

Parasite Rex: Inside the Bizarre World of Nature's Most Dangerous Creatures

By Carl Zimmer

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Parasite Rex: Inside the Bizarre World of Nature's Most Dangerous Creatures By Carl Zimmer

IMAGINE A WORLD WHERE parasites control the minds of their hosts, sending them to their destruction.

IMAGINE A WORLD WHERE parasites are masters of chemical warfare and camouflage, able to cloak themselves with their hosts' own molecules.

IMAGINE A WORLD WHERE parasites steer the course of evolution, where the majority of species are parasites.

WELCOME TO EARTH.

For centuries, parasites have lived in nightmares, horror stories, and in the darkest shadows of science. Yet these creatures are among the world's most successful and sophisticated organisms. In *Parasite Rex*, Carl Zimmer deftly balances the scientific and the disgusting as he takes readers on a fantastic voyage. Traveling from the steamy jungles of Costa Rica to the fetid parasite haven of southern Sudan, Zimmer graphically brings to life how parasites can change DNA, rewire the brain, make men more distrustful and women more outgoing, and turn hosts into the living dead.

This thorough, gracefully written book brings parasites out into the open and uncovers what they can teach us about the most fundamental survival tactics in the universe.

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Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Many books provoke a visceral reaction, but few really make you *itch*. Science writer Carl Zimmer's *Parasite Rex* does just that, provoking a deliciously creepy sense of paranoia in the reader as it explores a long-misunderstood realm of science. While entomologists love to announce that there are more species of insects than all other animals combined, few parasitologists choose to trump that by reminding us that "parasites may outnumber free-living species four to one." That figure is based on the multicellular chauvinism of the 19th century, which excludes bacteria and fungi from consideration (athlete's foot, anyone?), but Zimmer looks at the *E. coli* in our guts as well as the worms, flukes, mites, and other critters that earn a healthy living at our expense--and the expense of our domesticated plants and animals.

The author traveled to Africa to see firsthand the effects of sleeping sickness and river blindness. He learned from physicians and researchers that the parasites that wreak so much havoc are much more than the simple degenerates we've taken them for. Their complex adaptations to their environments--us--are as lovely and awe-inspiring as any eye or wing. The examples of hormonal and other behavioral control of hosts, causing changes in feeding habits and other life essentials, are chilling when personalized. Zimmer knows his subject well, and his writing, while robust and affecting, never descends to the all-too-easy gross-out. You wouldn't expect to find respect for a tapeworm, but *Parasite Rex* will show you how beautiful Earth's truly dominant life forms are. --Rob Lightner

From Publishers Weekly

One of the year's most fascinating works of popular science is also its most disgusting. From tapeworms to isopods to ichneumon wasps, "parasites are complex, highly adapted creatures that are at the heart of the story of life." Zimmer (*At the Water's Edge*) devotes his second book to the enormous variety of one- and many-celled organisms that live on and inside other animals and plants. The gruesome trypanosomes that cause sleeping sickness had nearly been routed from Sudan when the country's civil war began: now they're back. Costa Rican researcher Daniel Brooks has discovered dozens of parasites, including flies that lay eggs in deer noses: "snot bots." And those are only the creatures from the prologue. Zimmer discusses how the study of parasites began, with 19th-century discoveries about their odd life cycles. (Many take on several forms in several generations, so that a mother worm may resemble her granddaughter, but not her daughter.) He looks at how parasites pass from host to host, and how they defeat immune systems and vice versa. Many parasites alter their hosts' behavior: *Toxoplasma* makes infected rats fearless, thus more likely to be eaten by cats, who will then pick up the microbe. Quantifiable "laws of virulence" lead parasites to become nasty enough to spread, yet not so nasty as to wipe out all their hosts. And eons of coevolution can affect both partners: howler monkeys may avoid violent fights because screwworms can render the least scratch fatal. Two final chapters address parasites in human medicine and agriculture. Not only are parasites not all bad, Zimmer concludes in this exemplary work of popular science, but we may be parasites, too. And we have a lot to learn from them about how to manage earth, the host we share. Illus. (Sept.)

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From Library Journal

Zimmer, a columnist at National History, has written an absolutely fascinating book about parasites. Once the reader gets past the "grossness" factor. As with his previous book, *At the Water's Edge* (LJ 2/1/98), evolution is central: Zimmer considers not only how parasites have evolved but how they may have helped the evolution of other species. Though humans are not the only species discussed, some of the most

interesting evolutionary theories come from human-parasite relations. Mild cases of sickle cell anemia, for instance, seem to protect against malaria, implying that these sorts of blood diseases have evolved with the aid of parasites. The author discusses more recent research suggesting that some modern diseases, such as allergies or ulcerative colitis, may actually be triggered by our immune systems' not having parasites to fight. This well-written book makes parasitology interesting and accessible to anyone. Not a textbook (a few good ones are recommended in a selected bibliography), it does have a place in science libraries, even for students who don't realize that their field of study is related to parasitology. Recommended for public and academic libraries. DMargaret Henderson, Cold Spring Harbor Academics, NY
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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