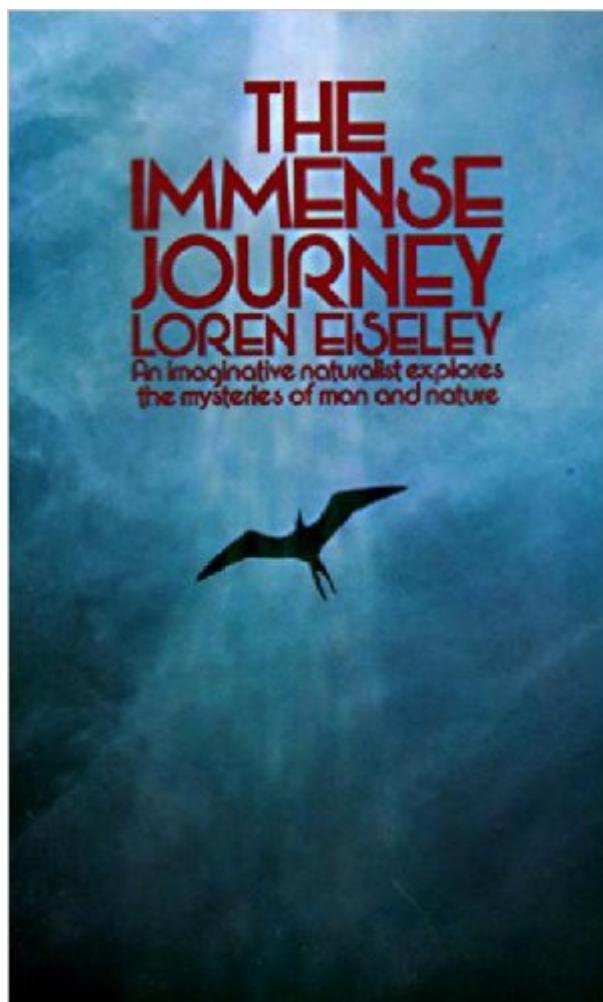


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The Immense Journey: An Imaginative Naturalist Explores The Mysteries Of Man And Nature



Synopsis

Anthropologist and naturalist Loren Eiseley blends scientific knowledge and imaginative vision in this story of man.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I first encountered Loren Eiseley's The Immense Journey by accident in a university's library stacks. I took it down from the shelf and, after glancing at the table of contents, started to read one of the essays. Three hours later I realized that I was still standing in the same place and had read through almost half the book. I had never encountered writing like this before. Eiseley writes about nature with the eyes of a haunted poet who sees the natural world slipping away even as we view it. It is hard to convey to one who hasn't read any of this just what makes his writing so special. He is a master of language. His 'take' on what he observes in nature is original and fresh. The structure of his essays, like arguments in the form of stories, progressing from some general observation to an unexpected conclusion - please and surprise the reader. Each of his essays is, at one and the same time, a lesson, a sermon, a lyrical poem, a travelogue through time and space, a prayer and a great imaginative leap beyond human skin, culture, time and place. These essays deserve to have a much broader audience than they have enjoyed. This is simply some of the best and most original writing that has been done in our century.

This is a wonderful book. Loren Eisley is an anthropologist who writes like John Donne. I went to the University of Pennsylvania in the 1960s when Loren Eisley was Professor of Anthropology. He was

then recognized as the finest writer at Penn. Though his field was anthropology, every semester he was a guest lecturer for the English department in their Creative Writing classes. Each chapter starts with a theme from nature, archeology, or biology. Gradually his writing turns from scientific observation to philosophical musing, poetry, and introspection. A perfect example is his chapter called "The Dream Animal." In "The Dream Animal" Eiseley starts by pondering a genuine problem in evolutionary biology - the remarkably short period of time (approx. 500,000 years ago to 150,000 years ago) during which the brain evolved from the size of an apes to modern man. He ends with this - "The story of Eden is a greater allegory than man has ever guessed. For it was truly man who, walking memoryless through bars of sunlight and shade in the morning of the world, sat down and passed a wondering hand over a heavy forehead. Time and darkness, knowledge of good and evil, have walked with him ever since... a new world of terror and loneliness appears to have been created in the soul of man. For the first time in four billion years a living creature had contemplated himself and heard with a sudden unaccountable loneliness, the whisper of the wind in the night reeds. Perhaps he knew, there in the grass by the chill waters, that he had before him an immense journey. Perhaps that same foreboding still troubles the hearts of those who walk out of a crowded room and stare with relief in to the abyss of space so long as there is a star to be seen twinkling across those miles of emptiness." Take your time with this book - read it in a quiet space where Eiseley's musings can lead you into musings of your own.

This is a very unusual book. It is ostensibly about the "Immense Journey" of man along his long evolutionary trail. But, in the same way that "The Odyssey" is not just an historical travel tale, Eiseley's book is much more. This is a work about the wonders of life, the joys of curiosity, the rewards from solitary time spent in the natural world and the transitory nature of all existence. This one must have been just fantastic when it was published in 1957. It's still very good in 2003 despite the passage of time, which has exposed several of Eiseley's scientific beliefs and musings to be erroneous. Keep in mind the tremendous advancements in archeology, molecular biology and all other fields of science over the last 46 years and don't get hung up on these anachronisms. Instead, revel in the beautiful language Eiseley uses and the imagery he evokes: "Some lands are flat and grass-covered, and smile so evenly up at the sun that they seem forever youthful, untouched by man or time." Or another favorite: "Tyrannosaurs, enormous bipedal caricatures of men, would stalk mindlessly across the sites of future cities and go their slow way down into the dark of geologic time." Read this book and you'll want to dig up fossils, listen to the wind, watch other animals and soak up life. And you will probably want to read it again.

The other reviews say it so well, so I will simply quote something from the book: "...whenever I see a frog's eye low in the water warily ogling the shoreward landscape, I always think inconsequentially of those twiddling mechanical eyes that mankind manipulates nightly from a thousand observatories. Someday, with a telescopic lens an acre in extent, we are going to see something not to our liking, some looming shape outside there across the great pond of space." Whenever I catch a frog's eye I am aware of this, but I do not find it depressing. I stand quite still and try hard not to move or lift a hand since it would only frighten him. And standing thus it finally comes to me that this is the most enormous extension of vision of which life is capable: the projection of itself into other lives. This is the lonely, magnificent power of humanity. It is, far more than any spatial adventure, the supreme epitome of the reaching out." The comparison of a frog's eye low in the water to humanity peering out into the universe from observatories blows me away and epitomizes this great writer's style and deep imagination, which is evident in all of his books. He was able to take the simplest things and weave them into a vision of immense beauty or perhaps disturbing self examination. A fascinating and lovely book. Go back and take a look at the cover, which I think fits perfectly!

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