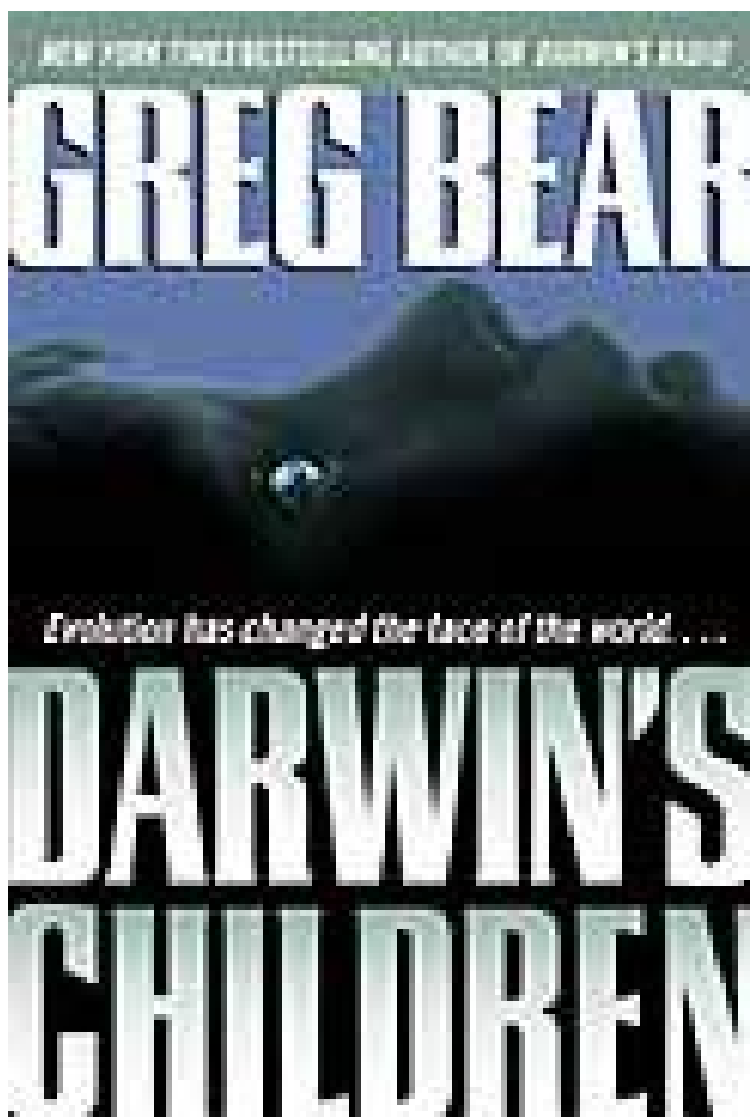


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Darwin's Children



Par Greg Bear
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurGreg Bears Nebula Awardwinning novel, Darwins Radio, painted a chilling portrait of humankind on the threshold of a radical leap in evolutionone that would alter our species forever. Now Bear continues his provocative tale of the human race confronted by an uncertain future, where survival of the fittest takes on astonishing and controversial new dimensions.DARWINS CHILDRENEleven years have passed since SHEVA, an ancient retrovirus, was discovered in human DNAa retrovirus that caused mutations in the human genome and heralded the arrival of a new wave of genetically enhanced humans. Now these changed children have reached adolescence . . . and face a world that is outraged about their very existence. For these special youths, possessed of remarkable, advanced traits that mark a major turning point in human development, are also ticking time bombs harboring hosts of viruses that could exterminate the old

human race. Fear and hatred of the virus children have made them a persecuted underclass, quarantined by the government in special schools, targeted by federally sanctioned bounty hunters, and demonized by hysterical segments of the population. But pockets of resistance have sprung up among those opposed to treating the children like dangerous diseases and who fear the worst if the governments draconian measures are carried to their extreme. Scientists Kaye Lang and Mitch Rafelson are part of this small but determined minority. Once at the forefront of the discovery and study of the SHEVA outbreak, they now live as virtual exiles in the Virginia suburbs with their daughter, Stella, a bright, inquisitive virus child who is quickly maturing, straining to break free of the protective world her parents have built around her, and eager to seek out others of her kind. But for all their precautions, Kaye, Mitch, and Stella have not slipped below the governments radar. The agencies fanatically devoted to segregating and controlling the new-breed children monitor their every move watching and waiting for the opportunity to strike the next blow in their escalating war to preserve humankind at any cost.

Extrait Spotsylvania County, Virginia Morning lay dark and quiet around the house. Mitch Rafelson stood with coffee cup in hand on the back porch, doopey from just three hours of sleep. Stars still pierced the sky. A few persistent moths and bugs buzzed around the porch light. Raccoons had been at the garbage can in back, but had left, whickering and scuffling, hours ago, discouraged by lengths of chain. The world felt empty and new. Mitch put his cup in the kitchen sink and returned to the bedroom. Kaye lay in bed, still asleep. He adjusted his tie in the mirror above the dresser. Ties never looked right on him. He grimaced at the way his suit hung on his wide shoulders, the gap around the collar of his white shirt, the length of sleeve visible beyond the cuff of his coat. There had been a row the night before. Mitch and Kaye and Stella, their daughter, had sat up until two in the morning in the small bedroom trying to talk it through. Stella was feeling isolated. She wanted, needed to be with young people like her. It was a reasonable position, but they had no choice. Not the first time, and likely not the last. Kaye always approached these events with studied calm, in contrast to Mitchs evasion and excuses. Of course they were excuses. He had no answers to Stellas questions, no real response to her arguments. They both knew she ultimately needed to be with her own kind, to find her own way. Finally, too much, Stella had stomped off and slammed the door to her room. Kaye had started crying. Mitch had held her in bed and she had gradually slipped into twitching sleep, leaving him staring at the darkened ceiling, tracking the play of lights from a truck grumbling down the country road outside, wondering, as always, if the truck would come up their drive, come for their daughter, come to claim bounty or worse. He hated the way he looked in what Kaye called his Mr. Smith duds as in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. He lifted one hand and rotated it, studying the palm, the long, strong fingers, wedding ring though he and Kaye had never gotten a license. It was the hand of a hick. He hated to drive into the capital, through all the checkpoints, using his congressional appointment pass. Slowly moving past all the army trucks full of soldiers, deployed to stop yet another desperate parent from setting off another suicide bomb. There had been three such blasts since spring. And now, Riverside, California. Mitch walked to the left side of the bed. Good morning, love, he whispered. He stood for a moment, watching his woman, his wife. His eyes moved along the sleeve of her pajama top, absorbing every wrinkle in the rayon, every silken play of pre-dawn light, down to slim hands, curled fingers, nails bitten to the quick. He bent to kiss her cheek and pulled the covers over her arm. Her eyes fluttered open. She brushed the back of his head with her fingers. Gluck, she said. Back by four, he said. Love you. Kaye pushed into the pillow with a sigh. Next stop was Stellas room. He never left the house without making the rounds, filling his eyes and memory with pictures of wife and daughter and house, as if, should they all be taken away, should this be the last time, he could replay the moment. Fat good it would do. Stellas room was a neat jumble of preoccupations and busyness in lieu of having friends. She had pinned a farewell photo of their disreputable orange tabby on the wall over her bed. Tiny stuffed animals spilled from her cedar chest, beady eyes mysterious in the shadows. Old paperback books filled a small case made of pine boards that Mitch and Stella had hammered together last winter. Stella enjoyed working with her father, but Mitch had noticed the distance growing between them for a couple of years now. Stella lay on her back in a bed that had been too short for over a year. At eleven, she was almost as tall as Kaye and beautiful in her slender, round-faced way, skin pale copper and tawny gold in the glow of the night-light, hair dark brown with reddish tints, same texture as Kayes and not much longer. Their family had become a triangle, still strong, but with the three sides stretching each month. Neither Mitch nor Kaye could give Stella what she really needed. And each other? He looked up to see the orange line of sunrise through the filmy white curtains of Stellas window. Last night, cheeks freckling with anger, Stella had demanded to know when they would let her out of the house on her own, without makeup, to be with kids her own age. Her kind of kids. It had

been two years since her last play date. Kaye had done wonders with home teaching, but as Stella had pointed out last night, over and over again, with rising emotion, I am not like you! For the first time, Stella had formally proclaimed: I am not human! But of course she was. Only fools thought otherwise. Fools, and monsters, and their daughter. Mitch kissed Stella on the forehead. Her skin was warm. She did not wake up.

Stella as she slept smelled like her dreams, and now she smelled the way tears taste, tang of salt and sadness. Got to go, he murmured. Stella's cheeks produced waves of golden freckles. Mitch smiled. Even asleep, his daughter could say good-bye. Center for Ancient Viral Studies, United States Army Research Medical Institute of Infectious Diseases: USARMID Fort Detrick, Maryland. People died, Christopher, Marian Freedman said. Isn't that enough to make us cautious, even a little crazy? Christopher Dicken walked beside her, tilting on his game leg, staring down the concrete corridor to the steel door at the end. His National Cancer Institute ID badge still poked from his jacket pocket. He clutched a large bouquet of roses and lilies.

The two had been engaged in debate from the front desk through four security checkpoints. Nobody's diagnosed a case of Shiver for a decade, he said. And nobody ever got sick from the children. Isolating them is politics, not biology. Marian took his day pass and ran it through the scanner. The steel door opened to a horizontal spread of sunglass-green access tubes, suspended like a hamster maze over a two-acre basin of raw gray concrete. She held out her hand, letting him go first. You know about Shiver firsthand. It went away in a couple of weeks, Dicken said. It lasted five weeks, and it damned near killed you. Don't bullshit me with your virus hunter bravado. Dicken stepped slowly onto the catwalk, having difficulty judging depth with just one eye, and that covered by a thick lens. The man beat his wife, Marian. She was sick with a tough pregnancy. Stress and pain. Right, Marian said. Well, that certainly wasn't true with Mrs. Rhine, was it? Different problem, Dicken admitted. Freedman smiled with little humor. She sometimes revealed biting wit, but did not seem to understand the concept of humor. Duty, hard work, discovery, and dignity filled the tight circle of her life. Marian Freedman was a devout feminist and had never married, and she was one of the best and most dedicated scientists Dicken had ever met. Together, they marched north on the aluminum catwalk. She adjusted her pace to match his. Tall steel cylinders waited at the ends of the access tubes, shaft housings for elevators to the chambers beneath the seamless concrete slab. The cylinders wore big square hats, high-temperature gas-fired ovens that would sterilize any air escaping from the facilities below. Welcome to the house that Augustine built. How is Mark, anyway? Not happy, last time I saw him, Dicken said. Why am I not surprised? Of course, I should be charitable. Mark moved me up from studying chimps to studying Mrs. Rhine. Twelve years before, Freedman had headed a primate lab in Baltimore, during the early days when the Centers for Disease Control had launched the task force investigating Herods plague. Mark Augustine, then director of the CDC and Dicken's boss, had hoped to secure extra funding from Congress during a fiscal dry spell. Herods, thought to have caused thousands of hideously malformed miscarriages, had seemed like a terrific goad. Herods had quickly been traced to the transfer of one of thousands of Human Endogenous Retroviruses (HERV) carried by all people within their DNA. The ancient virus, newly liberated, mutated and infectious, had been promptly renamed SHEVA, for Scattered Human Endogenous Viral Activation. In those days, viruses had been assumed to be nothing more than selfish agents of disease. She's been looking forward to seeing you, Freedman said. How long since your last visit? Six months, Dicken said. My favorite pilgrim, paying his respects to our viral Lourdes, Freedman said. Well, she's a wonder, all right. And something of a saint, poor dear. Freedman and Dicken passed junctions with tubes branching southwest, northeast, and northwest to other shafts. Outside, the summer morning was warming rapidly. The sun hung just above the horizon, a subdued greenish ball. Cool air pulsed around them with a breathy moan. They came to the end of the main tube. An engraved Formica placard to the right of the elevator door read, MRS. CARLA RHINE. Freedman punched the single white button. Dicken's ears popped as the door closed behind them. SHEVA had turned out to be much more than a disease. Shed only by males in committed relationships, the activated retrovirus served as a genetic messenger, ferrying complicated instructions for a new kind of birth. SHEVA infected recently fertilized eggs in a sense, hijacked them for a higher cause. The Herods miscarriages were first-stage embryos, called interim daughters, not much more than specialized ovaries devoted to producing a new set of precisely mutated eggs. Without additional sexual activity, the second-stage ova implanted and covered themselves with a thin, protective coating. They survived the abortion of the first embryo and started a new pregnancy. To some, this had looked like a kind of virgin birth. Most of the second-stage embryos had gone to term. Worldwide, in two waves separated by four years, three million new children had been born. More than two and a half million of the infants had survived. There was still controversy over exactly who and what they were: a diseased mutation, a subspecies,

or a completely new species. Most simply called them virus children. Carlas still cranking them out, Freedman said as the elevator reached the bottom. She's shed seven hundred new viruses in the last four months. About a third are infectious, single-stranded RNA sense negative, potentially real bastards. Fifty-two of them kill pigs within hours. Ninety-one are almost certainly lethal to humans. Another ten can probably kill both pigs and humans. Freedman glanced over her shoulder to see his reaction. I know, Dicken said dryly. He rubbed his hip. His leg bothered him when he stood for more than fifteen minutes. The same White House explosion that had taken his eye, twelve years ago, had left him partially disabled. Three rounds of surgery had allowed him to put aside the crutches but not the pain. Still in the loop, even at NCI? Freedman asked. Trying to be, he said. Thank God there are only four like her. She's our fault, he said, and paused to reach down and massage his calf. Maybe, but Mother Nature's still a bitch, Freedman said, watching him with her hands on her hips. A small airlock at the end of the concrete corridor cycled them through to the main floor. They were now fifty feet below ground. A guard in a crisp green uniform inspected their passes and permission papers and compared them with the duty and guest roster at her workstation. Please identify, she told them. Both placed their eyes in front of scanners projecting from the counter and simultaneously pressed their thumbs onto sensitive plates. A female orderly in hospital greens escorted them to the cleanup area. Mrs. Rhine was housed in one of ten underground residences, four of them currently occupied. The residences formed the center of what was reputed to be the most redundantly secure research facility on Earth. Though Dicken and Freedman would never come any closer than seeing her through a four-inch-thick acrylic window, they would have to go through a whole-body scrub before and after the interview. Before entering the viewing area and staging lab, called the inner station, they would put on special hooded undergarments impregnated with slow-release antivirals, zip up in plastic isolation suits, and attach themselves to positive pressure umbilical hoses. Mrs. Rhine and her companions at the center never saw real human beings unless they were dressed to resemble Macys parade balloons. On leaving, they would stand under a shower and soak their plastic suits with disinfectants, then strip down and shower again, scrubbing every orifice. The suits would be soaked overnight, and the undergarments would be incinerated. The four women interned at the facility ate well and exercised regularly. Their quarters each roughly the size of a two-bedroom apartment were maintained by automated servants. They had their hobbies. Mrs. Rhine was a great one for hobbies and access to a wide selection of books, magazines, TV shows, and movies. Of course, the women were becoming more and more eccentric. Any tumors? Dicken asked. Official question? Freedman asked. Personal, Dicken said. From the Hardcover edition. Presentation de l'diteur Greg Bears Nebula Award-winning novel, Darwin's Radio, painted a chilling portrait of humankind on the threshold of a radical leap in evolution one that would alter our species forever. Now Bear continues his provocative tale of the human race confronted by an uncertain future, where survival of the fittest takes on astonishing and controversial new dimensions. DARWIN'S CHILDREN Eleven years have passed since SHEVA, an ancient retrovirus, was discovered in human DNA a retrovirus that caused mutations in the human genome and heralded the arrival of a new wave of genetically enhanced humans. 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