Creationism is a perpetual thorn in the side of biology educators. New volumes continue to appear, cloaked in new images and complaints, but following tired old patterns. Such books are devoid of intellectual merit. They are unworthy of our attention. Even taking the time to dismiss them gives them an aura of respect they do not deserve. The best strategy is to disregard them.

Unfortunately, not everyone knows which books to ignore. One feels obliged, regretfully, to brand such books. Sometimes, too, educators need to know the content of such books to interpret and respond to new waves of political action in school boards and state legislatures. So, somewhat wearily, I address my colleagues:

Many fellow ABT readers may have noticed the full page ad for Icons of Evolution in the March, 2001 issue (p. 175) and wondered about its contents. The ad features two notorious images in biology: Haeckel’s embryos and the ape-to-man “march of progress.” These images have been strongly criticized in recent years, most notably by Stephen J. Gould in Wonderful Life (1990). As visual arguments, they are both persuasive and grossly misleading. In his book, Jonathan Wells (2000) echoes this theme, including as examples the Miller-Urey experiment, the peppered moths, Darwin’s finches, fossil horses, homology of vertebrate limbs, the ancestral tree of early life, Archaeopteryx, and the fruit fly double-wing mutations. At first, the book seems to informatively tour recent research on some complexities of these familiar cases.

The tone, however, is critical, aiming to debunk these icons. Apparently, we should feel betrayed that the nature of evidence is more complex than textbooks suggest [this seems to greatly surprise Wells, who continued through graduate school to regard texts as archives of the truth, plain and simple (p. xi)]. Indeed, many simple images are misleading. Wells is not the first to say so. For example, if cardiac surgeons tried to follow the heart diagram in most textbooks, we would be in trouble, as any student who has dissected a real heart can understand. We could thus expand Wells’ list to include other icons of biology: the population crash of the Kaibab deer (ABT, October 2000), Mendelian dominance (November 2000), many plant stories (June 2000), etc. We need to teach students how to interpret all the simple diagrams, concepts and models we teach in a world that is ultimately complex and occasionally “messy.” Motivated by Wells’ critique, we might thoroughly reassess the role of simplification. The ultimate result could be a dramatic renaissance in science education.

But this is not Wells’ focus. He targets only icons of evolution (gentle reader, take note). Nor does Wells propose other images that might better convey the evidence for evolution, or alternative strategies for teaching the concepts he faults. Wells has an agenda, all too evident in his other publications. It is no surprise that the persons lauding the book on the back cover read like a “who’s who” of creationism. In fact, Wells fails to heed his own advice. In a 1999 ABT article he noted, “of course, it would be illogical to conclude that Haeckel’s distortions invalidate Darwin’s Theory” (p. 349). Now, Wells concludes that biology teachers should simply state that this evidence (read “all evidence”) for evolution is wrong. Wells thus miscasts a problem in science education as a problem in science itself. How many uncritical readers will miss this significant frameshift?

Wells does not advance any creationist claim explicitly.