

A Reader's Notes on

Ishmael

a novel by Daniel Quinn.

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BOOK ONE

In this chapter, the main character (whom I'll call "**Person**") sees an advert in the Personals section of the newspaper, advertising a teacher seeking a student with an "earnest desire to save the world." Incredulous and irritated, Person goes to the address listed, and sees an ordinary-looking office space within. Upon further examination, Person realizes there's a gorilla behind glass, looking at him. Also incredulously, this gorilla communicates with Person in some form of telepathy, telling Person his life story.

The gorilla's name is Ishmael. After spending time in a traveling menagerie and a zoo, Ishmael was later adopted by an anthropologist who discovered Ishmael's communicative abilities and as a result taught Ishmael everything he could. Now, several years after the anthropologist's death, Ishmael seeks out persons whom want to learn from him.

There is a poster hanging on the wall behind Ishmael: "**WITH MAN GONE, WILL THERE BE HOPE FOR GORILLA?**"

BOOK TWO

Ishmael continues, describing the lesson he plans to teach Person. Essentially he will guide the dialogue so that Person will eventually attain the knowledge related to Ishmael's lesson. Ishmael introduces the notion that all are captives of the human condition in some way, alluding to the fact that it's not a tangible, physical prison, but one of thought and perspective.

He also introduces the terms "**Taker**" and "**Leaver**" into the discussion. Takers are ostensibly the more conquest-minded of humanity, while Leavers harbor no such thoughts; the Leavers include not just other humans (of less "civilized" societies) but also other animals, plants, and even the planet Earth itself.

Also introduced is the notion of "**Mother Culture**," the anthropologically-recognized paradigm into which Person had been birthed.

Each society has its own Mother Culture, a value system and perspective that helps that society's populace navigate its way through its various meaningful choices. Person acknowledges this, and admits he's been clearly shaped by this Mother Culture. Even so, says Ishmael, **there's more to the influence of Mother Culture than Person may immediately understand; this is the crux of the lesson Ishmael intends to teach.**

Concluding this chapter, Ishmael poses a challenge to Person: how do you describe how things came to be this way? He elaborates and lets Person know he's seeking Person's notion of his culture's creation myth: the beginning of the story, as far as humanity is concerned. Ishmael then sends Person on his way to ponder the question.

BOOK THREE

The main point of this chapter is explained with Person's account of how things came to be this way. In his explanation, Person begins more or less in a scholarly fashion, explaining what modern science sees as the way the universe came to be, culminating in the arrival of mankind and eventually modern civilization.

Ishmael then points out the human-centered view that Person has, by re-framing the explanation as if it was

told by a jellyfish. **The point is that, since Person's paradigm is developed to promote humanity above all other organisms, then Person's perspective suffers the consequences of being limited to only that point of view.** In truth, states Ishmael, things are much more complex and a lot has been omitted via Mother Culture's influence.

BOOK FOUR

It's firmly established that Person (and by metaphor, the bulk of humanity) has it firmly entrenched in his (or its) psyche that the world was made for man, and man came into this knowledge after a time of fumbling about, believing it to be simply another creature on the planet. This all changed, however, upon the advent of agriculture, which allowed humankind to abandon the hunter-gatherer lifestyle and embrace a more sedentary existence.

Ishmael asks Person to imagine life on Earth without humanity; Person's impression is one of untamed wilderness; a world without order. Person states that the world needs balance and order, and humanity is just such an entity to bring it to the world. In fact, bringing order to Earth is established as humanity's birthright, much like how a king and his rule must be accepted, or the king and his forces are driven to forcibly conquer their opponents.

Again, this is established as a construct of Mother Culture, pitting humanity in a struggle for order against the Earth itself. **In this chapter, Ishmael affirms that humanity has cast itself as the enemy of the world, and there can be only one victor.**

BOOK FIVE

At this point in the book, the thesis of the story of how things came to be this way is summed up as: "The world was made for man to conquer and rule, and under human rule it was meant to become a paradise." **Ishmael indicates that there's something left out of the explanation, which Mother Culture has nonetheless been able to instill in its adherents. It's the notion that humans are inherently flawed.**

Where does this notion of being flawed come from? The long explanation is that there has been no point of reference for proper living; of living a way of life that encourages the world to be a paradise under humankind's rule. The result is that humanity itself follows along no particular path, even conflicting with itself, in an effort to cope with this cultural belief that there is no hope of ever coming to terms with a paradise on Earth. Due to humankind's perceived flaw, they will simply accept that anything beyond a crippled, conflicted existence is beyond them.

Ishmael mentions that, of course, to move beyond this kind of thinking, a more open, appreciative existence is called for. This idea of humankind's flawed existence, Ishmael says, is a kind of monument that the natives don't see, but the tourists marvel at.

BOOK SIX

This chapter pretty much sums up the main point of the book at this point, as I see it.

An interesting point is established through comparison and metaphor, and explained by Ishmael to Person. Imagine what it must have been like to be one of the struggling inventors of the first flying machines, says Ishmael: How there was no blueprint of how to create a flying machine, no study of aeronautics, and yet

countless iterations of flying machines were being developed before some measure of success was acquired. In essence, the laws of aeronautics were unknown, while inventors were fumbling forward anyway.

This notion of incontrovertible laws is how Ishmael approaches Person: **even though humanity has no idea of how this paradise can be discovered, many have come forth stating that they know the way.** However, humankind--or, at least the Taker component of humankind--has come upon the happy idea that humanity is excepted from the law of nature on Earth. That is, once humanity had in its head that it was to conquer the world instead of simply be a part of the whole, it adopted this Mother Culture of conflict with the Earth itself.

Rejection of Mother Culture, says Ishmael, is an incredibly difficult thing to do. Although there have been significant blows to humanity's ego to which humanity has adjusted (such as the fact that the Earth is not the center of the universe, and that humanity has evolved just like every other organism on the planet: from microorganisms), there's one idea that is almost impossible for humankind to abandon: not only are they evolved from the "lowliest" of life forms, but they must also accept and be made to obey the same laws of nature as the rest of these life forms.

There is no exception for humanity written into the laws of gravity, thermodynamics, aeronautics, and so on. Humanity has continually striven to defeat and except itself from these laws, consuming vast amounts of natural resources in the process.

Civilisation has been crafted as if humankind can live in exception to these laws of nature, and coupled with the Mother Culture notion that humankind simply needs to work a little harder to dominate all the forces of the Earth.

This will be the downfall of humanity, says Ishmael. He likens it to an aviator testing out their creation, unaware that although it is plummeting to the Earth at ever-increasing speed, the craft seems to be flying, and achieving the desired effect. The abrupt landing is what will signify the end of the aviator...And, by metaphor, the end of humanity.

From the book:

At last I had something of my own to add to this. "The worst part of it is this," I said, "that the survivors, if there are any, will immediately set about doing it all over again, exactly the same way."

"Yes, I'm afraid you're right. Trial and error isn't a bad way to learn how to build an aircraft, but it can be a terrible way to learn how to build a civilization."

BOOK SEVEN

Ishmael illustrates the law humankind has abandoned in a rather colorful way. He likens the explanation of a civilization in which A's eat B's, B's eat C's, and C's eat A's. In this example, the As, Bs, and Cs are plants and insects, plant-eating creatures, and carnivores respectively. At some point, Ishmael says, humankind put it into its head that it was no longer bound by laws as simple and as all-encompassing as this. He charges Person with determining what those laws (the ones to which humanity believes it is the sole exception) are.

BOOK EIGHT

I spent several read-throughs on this chapter. I'm conflicted by it, at present.

Person comes forth with his explanation of laws that humankind has abandoned, or to which Mother Culture has believed humankind the exception:

1. Although many species of animal hunt and kill, and even kill in self-defense, it is exclusively Humankind that consciously exterminates its competitors and/or animals that prey on them. From the book: although baboons will kill a leopard on sight, they won't consciously hunt down all leopards until there are none left. Other animals kill to eat; not always so with humankind.
2. Humankind destroys the food of other species to produce food of its own.
3. Humankind denies its competitors access to food. For example, a farmer will fence in a flock of chickens, and will not let others eat those chickens or their eggs if it can help it. It claims ownership of the chickens and all they produce. From the book: a lion will kill a gazelle and claim it for its own, but it will not lay claim to the entire herd.

There was a fourth rule: that only humankind stores its food. But that was indicated as not true.

It is unclear whether or not Ishmael completely agrees with these laws; Person presented them, and only the fourth was directly refuted. Ishmael encouraged Person to continue, as opposed to saying things like "Yes, you are correct."

The point behind indicating that these were incontrovertible laws of nature was to prove the value of diversity. For example, if there were only lions at the top of the food chain, and only gazelles on the level before them, and only plains grasses on the level before them, the ecosystem would become terribly fragile. There is no super-gazelle that can outrun all lions, resist all diseases, handle all environmental stresses, weather, and hazardous conditions, etc. If one aspect of the select ecosystem faltered, then the rest would also, since the species all follow the rule of A eats B, B eats C, and C eats A.

Diversity, Ishmael explains, is a survival tactic for the entire Earth community itself. If a calamity ensues, then only a portion of all life on the planet will succumb, instead of the most of it. This in turn protects the vast array of life forms on the planet.

Without diversity, there is little hope for survival, as a single cataclysmic event can wipe out an entire aspect of the food chain, destroying the chances of survival for the rest. Homogeneity will result in its own destruction. If humanity succeeds in destroying all of its competitors and homogenizing the other levels of the food chain, it will die out much quicker. If food supply increases, population increases; if food supply decreases, then the population decreases. This is true in any segment of ecology examined.

This is also where I seem conflicted.

It appears that, in this chapter, Ishmael—in supporting diversity—supports the elimination of globalism. Taken to the extreme, it can be understood that he supports diversity to the extent that he alludes to racism/tribalism as the way to go. Extend the laws of nature discussed in this chapter, and racism ensures diversity, as each tribe keeps to itself and does not commingle.

Ishmael extends this explanation into human civilization, indicating that successful—as in, in harmony with

other life on the planet—human settlements (the "Leavers" in Ishmael's story) are the indigenous tribes.

These tribes generally respected one another's boundaries, controlling their own food supply, and keeping their own populations in control, matching with their available food supply. This was all due to necessity: obeying the laws of nature previously described.

Globalism, if Ishmael's words are taken to heart, leads to homogeneity, which leads to the eventual extinction of all species. Globalism, being a major part of Mother Culture (which teaches humans that the Earth must be dominated and ruled over by man), is self-destructive to the global community, and is ultimately a form of suicide.

At the very least, this is why humanity must work to save itself from itself.

If taken not as the anti-Globalization movement manifesto, then it requires that one assumes that all these indigenous tribes throughout the world are enlightened, non-Imperialist, smaller gatherings of humans. I personally don't see that as possible and/or practical. It's my opinion that Leaver cultures have been subjugated throughout human history at the expense of Taker aspirations. It's not that Leaver culture emergence or adoption is a bad thing (of course!) but that Taker culture has already abandoned it once, and would do very little to adopt it again.

In this author's opinion, Leaver cultures are doomed to extinction, leaving only "oddballs and outliers" as the only bastions of Leaver culture. The only exception to this is if there were some way to eliminate the hold that Taker culture has on the natural resources and geographic territory across the planet, and I really don't see that happening.

That being said, Ishmael's articulation and arguments throughout this chapter are valid and congruent. I just don't see a systemic change or paradigm shift occurring until a hypothetical catastrophe strikes the Earth and "rolls back" humanity's influence.

BOOK NINE

The lessons learned by Person in this chapter take a marked turn, physically as well as contextually. Ishmael is now no longer behind the glass, sitting on his cushions alongside Person. The lesson also expands upon the creation myth alluded to before, bringing it into a more secular perspective.

Let the writer of this critique confess here and now that he has not read any version of the bible in over ten years (I think the last one I read was actually the Book of Mormon. --ed.), and even then he didn't take it seriously.

The bible, explains Ishmael, is simply a series of allegories and metaphors to relate the territorial conflicts that began perhaps in 8000 B.C. At that time, agriculturalism was developed between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers north and east of the Arabian Peninsula. Although it took four thousand years to do so, the expansion from that small pocket of the Fertile Crescent eventually enveloped all of Asia Minor, north Africa, and most parts of Europe. The Semitic herders of the Arabian Peninsula (ancestors of the Hebrews) wrote a notable portion of the bible--the story of Cain and Abel--as a metaphorical depiction of the eventual struggle between these agriculturalists of the Fertile Crescent and the aeons-old culture of hunter-gatherer and/or pastoralist/herder.

In fact, states Ishmael, even the story of Adam and his 'fall from the Garden of Eden' is all metaphor.

Interestingly enough, however, is that it was a story written not by the Takers (agriculturalists), but by the leavers (the Semitic herders). The story of Adam and his fall was actually a warning about the Takers abandoning the ages-old accumulation of knowledge and instead embracing this totally new agriculturalist model. In essence, Takers felt that they had beaten the normal laws of nature (regarding food production and population explosion) with their agriculturalism.

The Semites depicted this as Adam ingesting fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. With the knowledge of the gods now under Humanity's belt, they attained the conceit that they were above and beyond all the rest of the animals. They believed that they were as good as the gods, who created the world itself. Surely, believed humankind, now that they had the knowledge of Good and Evil, they'll always elect to go for the Good and always abstain from the Evil. For example, creating more humans to populate the world is Good, so make sure that the population is set to expand. You need more land to produce enough food to support the population, so clear out all competitors, homogenize the plantlife, etc. so that humanity's growth and proliferation can be supported.

The Semites depict the agricultural revolution of 8500 B. C. as a catastrophic failure on the part of humans, not as a triumph (taught in most Taker cultures). The supreme irony (says Ishmael) is that this story was co-opted by Christians (clearly a Taker culture, but not outright spelled out by the author) to promote their agenda of population explosion, invasion, subjugation, etc. of non-believer cultures.

Viewing the Old Testament as metaphor explaining territorial conflicts makes so much more sense than attempting to take it literally, or in any form of realistic narrative. The Seven Days of Creation wasn't really seven days, it was simply a metaphor. The author of these notes would, in all seriousness, like to thank Daniel Quinn for finally making that clear.

BOOK TEN

This chapter begins with some mildly amusing situations encountered by the main characters. Person has to entertain an unexpected visiting relative and take care of some work responsibilities, along with a visit to the dentist; Ishmael's steward has died and as a result, rent is not paid on Ishmael's office space, and he's evicted to a traveling carnival as "Gargantua the Gorilla."

Person and Ishmael have their discussion in the menagerie tent of the traveling carnival.

A primary difference between Taker and Leaver cultures is that only in a Leaver culture is there a sense of tradition: a continuation of an accumulation of knowledge from one generation to the next. Meanwhile, Taker cultures have no such sense of tradition, continuation, or history. Each new generation must forget the outmoded practices of the previous in the name of progress and advancement. I immediately began to think of the dog-eared phrase, "those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it."

More specifically, Leaver cultures acquire a personalized way of working with people, while Taker cultures adopt more and better ways of manipulating things. Ishmael implies that, with the advent of agriculturalism (AKA Adam's fall), Takers soon thought that they had been living life all wrong, denying their own destiny of conquering the Earth, and must abandon the 3 million-plus years of accumulated wisdom to take on their true purpose.

As a result of Takers stamping out more and more Leaver cultures, plowing over more and more land for their singular purpose of population growth, the ways of working with people are being forgotten in an effort to learn more about the ways of efficient production of things. As a result, the methods of learning

how to live well for people are being gradually, systematically wiped out by Taker actions.

BOOK ELEVEN

Ishmael has turned to a sour mood ever since he ended up in the menagerie, and in this chapter he challenges Person as to why he must continue with the lesson. He accuses Person of "shutting off his brain" whenever he arrives to visit Ishmael, and Person really has no defense to this; he simply wants to learn more from Ishmael as the lessons continue. In an effort to share the story of the Leavers—a story that has heretofore been left unmentioned—Ishmael establishes a role-play encounter between the Leaver (played by Ishmael) and a Taker (played by Person).

Through this exchange, Ishmael exposes another tremendous lesson instilled by Mother Culture, which in turn assists in further clarifying the definitions of Taker and Leaver. Takers "are those who know good and evil," and Leavers "are those who live in the hands of the gods." This notion is further illustrated by, when asked to describe his impression of the lifestyle, Person describes the hunter-gatherer as someone in a state of constant anxiety: in fear of predators, a lack of food, shelter, and clothing. Someone living on "the knife-edge of survival." Psychologically, they are not living up to their potentials as human beings...They are living like animals, with the same concerns as the other key predators of the time: lions, wolves, tigers, etc. Modern life, with its Taker culture, is much more desired than that in modern society.

Ishmael counters this notion with the findings of anthropologists, who indicate that there was much more leisure time in the lives of the hunter-gatherers than there is now in the average lives of those in modern society. Furthermore, there is no poverty, poor, or huddled masses in a hunter-gatherer lifestyle (at least, as we know them in modern society). But as wretched as the lives of the poor can be, it's admitted by Person that the average poor person and their family would balk at the chance to somehow be magically whisked away to the time of the hunter-gatherers. They would apparently live in the back-breaking poverty of modern times than come to a situation where they are more beholden to Mother Nature than Mother Culture...Despite the fact that there are still natural disasters and various catastrophes.

Ultimately, however, Person maintains that the main argument behind wanting to keep hold of the Taker culture in the face of these facts is that there's at least an illusion of self-determination and control in Taker society, fueled with this opinion that humans are somehow exceptions to the laws of nature.

BOOK TWELVE

Person approaches the head of the carnival and offers to buy Ishmael from him. Person doesn't have the kind of money on hand that's required (the manager is asking \$2200), so Person mentions he would "think about it."

Evolution is the topic at hand for this particular chapter. A fundamental difference between the Takers and Leavers, as has been established, is the notion of controlling the environment for its own ends; the idea that the planet is here to be conquered and consumed by humans as they see fit.

Takers believe that, as they have the knowledge of good and evil, and that they are an exception to the rules of nature, it is their duty to control the destiny of the Earth, and actually shape the process of evolution as they see fit.

In essence, Takers believe evolution is in the hands of the Takers, not "the gods" or the Leavers. The

wholesale destruction and manipulation of the planet and all its resources and life forms is the result of Takers' conscious shaping of the environment to their own preference. As they believe they know the One True Way of how the planet should be run, the Leaver cultures are seen as backward, stunted, counter-evolutionary, etc. This flies in the face of facts, which indicate that there are processions of organisms throughout evolution (especially humanity) that have changed and evolved over time without attempting to harness and consciously manipulate the evolutionary process.

But why is it, Person asks, that humans have evolved in such a way, then?

Why must they be gifted with such intelligence and tool-using ability, if their purpose is not to command the Earth's procession? Ishmael believes this is an important point: no one listens to what they must not do; **the goal of anyone interested in saving the world is to inspire others to abandon the Taker culture and re-embrace the Leaver culture.** Ishmael proposes that humanity is to set an example for other organisms to follow; they are one of many who will approach the path to evolutionary excellence. Instead of stunting evolution--of themselves and all other organisms--humanity should instead shepherd the rest of the world into progress.

Some choice excerpts follow.

Ishmael said, "We know what happens if you take the Taker premise, that the world belongs to man."

"Yes, and that's a disaster."

"And what happens if you take the Leaver premise, that man belongs to the world?"

"Then creation goes on forever."

"How does that sound?"

"It has my vote."

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Person remarks on what he thinks now of Chapter Two of the humans' story:

"Just think. In a billion years, whatever is around then, whoever is around then, says, 'Man? Oh yes, man! What a wonderful creature he was! It was within his grasp to destroy the entire world and to trample all our futures in the dust--but he saw the light before it was too late and pulled back. He pulled back and gave the rest of us our chance. He showed us all how it had to be done if the world was to go on being a garden forever. Man was the role model for us all!' "

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Person presents the typical argument for re-embracing the Leaver lifestyle, and Ishmael responds:

"One thing I know people will say to me is, 'Are you suggesting we go back to being hunter-gatherers?' "

"That of course is an inane idea," Ishmael said. "The Leaver life-

style isn't about hunting and gathering, it's about letting the rest of the community live—and agriculturalists can do that as well as hunter-gatherers."

He paused and shook his head. "What I've been at pains to give you is a new paradigm of human history. The Leaver life is not an antiquated thing that is 'back there' somewhere. Your task is not to reach back but to reach forward."

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There's also a segment about all Takers being 'imprisoned' in the Mother Culture which I feel is given short-shrift. Ishmael explains that there's a primary, most-prevalent prison industry among the Takers: consuming the world. Lip service is given to the fact that in the Taker "cultural prison," the white males are pretty much the upper-level in the cultural hierarchy.

This hierarchy must be eliminated. Little description is given on how to initiate this process, while so many other aspects of the Leaver cultures are given examples throughout the book. It's pretty much left to the reader to determine how to go about replacing this hierarchical structure; like Person's description of the farewell between he and Ishmael at the end of this chapter, this was unfulfilling.

BOOK THIRTEEN

Starting the next day, Person clears out all his bank accounts and savings, rents a moving van, and goes back to the carnival with the intention to purchase Ishmael from the carnival, only to learn that it has moved on. More than that, though, is that he learns from the carnival custodian--still on-site, cleaning up trash--that Ishmael had died of pneumonia.

Person gathers up the remaining possessions of Ishmael: some papers, his sketch pad (still with diagrams and notes used in explaining different lessons to Person), and the rolled up poster: "WITH MAN GONE, WILL THERE BE HOPE FOR GORILLA?" Person decides to frame the poster, and learns that it is actually double-sided. The opposite side reads, "**WITH GORILLA GONE, WILL THERE BE HOPE FOR MAN?**"

THE END.

FURTHER THOUGHTS

Reading in the future will include more works from Douglas Adams. While reading Ishmael, I remembered a segment from "The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy," which describes the playfulness and intelligence of dolphins, and how there were striking differences between them and humans (apart from the obvious physical ones). Something to the tune of "Humans felt that dolphins were ridiculous because, instead of working and bettering themselves, all they did was swim around and eat fish all day. Dolphins thought humans were ridiculous, for the exact opposite reason." I think next on the agenda is [So Long, And Thanks For All The Fish](#).

Cited in Ishmael is a book called [The Chalice and The Blade](#), which is mentioned in Book Twelve. I'll read that sometime soon, as well.

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