

An excellent book that discusses, in very readable form, the historical and intellectual foundations of, and the struggle between, the rural (largely Southern) religious majoritarian anti-modernism of William Jennings Bryan (the Democratic populist of Nebraska, who ran for President in 1896, 1900, 1904, and 1908) and the modern, skeptical, rationalist and ever-courageous Clarence Darrow of Chicago. The fundamental divide in America still today. The afterward clearly traces the rise of recent creationism and Intelligent Design theory in this context. Good book.

Susan O says

4.5 - Overall an enjoyable and easy read. Excellent summary in the Afterword of the current (as of 2006) status of the creation vs. evolution debate.

Megan says

A meticulously researched account of the 1925 Scopes trial. I was expecting more about the last aspect of the subtitle (the continuing debate over science and religion), so this history wasn't what I was specifically looking for, but I still appreciated how Larson smoothly depicted the nuances of the cultural context of the trial. His account was quite balanced while still depicting clearly the passions of all sides of the debate. The writing was always clear, but the immense amounts of quotations without additional analysis and the nature of the trial (repetitive, sides arguing past one another) often dragged the reading down for me.

While the very painstaking depiction of the trial was necessary, I still vastly preferred the final chapters of the book that analyzed the immediate reactions as well as the emergent mythos of the trial. The Scopes trial didn't merit notice in my high school history class, and I've never seen *Inherit the Wind*, but I'm familiar with it being a cultural sticking point, so I appreciated the depth to which Larson was able to trace how and why misconceptions evolved (yeah, yeah, pun intended).

I had mistaken expectations about the extent of which the book got into the continuing debate alluded to by the subtitle, and I was a little irritated when cultural changes in regard to how fundamentalism's stand against evolution manifested were only analyzed in terms of the Scopes trial. I know, I know, that's the focus of the book, but still, for example, I wanted to know about the other contributing factors that led to a shift from fundamentalists protesting the teaching of evolution in public schools to abandoning public education for home schooling or private Christian schools. What were the economic and broader social changes that went into this? For example, did racial integration play a part? I completely understood why the book focused on just putting this in the context of antievolution, but it still felt like a pretty superficial analysis to make a point of pointing out this shift but only explaining it in the antievolution context.

Pamela says

"It's déjà vu all over again.", as the wag said and that's the feeling you wind up with after finishing Edward J. Larson's **Summer For the Gods: The Scope's Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion**. The arguments and counter-arguments discussed in this excellent book about the famous "Monkey" trial of 1925 recur again and again in our own time. I have no doubt that there are court cases winding their way through the judicial maze even now concerning the teaching of evolution in public schools. It is a constant hot button issue for a segment of American citizens.

In the 1920's the ACLU was interested in freedom of speech and expression issues and when the Butler Act was passed in Tennessee, they became interested in developing a test case. They offered to defend any teacher charged for teaching the descent of man from Darwin's Theory of Evolution. Dayton, Tennessee, on the other hand, saw the offer as an opportunity to garner publicity for their town and persuaded a substitute biology teacher, John Scopes, to become the defendant. Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan promptly came on board, offering their services for respectively, the defense and the prosecution. Each had their own personal ax to grind. The game was now on. The spectacle had now begun.

The book is divided neatly into Before, During, and After. It covers all the issues in detail and if most of your information comes from the movie versions of this trial, you will be amazed and surprised at how much more interesting this story really is. Complex in its arguments and pertinent to today's headlines as well, this one is a definite Don't Miss!

Luke Koran says

Even the biggest young history enthusiast out there learns something new every once and again. This book was such an occasion. And boy, was it a joyous occasion! After only seeing (and never really getting a basic understanding of) the term "Monkey Trial" on occasion while passing through a thick history textbook during high school, I took great pleasure during my collegiate studies when my professor assigned our class to read this book about this famed "The Trial of the Century." We even got to watch the 1960 film "Inherit

"the Wind", which is a close adaption of the events of this book, albeit with different names for the characters. I was ready and eager to learn as much as possible about what the heck this "Monkey Trial" was all about.

Larson re-discovers the passion that enabled this trial, especially its pre-hype, to captivate so much of the nation's attention during the mid-1920s. He does an excellent job detailing the changing social climate regarding traditionalism and progressivism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Larson gives the 21st century reader a great overview of what the two big faces of this trial, Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan, would've meant to the people - both the locals and the national media - during that time period. The tiny Tennessee town of Dayton was transformed overnight into a media circus, with every aspect of the trial being transferred across the country (and the world) through one of the newest forms of communication, the telegraph; these aspects are beautifully covered in this book, as well. Even if you are not a fan of legal proceedings, I PROMISE YOU that you will not be disappointed with both the courtroom drama and the dramatic events that happen out-of-the-court and following the decision. It's science versus religion! Heads are bound to clash! Finally, a great overview of the evolving status of creationism and evolutionism over the past century is explored, especially in relation to school curriculum but also in religious revivals among the general populace.

Larson impressed me greatly by covering a complex topic that is often overly condensed by text books and explores all aspects of this trial, including its causes and its legacy. As I said before, it would be great (especially for the visual learner) to watch the 1960 parable film of this trial, "Inherit the Wind." This book will likely leave you in awe, both of the "gods" that dominated that summer of 1925 and of the incredible passion people have regarding scientific and religious beliefs.

Mike Hankins says

Many courtroom cases have been billed to the public as the "trial of the century" over the last hundred years, but as Edward Larson demonstrates, few have truly had as lasting an impact on American culture and political debates as the Scopes Trial of 1925. While much fiction and non-fiction has been written on the trial, Larson delves deep into primary sources to get at the more complex truth behind this courtroom battle. With superb craft, Larson is able to then contextualize the trial within the larger processes of fundamentalism and modernism that continue to shape the debates of many present-day issues. Ultimately he shows the Scopes trial to be more complex than previously admitted, while simultaneously less decisive and more relevant than often considered.

Larson's book follows a simple three-part structure, examining pre-trial developments, the trial itself, and the lasting legacy of the event on local and national scales. The first section follows the familiar pattern of growing protestant fundamentalism in response to increasing modernization inherent in the decade of the 1920s. The rapid scientific, demographic, and cultural changes during this period spawned a number of developments, including the conservative swing of many who resisted urbanization and its implied changing values, and organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union, concerned with a perception of increasing infringements on individual rights. The ACLU, among others, longed for a "test case" of the anti-evolution education bills that had cropped up in many southern states. Far from an innocent bystander caught by intervening religious forces, Scopes was approached early, and volunteered to be a test case, even coaching his students in how to testify against him.

The selection of Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan as the chief attorneys was actually resisted by both sides of the trial originally, who justly feared the event would become a circus. Larson shows that,

while for many spectators the issue at hand was creationism vs. evolution, in a legal sense, this was hardly the case. For Darrow, this was partly true, in that the intent was to show that evolution was factually correct, and thus should be taught. However, part of the chief defense argument was the individual liberty of Mr. Scopes to teach truth in spite of a local majority that wished otherwise. For Bryan, while he was passionate about his faith, the chief issue at hand was democracy, and the ability of local people to determine what should be taught in their schools. Thus, each side was fighting for principles that can arguably be said to be essential to American democracy: one the one hand, individual liberty against the tyranny of majority rule, and on the other, the right of local communities to live in a democratic form of government, which applied to school curriculum as much as anything else. The section on the trial itself, although the story is familiar, is where the book really shines, and Larson's adept use of extensive primary source material bolsters a wonderfully written narrative.

Larson's examination of the trial's legacy is also insightful and well-researched. He includes a welcome narrative of the appeal process, which, while adding little difference to the original verdict, does add a sense of completeness to the story. He asserts that in most respects, the trial was inconclusive. The anti-evolution law remained on the books, and fundamentalist and scientific communities were pushed farther apart. For many Americans, the trial is seen through the lens of *Inherit the Wind*, the movie version of the trial, which Larson demonstrates is much more about McCarthyism and the Cold War than about evolution and religion. Yet, he also demonstrates that many viewers in the present day do not understand this difference, and growing fundamentalist groups often misinterpret the cartoonish straw-men of the film as accurate and laudable versions of themselves. Thus, the trial, while inconsequential in the short term of 1925, still resonates strongly in American culture and the increasing tension between fundamentalism and modernism.

Summer for the Gods is a wonderful read that sheds new light on the Scopes trial and provides a useful context for considering the event and its effect on the American cultural and legal landscape. His use of sources and his writing craft are wonderful, and the book is well deserving of its Pulitzer Prize. Additionally, while it serves as a good academic work, it is also easily digestible for more casual, popular audiences, giving the book broad appeal and value. For educators, students, or enthusiasts simply interested in the debates of science, religion, legal history, and cultural changes, this book is worth having on the shelf.

Chanel Earl says

I expected this book to give me a great picture of the Scopes Monkey Trial; my expectations were met. I didn't expect to be treated to a detailed history of the larger debate between science and religion in general, but I am so glad that this book had a larger scope than I envisioned. The information about "the trial" was wonderful but what I really enjoyed was how Larson set this trial into historical context.

I have always been bothered by the "war" between science and religion. It seems to me that the two should be friends, as they both seek to explain things as they really are. Science and religion are both so beautiful, so meaningful and so right. Now, I understand when I say this that some scientific theories have been proven wrong, and that some religious beliefs have to be wrong because they contradict each other. But I truly believe that any truth in either of these two enterprises must fit together perfectly and complement each other, or they could not be truths.

Back to the book: I really appreciated how Larson remained fairly unbiased throughout the history, never seeming to want to slander either side of the debate, but trying to represent them both as they see themselves and as their opponents see them. He also did a good job showing the ways in which religious men and

women have worked with evolutionists throughout to try to bring reason to this debate.

I really enjoyed this book. It was a slower read than I am used to (that's what I get for reading so much juvenile fiction), but every section was interesting and thought provoking. I think what I liked most about reading this is that I was forced to consider my own opinions about so many things: science and religion first, but also education, democracy, evolution and other related issues.

Matt McCormick says

A interesting and often dramatic account of not only the Scopes Trail but the belief systems which ultimately contended in small town of Dayton Tennessee in 1925. In the build-up to the trial Larson describes the rise of Fundamentalist Christianity, the populist and, more importantly, majoritarian movements lead by William Jennings Bryan and finally the advent of groups like the ACLU advocating for individual rights.

Larson remains objective throughout the narrative while conveying a description of time, place and people that makes the reader feel that they are sitting in Dayton's courthouse. My one criticism is that after enjoying the cut and thrust of the Dayton events we are left with forty pages that are mostly an academic summary of how the Scopes event was treated/viewed in the following years.

One may be saddened to consider that even after ninety years we retain a strand in our culture of politics that mimics those that wanted to deny science and preach to children in public schools a biblically literal creation of humankind. The braying of Billy Sunday has been replaced with the slick but false marketing of "teach the controversy".

Sher says

4.5 This book leads up to the Scopes Trials by explaining the issues of tension between religion and evolution well before the trial. Williams Jennings Bryant is well covered. The trial is covered in detail and also what impact the controversy had on the debate going forward. Most readers will remember the Scopes Trial from the film *Inherit the Wind*, and this book makes clear what was accurate in that film and what was not. Intelligent Design today is covered too. It's really a comprehensive and interesting look at the trial and all of its implications on education, law, and the debate with science and religion.

Michael says

Summer for the Gods is phenomenal. The book tells a riveting story well, but it elevates itself over other histories by critically examining the public's later interpretation of the events, and showing all the effects of such interpretation (also probably why it got the 1998 Pulitzer Prize in History). "Before" "During" and "And After" are its three parts, covering the build-up to the prosecution, the trial itself, and the public's reaction to and later interpretation of the events.

The book details the 1925 "Scopes monkey trial", but first situates the prosecution. Early 20th century Americans were religious. Religion and education hadn't really done battle because public high school was not yet widespread, but that changed quickly: Tennessee's high school population was 10,000 in 1910, then grew to more than 50,000 by 1925. (24) The mass public education of children raised the question of what to

teach them.

Two organizations destined to battle over such topic emerged at about the same time. In 1919 the World's Christian Fundamentals Association was founded (leading to the term "fundamentalist" to describe its adherents) to fight the slide towards modernism. (36) The ACLU began in 1920. (82) Shortly thereafter, it started a committee on academic freedom, and while looking for a test case, discovered Tennessee's new anti-evolution law, which fined public school teachers who espoused the doctrine; the ACLU took out an advertisement in a Tennessee newspaper, offering free legal representation, and a Dayton teacher took the bait. (82-83) The ACLU wanted to defend academic freedom, here, the right of the teacher to teach biology how he wanted, but when populist politician William Jennings Bryan offered to help the prosecution, Clarence Darrow publicly offered his services (the defendant accepted) and the case (or at least the defense's case) became about religion --Darrow's agnosticism being nationally known. (100)

Contrary to later portrayals, Larson's description of the prosecution, and especially Bryan, suggest sincere belief and eminently reasonable principles (at least in theory, not necessarily as applied to this statute), for example, Bryan frames the case as broadly about "the right of the people speaking through the legislature, to control the schools which they create and support" or more narrowly about how "Mr. Scopes demands pay for teaching what the state does not want taught and demands that the state furnish him with an audience of children to which he can talk and say things contrary to law." (128, 129) In essence, the anti-evolution statute represented the people's ability to exercise control over *their* public schools.

The prosecution was cut and dried, an easy factual case (and one that got a conviction after only a few minutes of jury deliberations, as the defense admitted he taught evolution) but the defense wanted to put on experts as part of its case. After the prosecution rested, and the judge denied the defense's attempt to introduce expert witnesses, he (the judge) allowed them to make an offer of proof -- essentially, showing a later-reviewing appellate court what its experts would have said. But in addition to its listed experts, the defense (specifically, Darrow) had a trick up its sleeve. Darrow's method to get Bryan on the witness stand was formalistic--he presented Bryan as an "expert" witness on the Bible -- as part of the defense's case, they asserted the prosecution needed to show that teaching evolution was contrary to the Bible's teachings, because technically it prohibited only "teach[ing] any theory that denies the Story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and [teaching] instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals" -- and was able to grill him about biblical "facts", providing the grist for later science-makes-religion-look-stupid articles about the trial.

In some sense, the prosecution itself ended in a draw: although Scopes was convicted, it was overturned by the Tennessee Supreme Court, which used a procedural formality (involving the imposition of the sentence) to vacate the conviction while sustaining the law's constitutionality. (221)

The telling of the story of the trial is excellent, but the last third is where Larson's book moves from very good to excellent: in it, he documents and critiques (the evolution of) later perceptions of the event. Both during and after trial, elite opinion sided with the defense, and was successful in focusing portrayals on Darrow's cross-examination of Bryan, and in painting the prosecution as out for blood, when in fact the maximum punishment for the misdemeanor was a fine, and Bryan had told Scopes that he would pay it for him.

The defense's arguments about individual liberty were fondly recalled, while the prosecution's articulation of majority power was forgotten. Larson surveys later textbooks and popular historical accounts of the time, one of the first of which was poorly researched (at least regarding the Scopes trial) yet immensely popular and influential, with subsequent works using it as a quasi-primary source, as it was written in 1931. (225)

Thinking that the Scopes trial represented a simple good v. evil or smart v. dumb, and that the good guys humiliated the bad ones, had a couple interesting effects. Because that perception of the trial became so widespread in subsequent years, it drove fundamentalists essentially underground -- their views rejected, yet still disgusted with materialistic evolution as a worldview, they decided to stop trying to convince others, and formed their own private schools and society. (236) The Supreme Court helped further this perception, announcing a significant shift in its First Amendment doctrine in a 1968 case striking down an Arkansas law similar to the one that Scopes violated (and enacted around the same time). In *Epperson*, the Court mentioned the Scopes case, using it as evidence of the legislature's purported purpose to ensure teaching of a particular religion in the school; the Court disapproved, and announced that to pass muster under the Establishment Clause, a statute must have a "secular purpose." (260) Now, such statutes were unconstitutional. Finally, the idea that science won made scientists complacent. They didn't need to convince the public to accept evolution, because (especially post-1968) the public appeared powerless to stop them.

But the public hasn't (yet) really accepted evolution, and they have devised creative ways to circumvent *Epperson*'s requirement. Almost sixty years post-Scopes, in 1982, Americans were divided 50/50 between believing in a biblical account of creation and those believing in evolution (those believing in God-influenced evolution are lumped in with those believing in evolution without God). And more than 80% wanted to include creationist theories in public school curriculum. (258) That matters because there are ways to undermine evolution without banning the teaching of it, e.g. presenting creationism and evolution as two competing (presumably, to a student, at least initially equally valid) "theories," preying on the difference between the scientific use of the term and the general one.

(This book was published in 1997; based on more recent data it looks like scientists have had some success in convincing the public, albeit of the slow-and-steady variety:
Gallup's 1999 poll pegged the creationist-inclusion number at 68%, with the former 50/50 split remaining in place; in 2005 only 54% of Americans wanted creationism taught in public schools.)

This book should move to the top of your list if you're interested in learning the context of and complexities involved with a famous trial, or in developing some measure of nuance when discussing the issue of sincere religious beliefs conflicting with science, especially in the realm of publicly-funded schools. The fact that I would recommend this book equally to both a fervent believer and ardent atheist speaks to Larson's thoroughness and even-handedness in canvassing a brutally contested terrain.

Daniel Solera says

In the last year, I have developed an insatiable fascination for the clash between religion and science, specifically as this encounter relates to social policy. The famous Scopes trial (also commonly referred to as "the Monkey Trial") was the most fervently hyped and widely publicized legal dispute on this matter, and Edward Larson's book does the confrontation justice.

The book is divided into three sections:

Before:

Larson begins by detailing the intellectual leaps that led to Charles Darwin's theories on evolution, followed by the rise of Christian fundamentalism and its rejection of the concept on religious and ethical grounds. The global climate at the turn of the century leads religious groups to associate Darwinism with wanton brutality

in the shape of World War I. Finally, with Darwinism removing God from the picture, the Tennessee state legislature forbade its teaching. Shortly thereafter, a group of citizens from Dayton decide to "test" the law, using a local science teacher as their guinea pig.

During:

Aside from being a high-profile debate between agnosticism and theism, the Scopes trial was also a battle of big personalities. The defense counsel Clarence Darrow was an intimidating yet charming lawyer, famous for his controversial clients. William Jennings Bryan, arguing for the prosecution (though not as legal counsel), had three decades of political campaigns and speech circuits under his belt - Bryan alone was responsible for drawing large crowds to Dayton. Furthermore, each side had their own philosophy and legal strategy. Darrow wanted to frame the issue as an assault on intelligence, while Bryan aimed to keep a narrower focus, arguing that it was a matter of upholding a majoritarian statute. It's this dynamic and each player's celebrity status that elevated this trial's status to that of a spectacle.

After:

Larson details the related events that have taken place since 1925 and the familiar arguments that continue to surface. His style is very journalistic and uneditorial, which means it's dry and very collected, though his bias towards science isn't successfully veiled.

This was a great read for many reasons, the most notable of which is the narration of the trial itself with Larson's characterization of each important figure allowing for electric court room scenes to unfold brilliantly. But also noteworthy are the questions his research asks: What should be the statute of limitations on government by the majority? Who should decide public school curricula? Why are Christian fundamentalists so opposed to the Darwinian model when they readily accept the Copernican model?

I recommend this book for anyone interested in the intersection between politics, science and religion. It is a perfect foundation for the understanding of the ensuing debate.

Emmanuel Boston says

Larson's Pulitzer Prize winning work is careful, clear, and revealing.

Book thesis: A book solely about the [Scopes] trial and its place in American history; America's continuing debate over science and religion.

This book does precisely what it sets out to do: take a look at the Scopes trial and evaluate what it has meant for American society since that time. In fact, as one reads the book, one finds that Larson accomplishes exactly what he intends to with each chapter. Is it written so clearly that the reader never has to wonder where Larson will be going in the respective chapter—the chapter thesis is almost always placed at the end of the first paragraph, and summarizes to the reader the happenings during the chapter. Of course, the remainder of the chapter is not redundant, but merely substantiates the initial claim. Although one might determine the first section ("Before...") to be a bit dry, this section is crucial to understanding the remainder of the book and the significance of the trial even at the onset. Truly, the way Larson sets up the arguments for both sides of the case (chapters 2 and 3), create an immense amount of tension within me as I wrestled with the validity of both claims. It really does make sense for the majority to determine what is taught to their children, but it also makes sense to have the experts determine what should be taught in their field. So, even though the first section may be a bit dry, it is essential to understanding what this trial represents.

Of course, it represents different things to different peoples—to some it merely means money. Larson does an excellent job of pulling back the curtain to reveal the actual events that occurred; he is not influenced by later recapitulations of the trial (but in fact devotes a whole chapter to explain these and why they are misguided). His recounting is measured and accurate, and he does not allow subjective interpretation or framing of the events (indeed, throughout one is hard pressed to find evidence for which side they believe Larson himself agrees with!). The interpretation which he eventually does offer is merely more historical recounting—what people thought and believed about the trial after it was over. Larson is a careful historian who is truly interested in clearing up the dust surrounding one of America's most famous and influential trials.

For those who grew up hearing the legends of the Scopes trial, this is for you.

For those of a younger generation who have never heard “Scopes” except in passing reference, this is for you too—it helps not only understand history, but understand today and our trajectory.

(Responding to what another reviewer has said regarding Intelligent Design, Larson answers in the new Afterword.)
