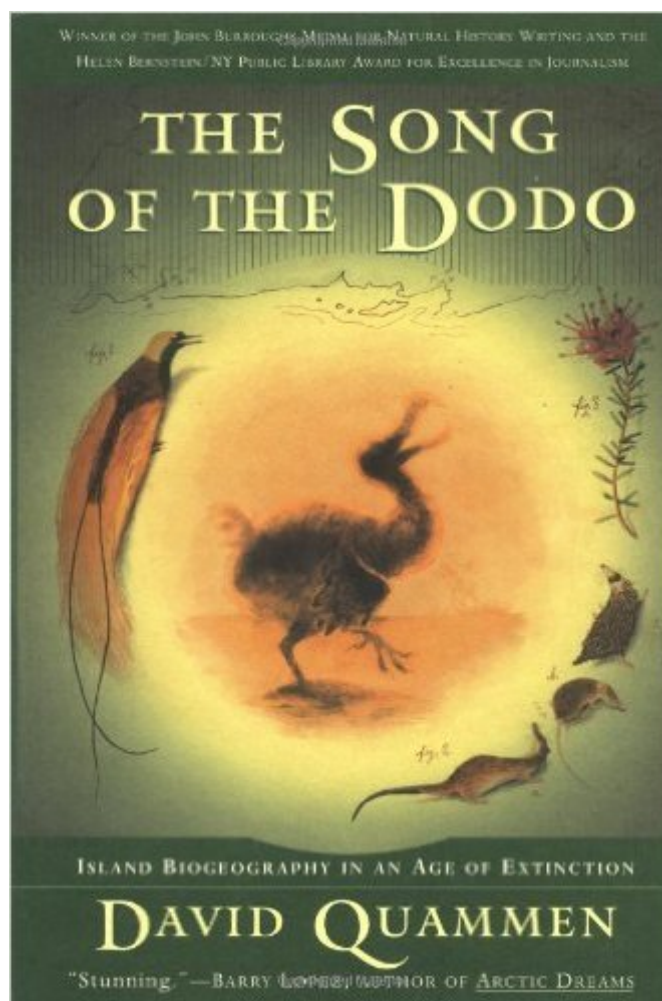


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The Song Of The Dodo: Island Biogeography In An Age Of Extinction



Synopsis

David Quammen's book, *The Song of the Dodo*, is a brilliant, stirring work, breathtaking in its scope, far-reaching in its message -- a crucial book in precarious times, which radically alters the way in which we understand the natural world and our place in that world. It's also a book full of entertainment and wonders. In *The Song of the Dodo*, we follow Quammen's keen intellect through the ideas, theories, and experiments of prominent naturalists of the last two centuries. We trail after him as he travels the world, tracking the subject of island biogeography, which encompasses nothing less than the study of the origin and extinction of all species. Why is this island idea so important? Because islands are where species most commonly go extinct -- and because, as Quammen points out, we live in an age when all of Earth's landscapes are being chopped into island-like fragments by human activity. Through his eyes, we glimpse the nature of evolution and extinction, and in so doing come to understand the monumental diversity of our planet, and the importance of preserving its wild landscapes, animals, and plants. We also meet some fascinating human characters. By the book's end we are wiser, and more deeply concerned, but Quammen leaves us with a message of excitement and hope.

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Customer Reviews

The Song of the Dodo is a very long book on what some of us believe to be a vitally important subject, the ongoing loss of worldwide biodiversity. Anyone interested in the fate of the world's wild creatures and yes, the fate of the world itself should read it and will likely enjoy it. David Quammen does an exemplary job of leading his readers through almost two centuries of significant ideas and

debates related to "island biogeography," a subject which is a lot more interesting and certainly a lot more significant than it might sound. Beginning with the fascinating story of the Darwin vs. Wallace story vis-a-vis "who really came up with the theory of evolution first?" Quammen goes on to explain and illustrate just why the biogeography of islands is so important to any consideration of biodiversity and wildlife conservation for the world as a whole. In weaving this historical narrative, Quammen doesn't just encapsulate theories (though he does this in some detail), he takes his reader into the field where the sometimes abstract principles behind diversity/rarity/extinction are actually demonstrated through the predicaments faced by various creatures. Quammen ventures to the Aru Islands, the Galapagos, Madagascar, Guam, Tasmania, Mauritius, Barro Colorado Island in Panama, the rain forest, and on and on. It's a veritable world tour of places where rare and endangered animals struggle for existence in a world where human encroachment is causing an alarming acceleration in the rate of species extinction. Through his mostly fascinating discussion of places, species, and biogeographical theories and the people behind those theories, Quammen shows an unusual ability to restate abstruse ideas in clear and understandable terms. He also writes with humor, a gentle and humane world-view, and an excellent eye for empirical detail. For me, the most painful chapter was "Rarity Unto Death," in which he recounts selected stories revealing how various animals (and peoples) have been lost to extinction. The discussions of the extinction of the dodo and other wild creatures are terribly sad; the horrifying tale of the demise of the Tasmanian aborigines is heart-rending and infuriating. In the end, Quammen's workmanlike effort establishes a "big picture" demonstrating how small, isolated ecosystems render their wild inhabitants increasingly vulnerable to extinction. We come to see that the biological notion of "islands" applies increasingly not just to small land bodies surrounded by water, but to more and more of our continental ecosystems as they are carved up into isolated pockets of habitat through human encroachment and development. Indeed, increasingly, the world's ecosystems are composed of various kinds of "islands," a situation that threatens to result in catastrophic losses of biodiversity over time. That the situation is not entirely hopeless for all creatures is shown by the remarkable, human-aided recovery of the Mauritius kestrel, rescued in recent years from the very brink of extinction. But certainly the message overall delivered by Quammen is not a comforting or upbeat one. In a book of this length and scope, there inevitably will be sections that particular readers may not like. I found the chapter on theorists McArthur and Wilson a bit pedantic and boring in places, partly due to the very abstruse nature of their mathematical theories. However, it also irked me a bit that Quammen took such an awe-filled, uncritical attitude here, particularly in his worshipful presentation of his audience with the Great Man, Edward O. Wilson. Wilson is a towering figure in the history of biology and biogeography,

certainly but a few words of criticism might have been in order here. Yes, the leftist activists of the mid-seventies were out of line in pouring water on Wilson's head at a scientific meeting and their accusations toward him vis-a-vis his theories of sociobiology were shrill and excessive. But the truth is that some of Wilson's human-related "speculations" in the final chapter of his book on sociobiology *were* overreaching, inappropriate, and yes, foolish, and he deserved some of the criticism he received. In providing a discussion of the furor raised by the mathematical grand theorizing proposed by MacArthur and Wilson and other scientists beginning in the sixties, Quammen also could have pointed out that the often emotional debate over "mathematical modeling" vs. "detailed, real world empirical research" took place (and in some ways, continues) not just in the biological sciences but in a large number of academic fields. Whereas it's easy to dismiss extremist critics of truly useful mathematical models as narrow-minded or antediluvian, the proliferation of derivative, marginal, and in some cases, fairly useless "quantitative models" has at times threatened to eviscerate various fields of study, emptying them of virtually all attention to empirical detail and rendering them arid and lifeless. I also was just a tad disappointed in the book's final section, where Quammen pays all too short shrift, in my view, to the question of "so what?" as it relates to the ongoing loss of world biodiversity. He makes the point that human encroachment is creating mass extinctions, but really doesn't drive home his thoughts as to why urban dwellers with no plans to visit the rainforest or the Galapagos should really care. I guess to Quammen the tragedy represented by this trend is self-evident, but what's really frightening to some of us is just how easy it is for people to live out their lives without ever having to give a darn about these broad, long-term issues of biodiversity. The question, "Why should people care?" needed at least a bit more attention, I think. Overall, however, this is a fine, readable, well-crafted, and wonderful book. I salute David Quammen for his accomplishment.

Over a couple of cold ones at the local pub, the good doctor and I burst out simultaneously: "I found this incredible book! You've got to read it!" It was, of course, Quammen. That's the kind of reaction this writer generates. His prose seizes your attention as he gently leads you into deserts, mountainous jungles, riverside woodlands and isolated islands in the Pacific. His quiet courage forces you to remind yourself that he's not gleaning his information from the vast list of sources in the back of this book, but from the researchers in the field. And he's right there with them as he relates their stories to him for you. Quammen writes books you want to carry around, waving at people, urging them to enjoy the superior writing and the critical message. It's all about our survival. Quammen's resurrection of Alfred Russell Wallace was long overdue. Others have tried to

bring this figure back into common knowledge, but the revival was either to accuse Darwin of plagiarism or taint Wallace's accomplishments with the flaws of penury and spiritualism. Quammen handles him as a total human being who achieved through inspiration in a delirium, what Darwin took two decades to accomplish. Quammen doesn't need to balance the two, he's more concerned with explaining the concepts in ways we can understand. It's Quammen's ability to make you feel you are accompanying him on his quest to see how Nature that places him far above other science writers. He understands the issues, recognizes the value of the research being done and presents the methods and events alike with unblemished clarity. As a writer concerned with the impact of humanity on the world's environment, Quammen exhibits a unique talent. While the ongoing extinction of species remains the central issue of this book, Quammen is able to show how dedicated researchers given support from concerned and caring people can begin to slow that eradication of our fellow species. Quammen's concern doesn't translate into alarmist rhetoric. He calls to us softly but urgently: "There's work to be done. There's people out there doing it. Help them how you can. They're our symbol of hope."

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