

Selection of Ishmael by Daniel Quinn

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“The people of your culture cling with fanatical tenacity to the specialness of man. They want desperately to perceive a vast gulf between man and the rest of creation. This mythology of human superiority justifies their doing whatever they please with the world, just the way Hitler’s mythology of Aryan superiority justified his doing whatever he pleased with Europe. But in the end this mythology is not deeply satisfying. The Takers are a profoundly lonely people. The world for them is enemy territory, and they live in it like an army of occupation, alienated and isolated by their extraordinary specialness.”

“That’s true. But what are you getting at?”

Instead of answering my question, Ishmael said, “Among the Leavers, crime, mental illness, suicide, and drug addiction are great rarities. How does Mother Culture account for this?”

“I’d say it’s because . . . Mother Culture says it’s because the Leavers are just too primitive to have these things.”

“In other words, crime, mental illness, suicide, and drug addiction are features of an advanced culture.”

“That’s right. Nobody says it that way, of course, but that’s how it’s understood. These things are the price of advancement.”

“There’s an almost opposite opinion that has had wide currency in your culture for a century or so. An opposite opinion as to why these things are rare among the Leavers.”

I thought for a minute. “You mean the Noble Savage theory. I can’t say I know it in any detail.”

“But you have an impression of it. That’s what’s current in your culture—not the theory in detail but an impression of it.”

“True. It’s the idea that people living close to nature tend to be noble. It’s seeing all those sunsets that does it. You can’t watch a sunset and then go off and set fire to your neighbor’s tepee. Living close to nature is wonderful for your mental health.”

“You understand that I’m not saying anything like this.” “Yes. But what *are* you saying?”

“We’ve had a look at the story the Takers have been enacting here for the past ten thousand years. The Leavers too are enacting a story. Not a story told but a story enacted.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“If you go among the various peoples of your culture—if you go to China and Japan and Russia and England and India—each people will give you a completely different account of themselves, but they are nonetheless

all enacting a single basic story, which is the story of the Takers. The same is true of the Leavers. The Bushmen of Africa, the Alawa of Australia, the Kreen-Akrore of Brazil, and the Navajo of the United States would each give you a different account of themselves, but they too are all enacting one basic story, which is the story of the Leavers.”

“I see what you’re getting at. It isn’t the tale you tell that counts, it’s the way you actually live.”

“That’s correct. The story the Takers have been enacting here for the past ten thousand years is not only disastrous for mankind and for the world, it’s fundamentally unhealthy and unsatisfying. It’s a megalomaniac’s fantasy, and enacting it has given the Takers a culture riddled with greed, cruelty, mental illness, crime, and drug addiction.”

“Yes, that seems to be so.”

“The story the Leavers have been enacting here for the past three million years isn’t a story of conquest and rule. Enacting it doesn’t give them power. Enacting it gives them lives that are satisfying and meaningful to them. This is what you’ll find if you go among them. They’re not seething with discontent and rebellion, not incessantly wrangling over what should be allowed and what forbidden, not forever accusing each other of not living the right way, not living in terror of each other, not going crazy because their lives seem empty and pointless, not having to stupefy themselves with drugs to get through the days, not inventing a new religion every week to give them something to hold on to, not forever searching for something to do or something to believe in that will make their lives worth living. And—I repeat—this is not because they live close to nature or have no formal government or because they’re innately noble. This is simply because they’re enacting a story that works well for people—a story that worked well for three million years and that still works well where the Takers haven’t yet managed to stamp it out.”

“Okay. That sounds terrific. When do we get to that story?” “Tomorrow. At least we’ll begin tomorrow.”

“Good,” I said. “But before we quit today, I have a question. Why *Mother* Culture? I personally have no difficulty with it, but I can imagine some women would, on the grounds that you seem to be singling out a figure of *specifically* female gender to serve as a cultural villain.”

Ishmael grunted. “I don’t consider her a *villain* in any sense whatever, but I understand what you’re getting at. Here is my answer: Culture is a mother everywhere and at every time, because culture is inherently a nurturer—the nurturer of human societies and life-styles. Among Leaver peoples, Mother Culture explains and preserves a life-style that is healthy and self-sustaining. Among Taker peoples she explains and preserves a lifestyle that has proven to be unhealthy and self-destructive.”

“Okay. So?”

“So what’s your question? If culture is a mother among the Alawa of Australia and the Bushmen of Africa and the Kayapo of Brazil, then why wouldn’t she be a mother among the Takers?”

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When I arrived the next day, I found that a new plan was in effect: Ishmael was no longer on the other side of the glass, he was on my side of it, sprawled on some cushions a few feet from my chair. I hadn't realized how important that sheet of glass had become to our relationship: to be honest, I felt a flutter of alarm in my stomach. His nearness and enormity disconcerted me, but without hesitating for more than a fraction of a second, I took my seat and gave him my usual nod of greeting. He nodded back, but I thought I glimpsed a look of wary speculation in his eyes, as if my proximity troubled him as much as his troubled me.

"Before we go on," Ishmael said after a few moments, "I want to clear up a misconception." He held up a pad of drawing paper with a diagram on it.



"Not a particularly difficult visualization. It represents the story line of the Leavers," he said. "Yes, I see."

He added something and held it up again.



"This offshoot, beginning at about 8000 B.C., represents the story line of the Takers." "Right."

"And what event does this represent?" he asked, touching the point of his pencil to the dot labeled 8000 B.C.

"The agricultural revolution."

"Did this event occur at a point in time or over a period of time?"

"I assume over a period of time."

"Then this dot at 8000 B.C. represents what?"

"The beginning of the revolution."

"Where shall I put the dot to show when it ended?"

"Ah," I said witlessly. "I don't really know. It must have lasted a couple thousand years."

"What event marked the end of the revolution?"

"Again, I don't know. I don't know that any particular event *would* have marked it."

"No popping champagne corks?"

"I don't know."

"Think."

I thought, and after a while said, "Okay. It's strange that this isn't taught. I remember being taught about the agricultural revolution, but I don't remember this."

"Go on."

"It didn't end. It just spread. It's been spreading ever since it began back there ten thousand years ago. It spread across this continent during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It's still spreading across parts of New Zealand and Africa and South America today."

"Of course. So you see that your agricultural revolution is not an event like the Trojan War, isolated in the distant past and without direct relevance to your lives today. The work begun by those neolithic farmers in the Near East has been carried forward from one generation to the next without a single break, right into the present moment. It's the foundation of your vast civilization today in exactly the same way that it was the foundation of the very first farming village."

"Yes, I see that."

“This should help you understand why the story you tell your children about the meaning of the world, about divine intentions in the world, and about the destiny of man is of such profound importance to the people of your culture. It’s the manifesto of the revolution on which your culture is based. It’s the repository of all your revolutionary doctrine and the definitive expression of your revolutionary spirit. It explains why the revolution was necessary and why it must be carried forward at any cost whatever.”