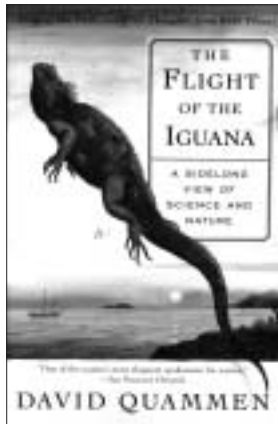


BOOK REVIEW

Quammen, D. 1988. *The Flight of the Iguana: A Sidelong View of Science and Nature*. Touchstone, New York, NY (1st Touchstone ed., 1998). Softcover, \$14.



How could I resist a title like *The Flight of the Iguana*? — in spite or maybe because of the fact that I had more than an inkling of the event to which that rather intriguing caption referred. I have for several years co-taught with a colleague, whose specialty is English literature, a course entitled “Darwin and Literature,” learning in the process much about the reciprocal influence between Darwin and the writers of

his and subsequent times. I also re-read much of Darwin’s own work, including the often delightful account of his voyage around the world — in which he tells of repeatedly throwing a Marine Iguana into the ocean, only to have it time and time again return to his very feet, only to repeat the process. Darwin concluded that these lizards were stupid, but Quammen, recounting his own experiences with the iguanas of the Galápagos Islands, preferred to “see them as recklessly, lavishly, forgivingly trustful.” How can you not like the person with that point of view?

Quammen also wrote *Song of the Dodo*, which everyone with even the vaguest interest in conservation, particularly of animals on islands, should read. Unlike that book, however, *The Flight of the Iguana* is a collection of 29 essays originally written for and published as monthly columns under the title “Natural Acts” for *Outside* magazine. Although the author notes that he always intended for these to be collected in a single volume, like most anthologies, this one is a bit uneven — despite prevalent themes that permeate the individual contributions. In the author’s own words, these are “the surprising intricacies of the natural world ... and the human attitudes toward those intricacies.”

The accounts of often “unpopular beasts” he has “gathered ... for [our] contemplation, are the natural and true-born practitioners of life on this planet, the legitimate scions of organic evolution, as surely as are the white-tail deer or the parakeet or the puppy. If we ourselves can fathom them only in the context of carnival canvas and hootchy-kootchy music, the problem is probably our own.” Those of us who sincerely like reptiles and are at least tolerant of strange invertebrates might initially be inclined to take umbrage at the characterization of “our” creatures as “unpopular,” but a moment’s consideration of how most of humanity sees these beasts will remind us that we’re the exception rather than the rule. Consequently, these evocatively written essays will appeal to us while simultaneously serving to educate those who are less enlightened.

Building on the theme of education, Quammen says that: “Facts are important to the appreciation of nature, because ‘appreciation’ without comprehension is often a shallow and

sentimental whim...” and “[n]ot to wax portentous, but it seems to me that nothing bears more crucially upon the future of this planet than the seemingly simple matter of human attitudes toward nature.”

Undoubtedly because of my own prejudices, I most enjoyed the essays that dealt with reptiles (even indirectly), with island biogeography (a topic particularly favored by Quammen), and Darwin, who appears not only as the “thrower” of iguanas but as the painstakingly precise investigator looking into the role played by the lowly earthworm and, on several occasions, in the context of other tales focusing on topics as diverse as carnivorous plants and bird-eating snakes. I smiled over “The Miracle of the Geese,” remembering when Canada Geese were uncommon and seeing or hearing them was a rare treat. I admit to a bit of wicked delight while reading the chapter on “Nasty Habits,” which is subtitled “an African bedbug buggers the proof-by-design.” I enjoyed the tale of the Hauff family museum devoted to ichthyosaurs, not just because of the topic, but because I could relate to the patience exhibited by Herr Hauff as he tried to impress on a group of young people the importance of the Poseidon Shales (Quammen gently describes Hauff’s effort as “struggling amiably toward a compromise with the attention span of his audience [and] the scientific complexity of his subject”). I was fascinated by the account of “Street Trees.” Did you realize that dog urine is “contributed to the environments of New York’s streets at the rate of roughly 22,000 gallons a day[?] Small wonder that the life expectancy of a tree in Manhattan is only seven years. It’s not easy being green in that place.”

Although equally well-written, often provocative, and, for the most part, consistent with the educational theme, I liked less the essays that focused more on humans and their attitudes than on animals. The essay on cryptozoologists and their fascination for anomalies known more from legend than reality was the weakest link in the entire volume. The account of a Russian icebreaker saving a pod of whales left me cold in spite of the warm-fuzzy outcome. Three essays with a desert theme stressed both the inhospitable environment and the political entanglements of the 1980s, when official U.S. policy toward refugees depended more on whether the government in the country of their origin was currently favored (= anti-Communist) than the very real persecution from which people were fleeing. I enjoyed them (maybe because they tended to reinforce my own political leanings), but believe that they may have detracted from the book’s principal focus. One notable exception to my aversion to stories that stressed the human element was a most enjoyable account of the author’s “Swamp Odyssey.”

Why do I believe that readers of the *Iguana Times* should read this book? In part, that belief merely reflects the desire to share something I enjoyed, but it’s also an educator’s admiration for a volume that entertains so effectively while it surreptitiously teaches. Besides, how can anyone not be enthralled by the eloquence of an author who almost seamlessly mixes accounts of Walt Whitman’s poetry, fruit-eating piranhas, Heraclitean philosophy, environmental sex determination, William Faulkner, okapis, and holes? Is it an “iguana book?” No. Is it a book for folks who like iguanas? Most assuredly.

Robert Powell