



The Wild Life of Our Bodies: Predators, Parasites, and Partners That Shape Who We Are Today

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“An extraordinary book.... With clarity and charm [Dunn] takes the reader into the overlap of medicine, ecology, and evolutionary biology to reveal an important domain of the human condition.” —Edward O. Wilson, author of *Anthill* and *The Future of Life*

Biologist Rob Dunn reveals the crucial influence that other species have upon our health, our well-being, and our world in *The Wild Life of Our Bodies*—a fascinating tour through the hidden truths of nature and codependence. Dunn illuminates the nuanced, often imperceptible relationships that exist between homo sapiens and other species, relationships that underpin humanity’s ability to thrive and prosper in every circumstance. Readers of Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* will be enthralled by Dunn’s powerful, lucid exploration of the role that humankind plays within the greater web of life on Earth.

The Wild Life of Our Bodies: Predators, Parasites, and Partners That Shape Who We Are Today Details

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Eric Rasmussen says

This book had a few "wow" moments, where I had to get up and tell my wife and family about the amazing insights delivered in this book. Those moments are what keep me coming back to nonfiction, what I live for in reading. Unfortunately, the few wow moments (parasites and autoimmune disease) were more than overbalanced by the shakier theories (loss of predators and modern anxiety issues?) and the rehashing of popular health ideas (good gut bacteria and its necessity). While all of that may be excusable, the author's attempts to add drama were nerve-grating - another reviewer likened the tone to a cable-channel documentary, and that's exactly what this book is, replete with the repetition and an overdramatic narrator - you can almost here the over-the-top orchestral soundtrack that accompanies everything on the History channel. For a casual reader, a great read. For those more familiar with the genre, there may be better options.

gabrielle says

This book is, in essence, about what it means to be human: "...our bodies and lives only make sense in the context of other species."

It completely blew me away. (I am going to buy it next time I'm at Powell's, and I'm a die-hard library user.)

Unlike Dunn's other book (*Every Living Thing*), which I also loved, you do not have to be a biologist or even a scientist to maximize your enjoyment here. *The Wild Life* is much more accessible to the layperson. I'm recommending it to pretty much everyone. (Yes, even you.) There are lots of amazing new ideas here, and new research for those of you that don't keep up with the latest (like, our appendix actually has a purpose!)

I love Dunn's writing style. He roams seemingly all over, and you're like "dude where are you going with this" but he brings the topics neatly back to his original point, so you don't feel lost for long. I picture him teaching, scrawling all over every available whiteboard, and drawing arrows back to previous topics with an "and so!" flourish of the marker.

I also think it'd be great to go out to the pub with him and listen to some of these stories. ("Hey, I did *not* need to know the thing about lice in the eyelashes! Ew!" "I know, right!")

Mary Ronan Drew says

Joel Weinstock was flying somewhere over New York or Pennsylvania when he got his crazy idea. He had been studying intestinal parasites. That day he began reading about Crohn's Disease. Why, he wondered, did people who had intestinal worms not have Crohn's and people who had Crohn's never have intestinal parasites? Could it be that worms prevented Crohn's? Naw. Impossible.

But he couldn't get the idea out of his head. In the 1940s half of American children had worms. In 1980 there were something like 10 times more people with Crohn's than in 1940. This is a pretty strong correlation. Weinstock decided to see what happened when he gave whip worm eggs to people with inflammatory intestinal disease.

In March of 1999 29 well-informed and consenting patients were given Gatorade laced with whipworm eggs. And by week 24 of the study all but one of the patients were doing better and 22 of the remaining 25 (some, understandably, dropped out of the study) were in remission. These were patients with serious and untreatable Crohn's. And having worms made them healthier.

Deborah Wade had an exceedingly bad case of Crohn's disease. She read about Weinstock's experiment and in 2007 she decided she wanted to try the worm treatment. So she found someone (a non-MD in an unlicensed Mexican clinic) who would give her a drink of worms. "The endeavor felt more like adopting a pet than modern medicine - a long, translucent, sucker-mouthed companion animal."

Deborah Wade is not cured, but she is better. And so are other people with autoimmune diseases who have been treated with worms. Why would "rewilding" your body, as the author calls it, keep autoimmune disease under control? How does it work? They aren't really sure but it has something to do with cells produced by chronic worm infestation that help to tamp down the excessive reactions of Lupus and asthma and Crohn's.

This is just one of the dozens of puzzling and sometimes alarming stories Rob Dunn tells in his amusing book about The Predators, Parasites, and Partners That Shape Who We Are Today. The author offers some convincing explanations for how cows domesticated humans, how lice and fleas made us naked, and the exceedingly useful role of our appendix.

Most of us who are primarily readers of fiction, ex-English majors, literature junkies, are distressingly ignorant about science. This makes reading popular science written by people like Dunn and Natalie Angier so entertaining. So much is going on out there in the world of botany and astronomy and ecology. Books like The Wild Life of Our Bodies begin to give us a hint of how much we are missing.

Read Rob Dunn's blog here: <http://www.yourwildlife.org/>

Chris says

Other reviews mirror many of my thoughts - I really wished the final chapter was fleshed out into two or more chapters. And for some reason I had this idea that the author was going to promote the idea of having our cities be wild to the extent that predators would be let loose there. I kept hoping to read about that somewhere in the last chapter, but I must have missed it.

Don't get me wrong, the other stuff about the evolution of mankind from H&G to Agricultural to our post-agricultural age; yet all the while living with all the rest of nature around us. Yet now we are trying to eradicate all that nature. However, what we have done is eradicate the beneficial parts of nature, leaving only the hardiest of pests behind - rats, cockroaches, bedbugs to name a few.

Another really cool bit was that humans are a cliff-dwelling species, so we have created huge ecologies of cliffs (cities) - and that many many of the species joining us in these modern cliff ecologies are also originally cliff creatures too - Dandelions, Norway rats, German cockroaches bedbugs, pigeons, starlings, earthworms, and even some domesticated species like goats, guinea pigs, almonds, carrots, and wheat. This was in the final chapter - I wanted to hear more of this stuff too.

Finally, I'll end this with a link to a web page that has some designs for urban farms, 3-D farms.
<http://weburbanist.com/2008/03/30/5-u...>

Jenny Brown says

The subject matter of this book is extremely interesting. Unfortunately, the author dumbed down his text to the level of a cable channel documentary so that you won't learn very much actual science from reading the book.

He gives many pages to long, detailed accounts of human interest anecdotes that don't contribute anything to our understanding of his topic--for example, the discovery of an early hominid fossil or one patient's trip to Mexico to get a treatment based on a theory he discusses. The fossil doesn't have anything to do with parasitology and the author has no idea whether the patient's treatment helped in any way. The pages given to describing the search for the treatment seemed to me to be filler.

Or, more likely, what happens when you turn the script for a made-for-TV documentary into a book. The author seems to think his readers are too dumb to have anything described in terms that would explain the actual science involved and that our only interest is in anecdotal material of the kind that is accompanied by woo-woo music.

Too bad. Good germs, Bad Germs, an excellent book published some years ago did a much better job of exploring this topic. I had hoped to learn of developments since that book came out, but I'm halfway through this book and I keep expecting the text to be interrupted by a commercial for some product medicare will pay for, or a company claiming it can help me fend off the IRS.

NOTE: I finished this book and dropped the rating a star as the second half was more vague and inane than the first. There was enough real material here for a brief magazine article. As a book it's a waste of time unless you don't know anything about ecology.

Greg says

Similar to the New Germ theory of disease in many aspects, the book argues not only that there are many diseases caused by either pathogens, or the lack of them, but that many other aspects of humanity, such as colour vision and xenophobia were fixed in us because of predators or pathogens. Often, he makes a good

case, but there is a tendency to jump on any crank suggestion and shout "ooh, this could be true, we should sow it is wrong before dismissing it", which might be technically true, but in reality there are so many possible crank explanations of everything, that it is on the proponents to gather the evidence in favour. Another issue I had was his pushing of a viral cause for cancer. This is well known in some epithelial cancers, such as those caused by HPV, but in most others, the evidence is limited at best, but he made it sound as though it was extremely strong and it is only scientists, showing the same reticence to new ideas that they did when the viral cause theory was. In reality, though it was ignored for a time, it later became a major field of study, but people just did not find it then, and it was dropped.

Steven Williams says

This book examines what are lives are like without the various species we evolved with. In a lot of cases we face issues we never had to face with them. There are plenty of things to think about when reading this book.

After an introduction in part one, part two explores why we might be afflicted with Crohn's Disease and other auto-immune diseases in the developed world, but not in other parts of the world. The answer very well might be that we in the modern world with its cleanliness and health care are missing the worms that infect the rest less fortunate part of the world. Less fortunate in the sense that they live without what we have come to rely on and aspect. If we factor in their lack of Crohn's Disease and its like, the matter might not seem so clear. One scientist wondered about our lack of worms, and if it could be responsible for these diseases. In an actual clinical trial Crohn's patient were given a benign species of hookworms, and most of those given the worms either improved or went in to remission. The reason that auto-immune diseases are prevalent might be that without the worms in our bodies for the immune system to fight it attacks our own bodies. Of course, there is a lot more research needed to provide that direct link. It's possible that there could be alternative explanations, or it might be only a part of the explanation.

The next part covers the trillions of bacteria that live in and on us. Research has shown that a lot of the bacteria in our guts are beneficial. These bacteria help us digest fiber and play a role in our immune system. Other research has shown a correlation between low fiber diets and colon cancer. The appendix is discussed as being a beneficial organ, long thought to be a relic and useless. Studies have shown that a particular antibody we have actually benefits good bacteria in our appendix. In the developing world where the incidence of appendicitis is rare the appendix replenishes their guts with the good bacteria that live in the appendix after a bout with common diarrheal diseases. Without the need to repopulate our guts in the developed world the appendix can become blotted and rupture, sending the bacteria into the body cavity where it can have deadly consequences. Again more research is needed to improve our understanding of our interaction with the bacteria that could be considered a part of us.

Part four covers how domestication of plants and animals have changed us. For me there was not much of interest in this part, except for lactose intolerance was reverse in cultures that domesticated cows and other milk producing species.

The subject of part five is the relationship we had and now have with predators. There is a theory that poisonous snakes are responsible for our excellent color vision. In other primates, the better the vision, the more poisonous snakes were in the environment. There are other explanations for color vision, such as the ability to spot nutritious fruits. The modern plague of anxiety disorders may involve a misdirection of fear from predators we used to come across with some frequency.

In part six the creatures that live on or did live on us are discussed. There is a theory that our hairlessness, which evolved in relation to lice, ticks, and other bugs that dine on our blood, has led to xenophobia. This theory could be a stretch, but is plausible. Our hairlessness has also led to our being prone to skin cancers.

The final part is on how we could make our city environments more like those we evolved in. Massive rooftop gardens and whole vacant buildings acting as natural cliff environments, which are thought to be part of our evolutionary environment. This section I view as pie in the sky type thinking. Although I believe we need people to dream big, because good things have often come with those dreams and people.

The book as a whole is pretty good. It was for the most part interesting throughout. I like the fact that the author presents experiments that support the various theories proposed in the book. The author also did not actually do any of the experiments or propose any of the theories explained in the book. But, like a good scientist he assesses the different theories and their weaknesses, which all of them basically had.

I would recommend the book for those interested in our evolution with other species in our environments, and what might be the result of not having them in our environment anymore. Like I said the author is careful in presenting the facts, based on experiments, and the proposed theories. This should be appreciated by readers who value honesty by an author in presenting her or his ideas. I think it is incumbent upon an author to present known and possible problems with his or her ideas being presented.

Jennie says

This book packed such a knowledge punch I am somewhat at a loss for words even days after reading the last page. One of the things I admired most while reading this book was how science was at the forefront – research, evolution and the beginning of mankind in forms that we would hardly recognize now. This book covers a range of topics from the lack of worms in our guts, to how STD's have changed since we have become hairless. Every page was fascinating and full of ideas that let your mind dance through how people have become the people we have become.

Aside from going to Mexico to willingly be injected with a worm, my favorite portion of the book covered the change from gatherers to hunters and then to farmers. I found this most fascinating because it really changed the way our entire future forever. We became less nomadic – creating the food instead of following after it. It was at first hard to realize the impact of this one change but as the author further writes of its weight I began to feel it myself. This changed the landscape of animals, plants, people and the Earth.

This is a powerful book that is worth reading, if nothing else for the insight into how our actions have impacted everything around us, and our own bodies.

Anne says

I didn't actually finish the book, so take my review with the appropriate grains of salt. This is a book about

one of the most fascinating topics imaginable, and it's written in such a cutesy, condescending, dumbed-down, frivolous way that it's almost unbearable to read.

In fact I'd call it irresponsibly frivolous in some parts, such as the "upbeat" story of the guy who just *had* to try infecting himself with parasitic worms in an attempt to treat his IBS, and the brave and plucky individuals who opened illegal clinics in Mexico to offer parasite treatments. I know just enough about the topic to know that this is an extremely interesting line of inquiry in the treatment of autoimmune diseases, and not scientifically wacko per se - however, such things *become* wacko at the moment that people decide to set up shop and offer these treatments based on extremely preliminary research, and it's grossly immoral to write about this kind of thing in such a credulous way without accurately portraying the limits of current knowledge.

I would really like to read a GOOD book on this topic, but this one isn't it.

Harry Lane says

Dunn's premise is that we have shaped evolution as much as evolution has shaped us, and not always to our advantage. His argument is fairly strong, and his conclusions well worth consideration. But it is something implicit in his presentation that I think is equally important: the degree of specialization in science is a barrier to some types of insights that only come from connecting notions from disparate fields.

Kili says

Humans like to think of themselves as different from other living things. Germs and parasites are bad: we should eliminate them. After all, it's what our immune system does. In this book, Dunn argues quite convincingly that this is a destructive view. Species don't evolve in isolation of other species - predators and their prey engage in an evolutionary arms race (which explains, for example, why mollusks have thicker shells in the Pacific as compared to the Atlantic), symbiosis is found all over (for example, our immune system encourages the creation of biofilms), perhaps why tapeworms are proving to be an effective method of controlling certain autoimmune disorders, and why a large number of "pest" species (rats, pigeons, dandelions, bedbugs, etc) come from narrow ecological niches (cliffs and caves).

When Dunn discusses human evolution and its impact on what we currently are, he doesn't draw the line that I automatically drew: that of being human. Of course, this is an arbitrary line, and I drew it because of my own bias of thinking of humans as being different from other living things. Like other old-world primates, our eyes see colors and we are good at spotting certain shapes, the latter being important in our use of writing for communication. Our long history of being prey (going way before your ancestors lost their tails) still has an impact on how we live - and amuse ourselves.

Dunn also opened my eyes on how our myths diverge from what probably happened. For example, how agriculture and domestication of cattle were likely acts of desperation. (I'd love to see Dunn and Harvard primatologist Richard Wrangham collaborate on applying Dunn's approach of coevolution to the emergence of cooking). I was reading this part while walking to the metro on my morning commute to NSF: this section made me stop to think. I looked around at the people around me - I was standing in front of the National Geographic building - and saw the "obesity epidemic" around me in a much different light. (A paragraph or

so later, Dunn touched on this topic, so all I had done was anticipate him).

The author Rob Dunn is an associate professor in the Department of Biology at NC State. Given the state of science in the popular mind of the United States, scientists like Rob are wonderful - not only does he have the ability to explain complex ideas in a clear manner, he actively enlists the public to join him in his research. Spend some time at the wildlife blog of his lab. (Rob seems like a natural for TED, and I was surprised to see he was not one of the speakers, but the way he is popularizing his part of science can have much broader impact than what TED offers). I read his 2004 Science paper "Species Coextinctions and the Biodiversity Crisis" - the paper that first attempted to estimate the rate of coextinction of species - which shows his interest in this topic goes back quite far.

Tanja Berg says

This was a quite interesting and fun read. The title is slightly misleading if it makes you think of only what is on or in our bodies. This book covers more. Interesting chapter titles include "when cows and grass domesticated humans", "we were hunted, which is why all of us are afraid some of the time and some of us are afraid all of the time" and "how lice and ticks made us naked and gave us skin cancer", to name a few.

What I learned that I didn't know before: some creatures and living things are alive today who's evolutionary "half" has been eradicated. For example pronghorns and their inexplicable and ridiculous speed: missing the American cheetah. Second thing I learned (that I should have known): when you use antibiotics you kill not only the bacteria you intend to kill, but also most other useful microbes in the gut. Third thing I learned: fear of snakes gave us better eyesight. Fourth thing: we might be snaked to avoid ectoparasites.

All in all this book is informative and interesting. It is however, extremely adapted to the non-scientific reader, repeating things often and explaining things I don't need explained. The author also names a scientist afraid of snake although he lives in "snakeless Sweden". Huh? Define "snakeless": no snakes? In which case Sweden is not snakeless, it has at least two species I know of. If it qualifies as "no known lethal snakes" so be it, Sweden is snakeless. This makes me think the dear Mr. Dunn might be wrong about other things, but I choose to give him the benefit of the doubt.

All in all this is a quite entertaining and highly informative book well worth reading. No need to worry about scientific jargon, that's for sure! All will be explained, whether you like it or not.

Lauren says

I liked this book, but as a microbiologist, I found the science behind the assertions to be either dumbed down or not explained fully. For example, in the case of intestinal worms improving auto-immune diseases, it would have been nice to see any evidence of a mechanism behind this phenomenon, rather than vague hand-waving about the immune system chasing things that aren't there. I did like many of the ideas in the book, but I found the book to have an overall negative tone that was distracting.

Philip Taylor says

Fascinating and, at least occasionally, exciting. We appear to need bacteria and certain parasites. However, as with many popular science books, I can't help thinking that I am not getting the full story and that statistics are being suspiciously used to lead me to a certain conclusion. That's what happens when you are ignorant of many things, you get suspicious that someone is deliberately obfuscating the topic for you. To cynical?

Claire says

Started out as notable, scientific, informative, disgustingly fun. What is the appendix for? Can intestinal parasites cure us of bowel diseases? And more. But as it goes, the writing is inconsistent at best. Instead of presenting interesting scientific findings about our bodies, Dunn puts more and more effort into first the secret life of scientists (how an anthropologist's new idea unraveled as she made eggs for breakfast!), and then into thought experiments that are not at all fleshed out, either because introduced ideas don't have enough evidence to support them, or because Dunn got lazy. Fun and interesting at times, and certainly great for dinnertime conversation, but I would vastly recommend *Parasite Rex* by Carl Zimmer over this one.
