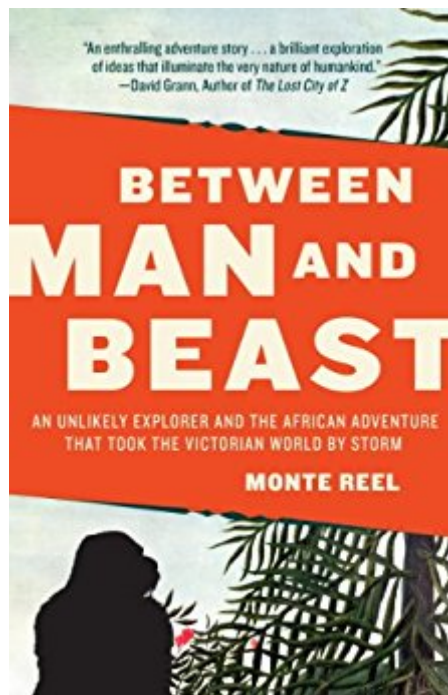


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Between Man And Beast: An Unlikely Explorer And The African Adventure The Victorian World By Storm



Synopsis

In 1856, Paul Du Chaillu ventured into the African jungle in search of a mythic beast, the gorilla. After wild encounters with vicious cannibals, deadly snakes, and tribal kings, Du Chaillu emerged with 20 preserved gorilla skins—two of which were stuffed and brought on tour—and walked smack dab into the biggest scientific debate of the time: Darwin's theory of evolution. Quickly, Du Chaillu's trophies went from objects of wonder to key pieces in an all-out intellectual war. With a wide range of characters, including Abraham Lincoln, Arthur Conan Doyle, P.T. Barnum, Thackeray, and of course, Charles Darwin, this is a one of a kind book about a singular moment in history.

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Customer Reviews

Paul Du Chaillu was the first explorer to encounter the gorilla, and he killed most the animals that he encountered. As pointed out by the author, exploration and hunting were enmeshed. Specimens were killed and stuffed, drawn, sent to museums. During his travels Paul also encountered the famous Fang tribes who were known as cannibals. He was, however, well treated by that tribe.

Members of the tribe shared that Europeans were regarded as cannibals, why else would they arrive "from nobody knows where.", captures men, women, and children, and depart. What else was the purpose but cannibalism. In the states, his talks and exhibits were eagerly consumed. To me the backstory, complete with competing theories about the discoveries, is the most cogent part of the book. Darwin with evolution and Owens with intelligent design, competed to explain the mysteries. Africa had been nearly impenetrable, and I believe the continent has been mostly the worst for those who penetrated it. Expeditions entered the continent to take what they sought, and Paul's policy of shooting to kill hasn't varied all that much. The terror of the explorations does make for good reading, and the author generally sees the feckless, more innocent side of Du Chaillu. Most of what he thought about gorillas of course was found untrue. They are generally isolative, vegetarian animals, now almost closed out of their habitats. The book gives a good basis of the start of the evolution- intelligent design debate that continues today for many people. This is a book with much to offer.

Is this a non fiction book that reads like fiction? Yes and no. There was plenty of history, but it could have been presented with a little more panache. If you have read my reviews, you know that this style of writing is my favorite genre...but don't do it half way. I liked this book, however it could have been written in a way that would have resulted in many nail-biting chapter endings. Monte Reel, you were so close to perfection! You have a 5' 3" unknown explorer who had the guts to stand up to a furious gorilla charge as your main character. According to your own research, the first white man to encounter this highly debatable relative of man is Paul Du Chaillu. You wrote an interesting tale, but you had the wherewithal at your fingertips to tell it in a more intoxicating style. This explorer, Paul Du Chaillu, in 2013 is practically incognito. Nobody in the mid to late 1800s understood who he was, just imagine what today's students know about Du Chaillu. Nothing! I see a book that could have been written with more flare and page turning capabilities. Okay, enough said, it was still a reasonable success. This is the story of Paul Du Chaillu of dubious parentage being brought up by the missionaries' John and Jane Wilson in Gabon, West Africa. Eventually, Wilson gets Du Chaillu a job as a French teacher in Carmel, NY. Once in America, Du Chaillu's African stories get to John Cassin, head of Philadelphia's Academy of Natural Sciences. Paul earns a paid expedition back to Africa to find and send back specimens of unknown animals and birds. He sends back many stuffed specimens over the next three years, but becomes famous for being the first white man to encounter a gorilla. Once back in America, Paul finds that there is little interest in his findings, and The Academy of Natural Sciences refuses to reimburse his expedition expenses. When Paul tries to

display his gorilla skins in NYC, he is out maneuvered by P.T. Barnum's Broadway museum. Monte Reel's prose had this reviewer rooting hard for this would be explorer with no credentials. During this time period, Charles Darwin's 'On the Origin of Species' is published in England, sparking debates pro and con. Suddenly Paul's encounter with gorillas becomes meaningful. Richard Owen, superintendent of all the natural history collections at the British Museum, invites Paul to England to "show and tell" his African expedition experiences. Guess what? England loves him! Since Paul isn't a "educated" explorer, he has his backers and attackers. Stories are written about him by the great Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray in their respective magazines. All is good! Not. Here comes the attack on his story and qualifications by England's zoological society's head, John Gray, and a jealous retired explorer, Charles Waterton. Ladies and gentleman, let the gorilla wars begin! This is where the novel gets intriguing and the ensuing chapters magnetic. I haven't read Reel's first book, 'The Last of the Tribe', but I have to say that Monte Reel has the knack for writing novels about uncommon subjects that are irreproachably researched. My only criticism is his occasional lack of verve. If you don't know what I mean, read Robert Klara's 'FDR's Funeral Train', Candice Millard's 'Destiny of the Republic', or Erik Larson's 'The Devil in the White City'. Nonetheless, I thoroughly enjoyed this book, and profoundly endorse Monte Reel's latest book.

This is a fascinating biography of a man who is now all but forgotten, but it's also a look at a very interesting point in history. The life and times of Paul du Chaillu are presented in the context of the Victorian scientific (and religious) debate surrounding the theory of evolution and the discovery of gorillas, which ignited a frenzy of excitement and unease concerning humanity's place in the world. For the most part, this book moves along quickly and smoothly, but there are some chapters that seem a bit out of place. Whenever P.T. Barnum's story comes in, the momentum of the larger story grinds to a halt. Barnum no doubt had an endlessly fascinating career, but he played very little part in the story at hand and it's difficult to see why there are entire chapters devoted to him. The rest of the book is so enjoyable that that's really a minor quibble. After all, says a lot that the least engaging portions of the book concern P.T. Barnum. This is a fascinating look at the way Victorian society handled scientific discoveries that were, to many, so extremely unsettling that the "debate" and unease surrounding the topic has not yet died down (at least in the U.S.). The past is often easier to analyze than the present, and this story offers a look at the reasons why even a society that considers itself enlightened can struggle with accepting facts that stir up uncomfortable feelings.

This was an interesting, if at times tedious, overview of one of the largely forgotten expeditions of the Victorian age. At times, the author overwhelms the reader with an almost endless list of scientists, freak show hucksters, politicians, and other characters, most of whom play an ancillary role to the story itself. What can be appreciated was the central intrigue of the book for me, that there was a time, not so very long ago, when the world seemed a much, much larger place than it does now. I am also interested in the scientific and cultural achievements of the Victorian age. This book is an interesting study of one of those achievements, and the man responsible for it.

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