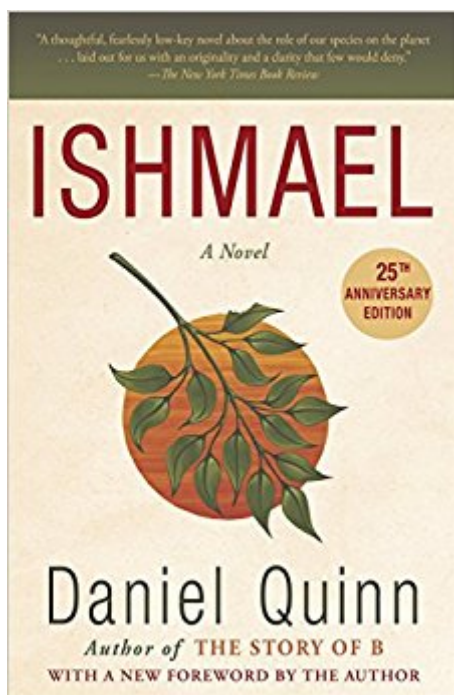


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Ishmael:A Novel



Synopsis

One of the most beloved and bestselling novels of spiritual adventure ever published, *Ishmael* has earned a passionate following among readers and critics alike. This special twenty-fifth anniversary edition features a new foreword and afterword by the author, as well as an excerpt from *My Ishmael*. **TEACHER SEEKS PUPIL. Must have an earnest desire to save the world. Apply in person.** It was just a three-line ad in the personals section, but it launched the adventure of a lifetime. So begins an utterly unique and captivating novel. In *Ishmael*, which received the Turner Tomorrow Fellowship for the best work of fiction offering positive solutions to global problems, Daniel Quinn parses humanity's origins and its relationship with nature, in search of an answer to this challenging question: How can we save the world from ourselves? Praise for *Ishmael* is as suspenseful, inventive, and socially urgent as any fiction or nonfiction you are likely to read this or any other year. "The Austin Chronicle" "Before we're halfway through this slim book . . . we're in [Daniel Quinn's] grip, we want *Ishmael* to teach us how to save the planet from ourselves. We want to change our lives." "The Washington Post" "Arthur Koestler, in an essay in which he wondered whether mankind would go the way of the dinosaur, formulated what he called the Dinosaur's Prayer: 'Lord, a little more time!' *Ishmael* does its bit to answer that prayer and may just possibly have bought us all a little more time." "Los Angeles Times"

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Quinn (*Dreamer*) won the Turner Tomorrow Award's half-million-dollar first prize for this fascinating

and odd book--not a novel by any conventional definition--which was written 13 years ago but could not find a publisher. The unnamed narrator is a disillusioned modern writer who answers a personal ad ("Teacher seeks pupil. . . . Apply in person.") and thereby meets a wise, learned gorilla named Ishmael that can communicate telepathically. The bulk of the book consists entirely of philosophical dialogues between gorilla and man, on the model of Plato's Republic. Through Ishmael, Quinn offers a wide-ranging if highly general examination of the history of our civilization, illuminating the assumptions and philosophies at the heart of many global problems. Despite some gross oversimplifications, Quinn's ideas are fairly convincing; it's hard not to agree that unrestrained population growth and an obsession with conquest and control of the environment are among the key issues of our times. Quinn also traces these problems back to the agricultural revolution and offers a provocative rereading of the biblical stories of Genesis. Though hardly any plot to speak of lies behind this long dialogue, Quinn's smooth style and his intriguing proposals should hold the attention of readers interested in the daunting dilemmas that beset our planet. 50,000 first printing; major ad/promo. Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Winner of the Turner Tomorrow Fellowship, a literary competition intended to foster works of fiction that present positive solutions to global problems, this book offers proof that good ideas do not necessarily equal good literature. Ishmael, a gorilla rescued from a traveling show who has learned to reason and communicate, uses these skills to educate himself in human history and culture. Through a series of philosophical conversations with the unnamed narrator, a disillusioned Sixties idealist, Ishmael lays out a theory of what has gone wrong with human civilization and how to correct it, a theory based on the tenet that humanity belongs to the planet rather than vice versa. While the message is an important one, Quinn rarely goes beyond a didactic exposition of his argument, never quite succeeding in transforming idea into art. Despite this, heavy publicity should create demand. Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 10/15/91.- Lawrence Rungren, Bedford Free P.L., Mass. Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I found 'Ismael' to be a sort of essay in narrative form (told by a gorilla) in the anti-civilisation (or beyond civilisation) genre. Though the book never mentions it explicitly, the theme is reminiscent of what is sometimes called the Easter Island effect, and warns against its extremities. Perhaps for someone new to the theme the novel might come across as marvellous, and also perhaps

revelatory. I must admit that I found it rather simplistic, often presenting scenarios and interpretations as if they were exclusive. By way of a solution (or at least a resolution) to the problem of the larger part of humanity's implosion which he so starkly presents, Quinn, I think, offers none, at least not practically. He does so theoretically, and superbly so. I would have thought, nonetheless, that, in practical terms, the gorilla would propose to its student a more explicit anarchist way of living. For it seemed that that was the direction being taken. However, the novel never gets to that point. A reference to Kropotkin's 'Mutual Aid' would also not have been amiss, since some ideas in the novel at least mirror what Kropotkin so skilfully expounds therein.

The concept of captivity and not being able to find the bars of the cage is used as a metaphor for our culture and how it relates to our thoughts and our behavior of that culture. Ishmael talks about how we are lost and captive in these invisible bars; we cannot see what is keeping us in; therefore the way out becomes more confusing. We start to disengage because of this feeling of hopelessness. This idea of man made for world or world made for man takes a toll on how life progresses. Are we aware of this captivity and/ or too comfortable in it to care? Our society has grown to feel good about these 'invisible bars' because of the mentality that what they cannot see won't hurt them. Ishmael knows and is trying to evoke the idea that it is time to create new culture with a sustainable way of life because without this we are heading straight for our extinction. The Economy has been a big part of captivity in our culture. Money is a driving force in fear of change. Large companies are afraid of losing what they have built. The mentality is that they feel against the world but in reality they are against themselves. Bettering themselves to benefit in the bigger picture is a foreign concept and idea. In today's society living a sustainable life seems to be too expensive for many people. It is easier to buy things that will not take as much time, money, or energy to apply to their lives. Ishmael's student says, "We have to carry the conquest forward. And carrying it forward is either going to destroy the world or turn it into paradise-into the paradise it was meant to be under human rule. We have to decide to carry on forward; a difficult idea that has many minds lost. The world was made to rule but in ruling we have created destruction rather than a paradise. Ishmael being a Gorilla, and also a teaching the student about life had me confused in the beginning. As I read, I started to understand the dynamic and relationship between animal and human/ or animal and animal. It gives you a moment to step back from your own culture and realize that because the teacher is a gorilla, we are no longer stuck in the idea that our culture is human centered. You can step back and see how intertwined we really are with all

aspects of life. I was also weary with the religious comparisons until I realized it is needed to comprise the thesis of man is headed for extinction; it gives us a visual story of our culture. The message lets you choose your plan of action to take rather than having Ishmael completely spell it out. The message of how this life came to be is put forth in such an interesting way.

In essence Ishmael is saying that humans are endangering the earth and their very existence by refusing to believe they are subject to the same treatment as any other invasive species. At some point in the not too distant future over population will surpass our ability to produce enough food to sustain life, and the population will crash. And as an added negative factor, global warming will hasten the process.

In his book *Chaos*, J. Snodgrass writes that he learned more from reading this book than he did from all of high school and college combined. That comment was sufficiently intriguing to cause me to read Ishmael myself. Though it was not what I expected, Quinn's thought-provoking novel invites the reader to reconsider the premises upon which much of human culture has been constructed. Is humanity the final act of creation/evolution? Does the world belong to humanity or does humanity belong to the world? What are the consequences of our anthropocentric worldview and, more importantly, what might be the consequences of abandoning that worldview? These are a few of the fascinating and challenging questions the book suggests. Quinn/Ishmael's take on the our mythology of origins, specifically the account of "the Fall" and Cain and Abel in Genesis, are alone enough to make the book worthwhile (Snodgrass' book on Genesis further considers the Biblical stories in light of the Agricultural Revolution and it's impact on pastoral societies, and is highly recommended). Perhaps the Eden story is describing something quite different from what our culture has been telling us for the past few thousand years. I'm glad to have read this book and I expect I'll be pondering its message for a long time.

A wonderful Socratic dialogue about why things are the way they are in modern civilized society with a focus on how we got here. I don't want to spoil it for you; it's a wonderful trip through history and philosophy and religion that will leave your eyes permanently open. I only wish our "leaders" would read it and apply the insights to be gained, but this is a book for everyone. Highly recommended.

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