BOOK REVIEW

Ishmael

Daniel Quinn. New York: Bantam, 1992

and

Beyond Civilization: Humanity's Next Great Adventure.

Daniel Quinn. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999.

Reviewed by **Andrea F.J. Betts**, Brock University

What do a 200-pound gorilla, the Olmec Empire, and a gypsy have in common? Well, if it were not for the works of Daniel Quinn, that query might sound more like the beginnings of a bad joke than a reference to a body of work.

Born in the mid-1930's in Omaha, Nebraska, Daniel Quinn has spent the majority of his life wading in the pool of language, abstraction, and ideas. From a BA in English (cum laude) in 1957 and a twenty-year career in education and consumer publishing, Quinn went on to write about that which inspires him. His novel *Ishmael* won the 1991 Turner Tomorrow Fellowship, established to encourage authors to pursue creative and positive conclusions to global problems. The novel suggests that rather than wage war against nature, humanity should attempt to adopt a new belief system which holds that people can live within its laws. The collection of essays which comprise *Beyond Civilization*, supports the reality that Quinn is not a Luddite, but a man challenging humanity to use knowledge and technology in a new fashion. He does not want a return to antiquity, but rather a move beyond the present perils of civilization.

No doubt the concepts Daniel Quinn explores in his writings, had they been articulated in another fashion, would have caused an almost unbearable friction and a frustratingly indecipherable read for those raised within the dogma of our current North American mindset. Quinn has successfully written a series of books dealing with the frighteningly real new face of survival that confronts humanity in the twenty-first century. His message is one of an urgency which we must respect and act upon if we are to avoid the extinction of our species.

In his novel *Ishmael*, Quinn began his educative quest through the fictional account of a man who responds to a newspaper advertisement. The pitch entices the man to respond, as it requests that a student be recruited to meet with a teacher so as to liberate the world. The teacher is a gorilla named Ishmael, who provides his student and the readers with his thought-provoking interpretation of the history of humanity. As we are informed, the premise of

humanity's story is that the world was made for humanity, but that humanity's "progress" will itself cause our demise as we continue towards betterment without end. The reader is required to view humankind as a species attempting to exempt itself from the rules of competition and in so doing, becoming a lonely entity in enemy terrain. Nature is a threatening creature, an all-encompassing enemy, whose laws of existence endanger those laws that humanity prefers and believes is its indisputable right to maintain. Quinn uses a caged gorilla to educate humanity about the reality of their own culturally-caged existence.

Beyond Civilization: Humanity's Next Great Adventure, this time written as a personal conversation with the reader, is Quinn's clarification of the opinions presented in *Ishmael*. In this text an attempt is made to elucidate and contribute a rebuttal to the controversial substance of the previously offered analyses of the state of humanity. Quinn states that by making our planet uninhabitable, we are expeditiously moving towards extinction, as we stubbornly choose to adhere to the belief that there is no better way for humanity to exist than civilization. We are challenged to not look upon civilization as the ultimate invention, but rather to look to previous examples of humanity abandoning what we might think of as a preferred lifestyle for one more suited to their survival. Quinn cites the Maya, the Olmec, and the people of Teotihuacán as examples of people who decided that to continue as they were was detrimental to their existence. They were brave in Quinn's mind, and decided to move beyond what they knew, to live another, more suitable lifestyle.

Quinn is careful to point out that he is not advocating a return to the era of cave dwelling, but that we must contemplate the possibility of alternatives to our current norm. His introspection on this issue has led him to consider the prototypes of circuses, gypsies, and nomad cultures as offering this contingency: "tribalism," a sense of a group of people working together as equals for the good of the whole. He offers hope for the reader if we continue to not fear getting our feet wet, asking questions, and demanding explanations.

Ishmael and *Beyond Civilization* make us consider that humanity is programmed for survival, and that we must in some sense glorify our endurance. Humans are at their best when they are voracious, when they can give meaning to the foundation of their survival. When we can see how precious life is, how delicate a balance it is that must be mastered, then we are truly human. I would argue that we currently live out a spiritual-less existence, where our symbols have no meaning, and are empty holdovers, anachronisms from our former existence. There was a time when we lived in a close and constant proximity to our own mortality. Although our physical extinction may yet be some time in coming, our spiritual death is right around the corner. *Ishmael* speaks of this spiritual death, and *Beyond Civilization* beseeches us to act so that we may prevent it.

C.E. Betts stated to me in conversation that Nature is the wall socket of existence that we need to be plugged into, in order to obtain power. *Ishmael* holds the flashlight at the wall and *Beyond Civilization* helps us to consider how to put the plug back into the socket.

Both of Quinn's books are a manageable length, and quite effortless to understand even if one is not philosophically inclined. He attacks issues of the greatest of importance, but is able to do so in a manner which allows some insight into a deeper sense of meaning.

From an educational standpoint, the concepts of *Ishmael* and *Beyond Civilization* have great merit. I believe that it is along these lines that a true education should be drawn. We need an education that causes us to think, to feel, and to experience our own existence in this great web of life over which we have always presumed our superiority. These books in concert should be incorporated into the educational lives of the young and the old.

Although Quinn's works have been around for some time now, their message does not abate with age. As more time passes, we are furthering our spiritual and physical dissolution enormously.

Ishmael and *Beyond Civilization* are a must-read for all. It is my hope that the fire will be lit by such books, encouraging readers to continue to search on this path, and seek out alternatives to what we have been led to believe is divine ordinance. We are not necessarily in the promised land and we must reflect upon ourselves and our existence to truly be authentic. There *is* something beyond our present way of living and we must begin to acknowledge it if we hope to prevail.