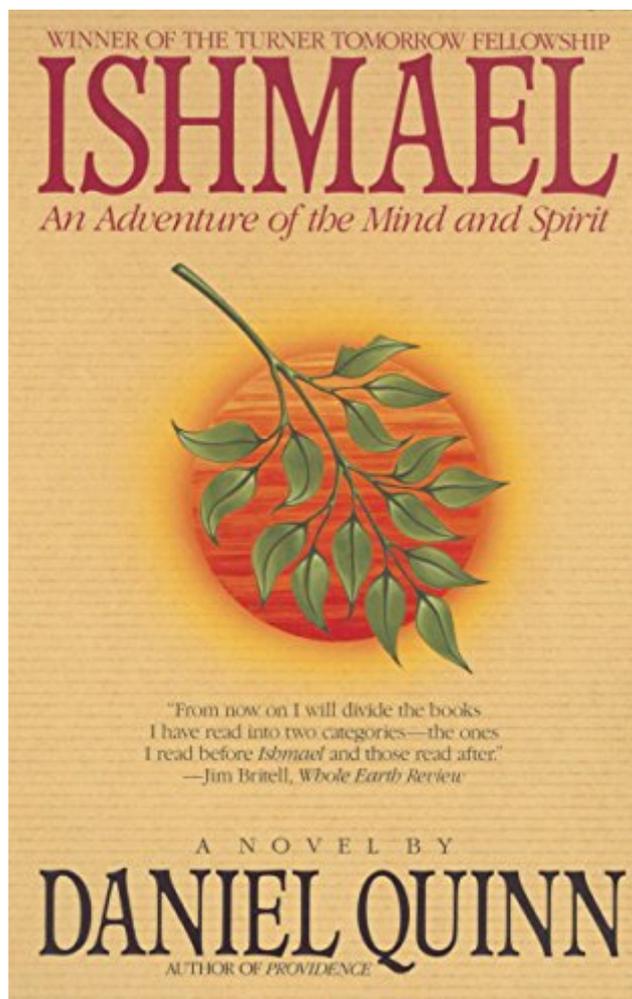


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Ishmael: A Novel



Synopsis

MORE THAN ONE MILLION COPIES IN PRINTThe narrator of this extraordinary tale is a man in search for truth. He answers an ad in a local newspaper from a teacher looking for serious pupils, only to find himself alone in an abandoned office with a full-grown gorilla who is nibbling delicately on a slender branch. "You are the teacher?" he asks incredulously. "I am the teacher," the gorilla replies. Ishmael is a creature of immense wisdom and he has a story to tell, one that no other human being has ever heard. It is a story that extends backward and forward over the lifespan of the earth from the birth of time to a future there is still time to save. Like all great teachers, Ishmael refuses to make the lesson easy; he demands the final illumination to come from within ourselves. Is it man's destiny to rule the world? Or is it a higher destiny possible for him "one more wonderful than he has ever imagined?" From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

I've read several reviews of this book and found that, despite Quinn's careful attempts to get his message across clearly and unequivocally, many readers misunderstand the finer points of

Ishmael's arguments end up praising or condemning Ishmael for the wrong reasons. Here is a short list of common misunderstandings you're likely to encounter in the course of reading reviews of this book: (1) The central message is a hackneyed statement about saving the planet: All we have to do is this or that. We need to treat the earth better, or treat each other better, etc.... No, the author has no such message. He is not even concerned with saving the planet. He merely points out that, in the past, there were many ways a human could make a living in the world that did not threaten to render the planet uninhabitable. As George Carlin once said: "The planet isn't going anywhere. We are!" The author recommends that if we are concerned about our future, then we should find out as much as we can about these other ways of living in the world and what made them sustainable. (2) This is communism. No, this is tribalism, the cultural traits of which have been found to be conducive to sustainable ways of living. So-called communist countries operate the same unsustainable lifestyle as so-called democratic countries and are just as hierarchical and corrupt. Nothing new, except the academic devaluation of the individual. In "democratic" countries, the devaluation is not openly professed, only practiced and theoretically implied. Progress means the same thing in both societies: the technological displacement of people. (3) The ape is omniscient; skeptics beware. Skeptics always beware. Ishmael is the ultimate skeptic.

Some quotes that have caused me pause: "The earth is on the brink of environmental collapse because the evil white people have forgotten that the world does not belong to them." "Its central tenet - that human beings, through their total disregard for the world around them, are destroying the Earth" Way to miss the boat. First of all, in no way is Quinn saying humans are a disease, that white people in particular are a disease, or that "Western Civ." is responsible. Quinn is saying that for millions of years humans existed on this planet without conquering it, and that that they did so sustainably. It is not "human beings" that are responsible, it is the "produce or die" culture that's responsible. Jean Jacques Rousseau posited that the greatest crime in the history of humanity was when one person fenced off an area and said "this is mine." The rest is, unfortunately, history. It is not that we're human, it is how we are living. We are under the delusion that there is no other way to live - but we have 3 million years of shared "non-history" to point to to show that before our culture, humans lived just fine, thank you. Since our culture's inception, we have been on the track to disaster - War, Famine, Slavery, Plague - all fruits of this cultural tree. And with no one even considering the possibility of changing course (and frankly, why would they when the rewards are "comfort" and "wealth"), there is nothing but a great brick wall at the end of this tunnel to look forward to. This book is not meant to do anything more than wake us up from the mind-numbing

hum of the culture that tells us there is no other way to live.

It is a general rule that any particular culture can only be understood by someone outside of it - a neutral observer, unaffected by prejudice or indoctrination. This is the reasoning behind Quinn's choice of a gorilla named Ishmael as the main character of this novel, who conducts a series of dialogues analyzing the whole of civilization itself. But what is the civilization that Quinn looks at? Instead of muttering about monumental building and written language, Quinn treats civilization in a method that is becoming increasingly popular: as the result of a critical mass of humanity that makes possible rapid advances in knowledge and science. For this to be possible, intensive agriculture must be used to raise the population density to such a point that civilization occurs. So Quinn uses a gorilla as an outsider looking in and perceiving the reality of civilization - of cultures using intensive agriculture to dominate the world. His conclusions are for the most part negative: he concludes that civilization is not sustainable in the long term (that is, over millions of years). The observations used to come to this conclusion are relatively well-known; that civilization is the greatest disaster to befall earth in the past 65 million years. In terms of pollution, deforestation, extinction, and overall negative impact to the web of life itself, humanity is supreme among all the species. What Quinn does not share with the others who know these facts is a belief that civilization will overcome any difficulties it encounters. Civilization, to Quinn, is the problem, not the solution. Ishmael is the presentation of these ideas in a Socratic method from a gorilla to a man "with an earnest desire to save the world.

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