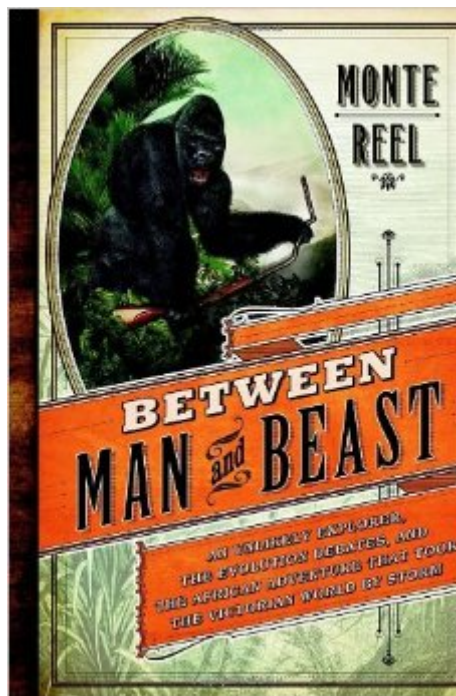


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Between Man And Beast: An Unlikely Explorer, The Evolution Debates, And The African Adventure That Took The Victorian World By Storm



Synopsis

The unbelievably riveting adventure of an unlikely young explorer who emerged from the jungles of Africa with evidence of a mysterious, still mythical beast—the gorilla—only to stumble straight into the center of the biggest debate of the day: Darwin's theory of evolution. In 1856 Paul Du Chaillu marched into the equatorial wilderness of West Africa determined to bag an animal that, according to legend, was nothing short of a monster. When he emerged three years later, the summation of his efforts only hinted at what he'd experienced in one of the most dangerous regions on earth. Armed with an astonishing collection of zoological specimens, Du Chaillu leapt from the physical challenges of the jungle straight into the center of the biggest issues of the time—the evolution debate, racial discourse, the growth of Christian fundamentalism—and helped push each to unprecedented intensities. He experienced instant celebrity, but with that fame came whispers about his past, his credibility, and his very identity—which would haunt the young man. Grand in scope, immediate in detail, and propulsively readable, *Between Man and Beast* brilliantly combines Du Chaillu's personal journey with the epic tale of a world hovering on the sharp edge of transformation.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Terrific popular history, this. Like a great many others, I suspect, I had never hear of Paul Du Chaillu prior to picking this up. This could be due to my spotty education, though it is more so (I flatter myself) that Du Chaillu seems virtually unknown today, at least in his adopted US. Mores the pity, but it does point out the hole to be filled by this very entertaining and enjoyable volume about this

explorer /adventurer who gave the outside world its first glimpse of the mysterious beast, the gorilla. Shrouded in myth and mystery, when Du Chaillu set out from the coast of Gabon to search the interior of equatorial Africa in 1856, gorillas had rarely, if ever, been so much as glimpsed by anyone other than local tribes who tended to steer clear of them and fabulate incredible stories to help explain why they did. When Du Chaillu emerged with their bodies and presented them to the outside world he set off a storm of celebrity, controversy and consternation. And this is where the story really takes off. Well researched and extensively noted, Reel's book is not an academic history or a full-fledged biography, though it is likely as close to the latter as we are likely to get since Du Chaillu's origins are both poorly documented and, for reasons that become clear, he did a wonderful job of keeping them hidden during his lifetime. But it is also more than a jolly-good yarn, too. Reel does a fine job of putting the man, his acts and actions, into historical context, where he and his gorillas stepped out of "darkest" Africa right into the middle of the initial controversies over evolution and "man's relationship to beast". But it is, too, a jolly-good yarn and an absorbing read. If I might have liked to delve a little deeper here and there, well, that's why there are OTHER books on the era and the histories of science, thought and exploration. This is written for a popular audience and it delivers. Very much recommended.

The main theme of this book is the biography of Paul du Chaillu, who is credited as being the first white man to see, kill and capture a gorilla. Were that the end, the story would be a mere twenty pages. There is much more to the story and Mr. Reel captures it. Du Chaillu was one of the explorers of the Victorian Age who were worshiped in theory, but not in practice. With echoes of today's world, it seemed the scientific community and the public loved to pump these explorers up and then relish in trashing and destroying them. Du Chaillu returned from Gabon having explored areas of Africa never seen by white men before. He brought back skins and skulls of gorillas, samples of hundreds of other birds and animals never before seen as well as stuffed gorillas. Since he was young and inexperienced, he did not have the scientific proof necessary in some people's eyes. Therefore they tore him down accusing him of never traveling inland and fabricating his stories of bravery. A second trip, taken after he learned his scientific lessons, vindicated him and his reputation was resurrected. The story is bigger than that, however. Our hero's travels occurred at the same time that Darwin's evolution theory was being spread. The gorilla played right into the burgeoning vitriolic debate between evolutionists and creationists (as they are now known). The storm enveloped du Chaillu's finds and the debates often turned personal. Thus, the discovery of the gorilla developed into much bigger questions such as: Was the gorilla man's previous step in

evolution? Was the gorilla half a step below blacks? Mr. Reel's account is very readable. He does well integrating the biography of an interesting yet forgotten historical character into the times and scientific debates of the times.

In the last year or so I've been struggling to broaden my literary tastes by dabbling in nonfiction. Authors like Monte Reel make me forget that I am reading historical accounts because the characters are very much alive and real. I wrongly assumed that this book might be a dry dictation singularly about Paul Du Chaillu. Instead, Reel weaves a tapestry, introducing us to historical figures who we would likely never have heard of but were frequently quite renowned in their heyday. "Between Man and Beast" exceeded my hopes for all that nonfiction can be. I felt more than a passing interest in the topic, I was genuinely engaged. I gained a much greater understanding of the era and the people and was even made to laugh by their antics more than 150 years later. The vibrant passion, curiosity, and dedication demonstrated by so many people all brought to life by Reel's exceptional storytelling make this one a book not to miss. Why couldn't all of my history lessons have been so fascinating?

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