

**SPLENDID ISOLATION:  
The Curious History of  
South American Mammals**  
by George Gaylord Simpson  
Yale, 1980  
255 pp. \$17.50

The animals that interest Simpson, a University of Arizona paleontologist, would win few beauty contests: the capybara, a rodent four-and-a-half feet long, weighing 110 pounds; saber-toothed marsupials; sloths the size of rhinoceros with the ability to walk erect. These odd, highly specialized creatures (represented in this polished technical account by precise line drawings) flourished as recently as 7 million years ago in South America. Their ancestors began evolving 63 million years ago—no one knows exactly how or why—when South America was still unconnected to northern regions. Within the short span of 15 to 20 million years, the continent became home to at least 20 mammalian families and hundreds of genera. In relative isolation and freedom from competition, fragile mutant strains—nature's genetic "experiments"—survived. Then, 7 or 8 million years ago, came the "Great American Interchange" when animals were able to travel between North and South America via the newly formed Isthmus of Panama. Rabbits, squirrels, dogs, bears, raccoons, skunks, and deer went south; porcupines and armadillos went north. Small humpless camels from North America evolved into llamas and alpacas in South America. Some mammals (guinea pigs, howler monkeys) that had developed in the period of insularity survived; but many of the stranger ones, less adaptable and fewer in number, became extinct.

**THE TREE**  
by John Fowles and  
Frank Horvat  
Little, Brown, 1980  
unpaged \$24.95

Modern man distrusts disorder. We see forests and yearn for orchards; we see wild flowers and picture formal gardens, observes Fowles, a British novelist, in this elegant essay on nature, science, and art. Worse, with an acrobatic, wish-fulfilling turn of mind, we have begun to *believe* that scientific evidence corresponds to natural fact. Our tendency to label, classify, and analyze—our insistence, since the Victorian age, that our relationship with nature be "purposive, industrious, always seeking greater knowledge"—casts nature as a "kind of opponent." Fowles would