

June 2009

Dear students,

On Monday, September 7, as part of your orientation to Brown, you will participate in a seminar about a book that you and all new Brown students will read this summer. The book we have chosen is *The Beak of the Finch: A Story of Evolution in Our Time*, by Jonathan Weiner. It has been purchased for you by the Office of the Dean of the College and the Office of Alumni Relations. Think of it as a welcome gift from Brown and your first official college reading assignment.

The book relates the story of Peter and Rosemary Grant, biologists who spent more than two decades on the Galapagos Islands, studying a dozen species of finches. These are the same finches that Charles Darwin discovered on the islands in 1831, and whose physical traits — especially the size and shape of their beaks — influenced his first ideas about evolution and natural selection. The Grants' research extends Darwin's thinking to a new century, and tells us a great deal about the power of close observation, the pursuit of knowledge, and the always surprising evolution of ideas. In a year that marks both the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth, and the 150th anniversary of the publication of *The Origin of the Species*, it is the perfect book with which to launch your Brown career.

We would like you to read this book and to tell us your reactions to it. What aspects of the Grant's story — or the story of the birds themselves — did you find most compelling? How did Weiner's account make you think differently about evolution? About science? Were there parts of the book that you did not like? Write up your reactions in the form of a letter to your academic advisor. Think of the letter as a way of introducing

yourself to your advisor, giving him or her a sense of who you are and how you think. Because this book is also about pursuing long-term academic work, tell your advisor something about your own goals for the next four years. What do you most want to accomplish at Brown? How do you imagine yourself evolving in the process? Please submit your letter online at www.brown.edu/college/secure/first_readings by August 7. We will make sure it gets into your advisor's hands before your first advising appointment on September 8.

I should mention that your letter will be read by a few other people, as well. First, the specialists in Brown's Writing Center will read your letter to get a sense of your strengths or weaknesses as a writer. We will also share a copy with the person who will be leading your seminar discussion on *The Beak of the Finch*, and who may want to use your ideas as a starting point for the discussion. For both of these reasons, we ask that you give this first college reading assignment some careful attention and thought.

When you arrive on campus, you will receive a move-in packet containing information about the time and location of your seminar, the name of your discussion leader, and the names of students in your group. We hope these discussions will make your orientation to Brown even more exciting and meaningful — a chance to meet a professor, debate ideas with fellow students, and make some new friends. So enjoy your reading, and don't forget to bring your book when you come to Brown in September!

All my best,

Katherine Bergeron
Dean of the College
Professor of Music