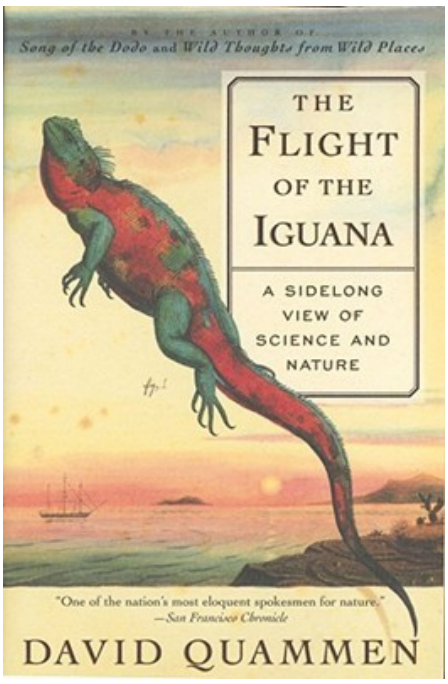

The Flight of the Iguana: A Sidelong View of Science and Nature

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From the award-winning author of *The Song of the Dodo* comes a collection of essays in which various weird and wonderful aspects of nature are examined. From tales of vegetarian piranha fish and voiceless dogs to the scientific search for the genes that threaten to destroy the cheetah, Quammen captures the natural world with precision. A distinguished natural science essayist, Quammen's reporting is masterful and thought provoking and his curiosity and fascination with the world of living things is infectious.

The Flight of the Iguana: A Sidelong View of Science and Nature Details

Date	:	Published February 16th 1998 by Scribner (first published 1988)
ISBN	:	9780684836263
Author	:	David Quammen
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From Reader Review The Flight of the Iguana: A Sidelong View of Science and Nature for online ebook

Jordan says

Fun, winding essays that beautifully mix the biological intricacies he's learned with the emotional parts of his life - particularly his mentors and friends.

Dale says

As I think I've mentioned in other reviews, I love the interesting parts of science. I don't have the discipline to grind through the boring parts and become an expert, but man do I enjoy dabbling. Quammen strikes me as a bit of a dabbler in science as well, while being a born writer, and that of course puts him solidly in my camp. This collection of essays actually belongs to my wife and she recommended it to me because, hey, she knows me pretty well. She suspected I would enjoy it, and she was absolutely right. The only strike against the book is that it includes two essays which are basically about the same thing, and that same thing is the crisis of El Salvadoran refugees seeking asylum in the U.S. who were often deported and then executed by death squads when they returned to El Salvador. Quammen ties this in to biology tangentially by talking about the ecology of the desert that many of these refugess/illegal immigrants cross through, but mostly it's his personal political axe getting a good grinding. And it's a worthy cause, it just seems out of place among the other essays on how cheetahs hunt and how black widows reproduce and so on.

I'm not sure how many other science-related books I'll be able to add to my "read" shelf alongside this one, but I'll give it a shot ...

Steven Williams says

This book is a collection of articles written by David Quammen for *Outside* magazine. All these articles seem to have a moral point to them. He divides the book into five sections, and while they do tend have a theme, they are somewhat fluid. Therefore, I will not attempt to key you in on their content.

One thing I can say about the book is that Quammen is a very good writer, hence I found pleasure in reading the book. There were some tidbits that I found intriguing, but fail to keep any notes on them. While I did enjoy the book, I found it nowhere near as good as his book *Spillover* on zoonoses.

What I think makes Quammen a good writer is he was trained in journalism, which for science means that a writer will get hers or his science second hand.* This is not really all that bad because scientists who become writers for the general public rarely stick to what they themselves have research. Maybe they have more skill at evaluating and interpreting actual research, but this does not precluded a person not trained in scientific research from understanding research at all. Of course, most scientists are not interested in writing for the general public, but those that do tend to be able to communicate fairly well, and some of them are very good indeed, such as Richard Dawkins. I think another plus for Quammen is he immerses himself physically in what he writing about. Most of the articles in the book (maybe all) featured him being in some location or another. He did this as well for *Spillover* visiting places where diseases like SARS and Ebola occur.

So, my recommendation would be for those interested in nature writing, and also for those that are interested in what nature could or should mean in a person's life.

* For more on second hand knowledge see my blog "Are You Sure?" @ https://aquestionersjourney.wordpress...

Deborah Mantle says

It was spattered with small, orange spots of damp and priced at 780 yen. Not cheap for a second hand book. And yet, in that used books shop in Kyoto, Green e Books, there was something that stopped me from putting 'The Flight of the Iguana' back on the shelf.

The title was intriguing. How could an iguana fly? Why would it even try? But there on the cover was an iguana, rich in red and green detail, set against an exotic sunset as if captured in mid-flight. And then there was the subtitle: 'A Sidelong View of Science and Nature'. Why sidelong? To see things differently or doubtfully? The blurb on the back of the book described the author, David Quammen, as wise, witty and insightful. I needed some wisdom and wit and insight.

I bought the book and I'm glad I did. It was my first reading experience of modern natural history writing, of the possibilities of nature writing.

Quammen sets out his aims for the book in the introduction. He wants to provide intimate, intricate portraits of nature and raise 'questions about our relations with nature and with each other'. The book contains twenty-nine essays that range far, wide and sometimes circuitously across land and sea, over time and in subject matter. In no other book had I come across a suggestion to make eye contact with a black widow spider, to consider cross-species communication, definitions of personhood and the reactions of beluga whales to classical music, to ponder the life of a lone, urban street tree and, of course, why Charles Darwin would hurl an iguana into the sea, not once but repeatedly.

Quammen's writing has an effortless, conversational style. It's writing about nature that's sensuous and swampy, perceptive and irreverent, factual and opinionated, personal and universal. Quammen offers not so much a sidelong view of nature but a full-on, familiar, feet of scorpion, stomach of starfish view. Through the varied essays, he urges the reader to pay attention to nature, to appreciate and understand, to look closer and think more deeply. As he writes, 'it's the little things that turn the world inside out'.

Reading 'The Flight of the Iguana' for the first time may not have turned my world completely inside out, but it inspired me to search out more of Quammen's books, as well as those of other nature writers. Most importantly, it showed me the power of great nature writing.

Emma Burlingame says

I loved this book. The information it contains is a little dated, but I think Quammen's references to the Cold War and Salvadoran Civil War are still important to reflect on today, and as long as you're not expecting to read about cutting edge scientific research there's really no value lost. I really enjoyed the way Quammen

used history , philosophy, and personal anecdotes to contextualize his meditations on nature and the way human beings interact with it.

Cheryl says

Welp. I wound up reading most of this, but the pretentiousness of the author is maddening and the science is both minimal and dated. Very much a disappointment. I was able to find his essay 'Has Success Spoiled the Crow?' online (in re' which I first heard of him) so now I'm done. Otoh, others' opinions will certainly vary.

Bryce Holt says

"Spillover," a book about modern zoonotic diseases, was easily one of the top three books I read last year. It prompted me to pick up another 4 books by Quammen, and I'm glad I did. I started with "The Flight of the Iguana" out of those for exactly for this reason...it was his earliest stories, and therefore, the one I was most likely to be disappointed by. "Spillover" (published, I think, in 2012) and "Flight of the Iguana" (1988) are seemingly written by two different authors, and that's a good thing because David Quammen is truly at the top of his game still. That's not to say that "Iguana" isn't a very interesting and thought-provoking book. It is! But the writer at the helm is comparatively at the beginning of his career, and you can tell that immediately. The same can be said by almost any author...Stephen King, Bill Bryson, Geraldine Brooks, Billy Collins...the list goes on. I like to read an author's early work because it shows the promise of the author before they've worked all the kinks out, you know?

That's what "Iguana" is. It's a brilliant man finding his way through the quagmire of thought, focus, attention to detail (sometimes...sometimes he's too focused on detail). His subject matters tend to drift, as do his interests. But the promise of greatness is there, through and through. Perhaps that's why he's still a top writer at National Geographic all these years later.

Another thing that ratchets down the score is that this has a lot of the late-80's National Geographic guilt embedded into it. There was a whole lot of "people are horrible and the environment is suffering for us." Nobody is questioning that, but there was also a whole lot of nobody is doing anything about it. Well, I do believe that sentiment has changed quite a lot (probably not enough to make a difference at this point, but that's for another day). There is more optimism, but it's quite the Debby Downer in places.

Read it, but then read Quammen's later work. Powerful stuff.

Colby says

I had the opportunity to see a panel discussion at the National Geographic Museum about something or other of which David Quammen. was one of five guest speakers. I had no idea who he was. But when he was asked something about his method for gathering information on a story, he sited some assignment to a backwater jungle town and said, "I showed up with two bottles of Johnny walker and a notebook. And that was it." I decided I should check him out. This book is collection of his writings for Outside magazine in the 80s mostly focused on natural science, ethnography, and evolution. While science writing can easily become outdated, his style and humor are still really enlightening and engaging. Furthermore, science journalism can

be sterile and distant, but with his personal anecdotes it, well, kind of transcends that (i.e. navigating the moral implications of squashing a black widow by first looking it in the eyesss and then deciding it's fate). A thorough science journalist drinks Johnny Walker and writes about the natural world, that about sums it up.

John Taylor says

A passionate dive into the world of natural history, nature, and the proverbial human condition. Readers are treated to incredibly described landscapes both foreign and domestic where we meet creatures great and small whom impact the world we inhabit.

Tonti Riyad says

David Quammen is the kind of science writer I aspire to be. How u write so eloquent so witty???

ClareT says

This is a collection of natural science writing from David Quammen which I believe were originally written for a newspaper column. Each chapter has a different topic and all can be read on their own. There are many different topics within the book, from why do dogs bark when wolves don't to why did the Iguana that Darwin kept throwing into the sea keep coming back out again?
Overall a really interesting read that made me think about nature in a different way. Once more the author makes some interesting points but writes in a very engaging way.

Pat Cummings says

Imagine a moment in the history of ideas: A young man stands on the corner of a tropical island, throwing an oversized lizard into the sea.

> The lizard swims back to shore. The young man follows this animal,… catches it by its long muscular tail, and throws it back again into the sea… Always the lizard swims straight back to that same stretch of rocky shoreline where the young man waits to catch it again, throw it again. The lizard is a strong swimmer but seems stubbornly disinclined to try to escape through the water. The young man takes note of that fact and, despite his homesickness, wonders why.

The young man is Charles Darwin, approaching the end of his trip to the Galapagos Islands. The lizard is the Galapagos marine iguana, an animal adapted to swimming and feeding in the sea. Darwin spent the better part of a day repeatedly tossing the lizard into the sea, asking himself, “Why does it continue to return to me on the shore, when it has the ability to escape by water?”

> The nature of this lizard’s food, as well as the structure of its tail and feet, and the fact of its having been seen voluntarily swimming out at sea, absolutely prove its aquatic habits; yet there

> is in this respect one strange anomaly... they will sooner allow a person to catch hold of their tails than jump into the water… Perhaps this singular piece of apparent stupidity may be accounted for by the circumstance, that this reptile has no enemy whatever on shore, whereas at sea it must often fall a prey to the numerous sharks. Hence, probably, urged by a fixed and hereditary instinct that the shore is its place of safety, whatever the emergency may be, it there takes refuge. —Charles Darwin, Voyage of the Beagle, Ch. 17.

We know all about The Beagle, all about giant tortoises and finches and the theory they spawned in Darwin's mind. But this tale of the tossed lizard, which Darwin recounted in ***The Voyage of the Beagle,*** is rarely mentioned.

David Quammen, visiting the Galapagos himself, explores in his essay *The Flight of the Iguana* what the later-famous theorist was like at the time: boundlessly curious, unsentimental about nature, doggedly systematic, "and yet in some measure still just a wealthy young remittance-man off on a round-the-world lark." In addition to these insights into Darwin's development as an observer and scientist, Quammen gives us his own picture of the application of Darwin's theories to island ecologies.

The Flight of the Iguana is just one of a collection of essays (most from **Outside** magazine). Many of them espouse Quammen's concept of the "fragile island" that supports diversity, and the impact of "island ecologies"—and their fragility—on evolution, extinction and the richness of living things on Earth.

Even with Quammen's perspective and bias in mind, each essay is enjoyable on its own; collected in one volume, they sound a warning for those complacent that we are "saving enough". If Quammen is correct that the islands are more fragile than we think, where will a future Darwin observe the variation to inform his inspiration?

Jason Mills says

I read this as my commuting book, and it's a measure of its stimulating qualities that it actually made me look forward to getting the bus to work!

Quammen writes great natural history, but his particular schtick lies in writing *around* the topic. His essays are steeped in anecdote, humour and travelogue. He has things to say beyond, but deriving from, the immediate subject. Discussing Darwin's lifelong obsession with earthworms, he remarks:

> It is equally essential that some people *do* think about earthworms, at least sometimes, as it is that *not everyone* does. It is essential not for the worms' sake but for our own.

- and from there launches into meditations on how television flattens diversity by making us all think about the *same* thing at the same time.

Most of these essays display this muscular wrangling of themes. They are well-structured affairs, focussed and smart, always interesting, sometimes emotional. Quammen, a journalist rather than a scientist, is very much an outdoorsman, an observer of people and nature who likes to get sweaty and dirty; and he takes us with him on his various journeys. Here we join him camping in the filthy, bug-infested Okefenokee Swamp:

> "Who would like wine?" said Crawfish.
> "Yes, yes, yes!"
> It was a pert but amusing Chablis in a large plastic jug bearing a label that read ANTIVENIN.

I was not so happy with a section dealing with the refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala arriving in the US (this collection dates from the '80s): the writing was as strong as ever, and Quammen's compassion and concern is well justified; but the subject is awkwardly adrift from the rest of the book, despite his seeking ecological material in it.

But this is a minor cavil. If you're interested in science, or enjoy humour, or like to learn about new places, Quammen's your man. You know you're going to enjoy a book with a first line like this:

> One evening a few years ago I walked back into my office after dinner and found roughly a hundred black widow spiders frolicking on my desk.

Liv says

Oh, friend I am home in these words. A number of short ... not essays. Not articles. Not stories. Somewhere in between that swirled together with poetry. All on things biological. An encounter with a spider. The mystery of okapi: the biggest mammal you've never heard of. The harshness and vulnerability of the desert as a metaphor for the suffering and resilience of an immigration crisis. Three old soldierfriends reuniting to canoe through strange waters.

I will gush to no end about Tom Robbins' writing style. This man, this David Quammen, he writes like Robbins, he writes like ice cream and it tastes GOOD, kids. And he writes on naturalism, and I am so fucking excited that I accidentally bought another of his books awhile ago. I based that purchase on 3 things: $1.99 purchase price (thank you Value Village for indulging me), the title: Natural Acts, and randomly flipping to a chapter to find a subtitle: (Love's Matyrs): The Metaphysical Poetry of Semelparity.

THE METAPHYSICAL POETRY OF SEMELPARITY. Do I know offhand what those words mean*? The implications? NO. No I do not but I know that the syllables are harmonics for sumthin three feet under the surface of soul. Say it five times fast:

the metaphysical poetry of semelparity
the metaphysical poetry of semelparity
the metaphysical poetry of semelparity
the metaphysical poetry of semelparity
the metaphysical poetry of semelparity

Now I hope you understand.

"Flight of the Iguana" comes from an annecdote about Darwin repeatedly throwing an aquatic iguana into the ocean to see what it would do. It swam back, and promptly got tossed again. The short lil' chapters are addictive to read through in exactly the same way.

Chriss says

It was alright. I was looking more for a book about nature and this book is more about the author musing about stuff with an animal theme. The first two or three were entertaining, but then it just became a laborious read. Maybe because the material is a bit dated and so the author is musing on things that are currently a bit off-topic. *shrug*