
GOD CREATED MANNEQUIN

Clockwise from top left: Adam and Eve; hammering home a point; museum-goers.

ROLL OVER, CHARLES DARWIN!

On the 150th anniversary of Darwin's masterwork, the author visits Kentucky's Creation Museum, which has been battling science and reason since 2007. Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark: it's a breathtakingly literal march through Genesis, without any hint of soul

BY A. A. GILL

It's not in the nature of stoic Cincinnatians to boast, which is fortunate, really, for they have meager pickings to boast about. They could, though, if they were the bragging sort, brag about a quaint old optician's shop that will make you a new pair of spectacles in an hour—by chance I am both shortsighted and had an hour to spare. As the nice lady gave my new lenses a polish, I asked her if she thought the eye was such a complicated and mysterious structure that it could have been created only in one inspired, farsighted moment by God and not by the blind trial and error of natural selection. "That kind of makes sense," she smiled. But then, Galileo invented a refracting telescope and the church locked



him up for pointing out that, as he learned by observing the rest of the solar system, the earth isn't the center of the universe. Do you think that glasses might be the work of the Devil? She smiled again. "Would you like a hard or a soft case with that, sir?"

Perhaps the biggest thing the citizens of the "Queen of the West" have to tell a tall tale about is the Creation Museum. Twenty minutes outside of town, just over the Kentucky border, it was placed here with prayerful care to be accessible and available to the greatest number of American pilgrims coming by road, presumably in surreys with fringes on top. Build it and they will come. November was the 150th anniversary of the publication of Charles Dar-

win's *On the Origin of Species*—last February the 200th anniversary of the birth of its author—so now seems like a good time to see what the world looks like without the benefit of science. Or spectacles. Although both these anniversaries seemed to pass without ever troubling most Americans—there were precious few commemorations, TV specials, or pop-up books—it's not that you don't care about where you came from; it's that our collective origin is a trip-wire issue, a knuckle-dragging skeleton in the closet. If you want to get through a class, a dinner, a long-haul flight in peace, it's best not to go there. This is one argument that refuses to evolve.

I took Paul Bettany, the actor who plays Charles Darwin in the new film *Creation*, along with me to photograph the museum. He has played crazed and murderous apostates in films the devout ban themselves from seeing—in *Legion*, also out this month, Bettany stars as the archangel Michael, who

if he had had money. This is it. Oddly, it is a conspicuously and emphatically secular construction. There is no religious symbolism. No crosses. No stained glass. No spiral campanile. It has borrowed the empirical vernacular of the enemy to wrap the literal interpretation of Genesis in the façade of a liberal art gallery or library. It is the Lamb dressed in wolf's clothing.

The next things I noticed were the very illiberally accoutred security guards. They are absurdly over-armed, overdressed, and overweight. Perhaps the museum is concerned that armed radical atheists, maddened by the voices of reason in their confused heads, will storm in waving the periodic table, screaming, "I think, therefore I am!"

The Creation Museum isn't really a museum at all. It's an argument. It's not even an argument. It's the ammunition for an argument. It is the Word made into bullets. An armory of righteous revisionism.

We start with the creation of the world, and of light. And there you are, immediately—Houston, we have a problem: you get light three days before you get the sun. But that's fine—we've got an answer; the sun is, in fact, what God made to keep the light in. It was an afterthought, a receptacle born out of necessity.

The early bits, it must be said, are rather boring, like walking past a lot of TVs showing nature programs, with the gravelly voice from trailers for disaster movies: "In a time before man..." There's a room that has all the stuff God made on each day; the exhibit looks like holiday photographs or the brochure for an eco-safari. Included with the birds of the air are, apparently, the bats, who are mammals and will be annoyed. But we don't have time to nitpick. What is truly awe-inspiring about the museum is the task it sets itself: to rationalize a story, written 3,000 years ago, without allowing for any metaphoric or symbolic wiggle room. There's no poetic

THE MUSEUM MAY BE THE BIGGEST COLLECTION OF KITSCH IN GOD'S ENTIRE WORLD.

defies a vengeful God hell-bent on destroying mankind. He once played a Wimbledon champion. Here in Nowheresville, Kentucky, tennis is considered a game for Europeans and other sexual deviants. I can't imagine what they think of English actors.

Just off a motorway, in a barren and uninspiring piece of scrub, the museum is impressively incongruous, a righteously modernist building resting in landscaped gardens filled with dinosaur topiaries. It cost \$27 million and was completed in 2007. It answers the famous question about what God could have done

This whole building is devoted to the literal veracity of the first 11 chapters of Genesis: God created the world in six days, and the whole thing is no more than 6,000 years old. Everything came at once, so *Tyrannosaurus rex* and Noah shared a cabin. That's an awful lot of explaining to do. This place doesn't just take on evolution—it squares off with geology, anthropology, paleontology, history, chemistry, astronomy, zoology, biology, and good taste. It directly and boldly contradicts most -onomies and all -ologies, including most theology.

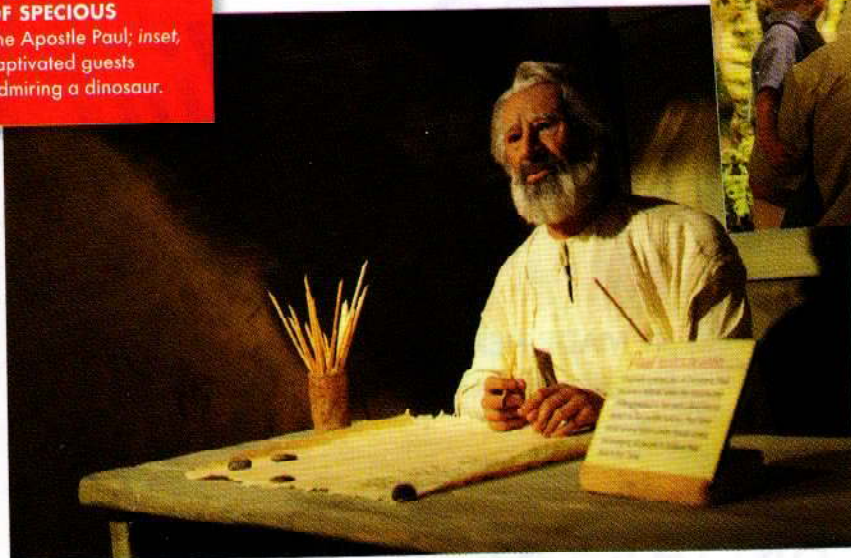
license. This is a no-parable zone. It starts with the definitive answer, and all the questions have to be made to fit under it. That's tough. Science has it a whole lot easier: It can change things. It can expand and hypothesize and tinker. Scientists have all this cool equipment and stuff. They've got all these "lenses" and things. They can see shit that's invisible. And they stayed on at school past 14. Science has given itself millions of years, eons, to play with, but the righteous have got to get the whole lot in, home and dry, in less than 6,000 years, using just a pitchfork and a loud voice. It's like playing speed chess against a computer and a thousand people with Nobel Prizes.

But we should cut the creationists a little slack, because every new bit of evidence, every discovery, is a nightmare for them.

Take the ark. The big-boat business poses all sorts of questions. But, again, they've got answers. There are models and plans and layouts of the vessel. You can walk through a part of the hull. There's biblical carpentry and weather reports. And the dinosaurs are on board. (They were probably small ones, the museum helpfully adds.) But recently scientists found a new giant rat and a fanged frog in Papua, New Guinea, so now some Noah-ists have to redesign the amphibian

THE ORIGIN OF SPECIOUS

The Apostle Paul; inset, captivated guests admiring a dinosaur.



quarters. The rats probably sort themselves out. O.K., so you get everybody aboard, 10 million creatures, times two, without the neighbors' noticing. Where did the water come from? You have to flood the whole world. Did they import water from the Scientists? No: it came from underground. There is a great reservoir, presumably for flooding purposes, under our feet. I assume that's where it went back to. Why don't we drill for it to water Phoenix? (By the way, the flood is where we get fossils from. That's all the dead stuff, caught in mud.) When the waters abated, the animals got off, stretched, and walked around the world eating one another's children. I'm not making this up. Nobody's making this up. This is what happened.

There is a bit of a snuffy disclaimer between the Flood and the Tower of Babel about Cain's having to have sex with his sister: First of all, there's a statute of limitations on this stuff, and it can be excused on some biblical technicality, and we shouldn't be so prurient as to keep asking about it. The dinosaur thing, though, is a problem. Creationists didn't have to bother about it before the 19th century, but nosy, faithless scientists—and Michael Crichton—have made them irrefutable. According to the museum, their extinction was caused by men killing them, possibly for sport. I will later learn that this may have happened in the Middle Ages, when dinosaurs breathed fire and were hunted by knights.

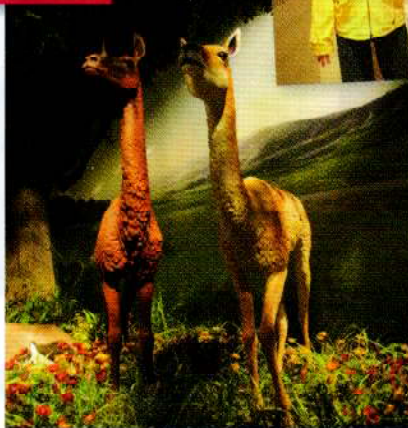
It all gets good when the leading man ar-

fiery pit for overdosing on vanity, though they may get done in early for overdosing on carbs. There was an astonishing number of women dressed as if they'd come from the little house on the prairie, in long, floral frontier frocks with bonnets and shawls. Their men are in bibs and braces, with straw hats, authentic pudding-bowl haircuts, and Abe Lincoln beards. They stare at this Hispanic Adam with a touching reverence and a vengeful fury. This goddamned—and I use the word advisedly—dark-eyed wetback is the reason for all the sin and evil and Communism in the world. If it weren't for

him, we'd live forever. On the other hand, if

WORD UP

Two museum residents; inset, two dummies take a swipe at secular curricula.



scarlet ibis, a fallow deer, an ibex, a cougar, a dinosaur, and a snake. It could be the diorama in a hunting-goods store. The animals aren't doing much, just hanging out, waiting for something to happen. There's nothing to do. No hunting, no mating, no nesting, no getting better, no getting worse. Just the infinite drip, drip, drip of bliss. Things that weren't in the Garden of Eden at its planting but came later as part of the fruit-knowledge-shame-punishment plea bargain—poison weeds, carnivores, carrion eaters, fear, and thorns—are

of great concern to creationists. A fossil with thorns is proof that it must have been made after the fall from Eden, because Genesis is quite specific about Eden's being un-sharp and blunt, or, you might say, dull and pointless. I spent a lot of time in the Eden picnic area, trying to wrest some sort of spiritual buzz, a sense of the majesty and

the mystery, but it's conspicuously absent. Literally beaten to death. This is Ripley's Believe-It. It is irredeemably kitsch. In fact, it may be the biggest collection of kitsch in God's entire world. This is the profound represented by the banal, a divine irony. (The penchant for kitsch is something that gay men and born-again Christians share.) This tacky, risible, and rational tableau defies belief, beggars faith. Compare it to the creation story in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, Masaccio's expulsion from Eden, or any of the

IF GOD PLANNED ON EVERYTHING LIVING FOREVER, WHAT WAS THE POINT OF HEAVEN?

rives. Adam comes on looking like the Hispanic bass player for a Janis Joplin backup band, with a lot of hair and a tan. He looks a bit stoned. As well he might be, because he's all on his own in Eden. Nothing can do him any harm, and he's got the whole pharmacopoeia at arm's reach. And then you get to Eve, a demure, foxy little girl who could be Juliet in a Guatemalan school play. Her long hair is meticulously glued to her pert and perky breasts. Adam has his as yet unnecessary organ of generation decorously concealed behind foliage. There is something wincingly salacious about this bearded hippie and his schoolgirl mate. And he has what looks suspiciously like a belly button.

The most compelling evidence for the ineffably mysterious ways of God are the people who've come here to load up with ammunition for the constant and relentless argument with the free world. Here, it's safe to say, no one is going to get flung into the

he'd lived forever, we wouldn't be here. (Just as an aside, a point of order, wasn't it divinely unfair of God to say, "If you eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, I will bring death unto you"? Death is a difficult if not impossible concept to explain to an illiterate man who has never seen anything die. And while we're at it, if God planned on everything living forever, what was the point of heaven?) "This is the Garden of Eden," a man with jelly-mold hair said to his little Tom Sawyer son. "Really?" replied the lad. "Really," said the man.

The Garden of Eden is well worth the trip to Petersburg, Kentucky. Seeing as this museum is in the literal-truth business, this must be the literal Garden of Eden. This is exactly what it looked like. This is no simile, no mock-up, no artist's impression. This is it. And it takes your breath away. Sharing the perfect rest stop with Adam is a whole mess of animals. There's a worried-looking sheep, a fox, a chimp, a wallaby, a bear, a llama, a

thousands of flickering images, icons, and installations based on faith rather than literalist realism. It truly makes you wonder, Is all this righteous ire, all this money, all this Pentecostal flame-throwing the best they can come up with? This cheap county-fair sideshow—this is their best shot? It may be more replete with proof than a Soviet show trial, but this creation is bereft of any soul.

Back in the entrance lobby, where we get our photographs taken in the Garden of Eden with the dinosaur and the ark (through the scientific miracle of lenses, computers, and green screen), one of the security guards smiles brightly at me. It's about the first smile I've seen all day, and its warmth makes me smile back. I notice his embossed badge. His name is Adam. □

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AN EXTENSIVE SLIDE SHOW OF PAUL BETTANY'S PHOTOS OF THE CREATION MUSEUM.