

I was thirteen when I first read Ishmael by Daniel Quinn. Although I understood only part of the story, I felt that the book had a deep and poignant meaning. I bought and reread the book two years later, feeling that I understood the message in its entirety. Ever since, I have read Ishmael every year in order to keep the story fresh in my mind. Each time I read this book, I learn more about how humanity is destroying the world and about myself.

Ishmael is a book about saving the world. The novel primarily uses a teacher-student exchange to educate the reader on what Quinn calls Mother Culture and the mythology she teaches all members of our culture. The teacher is unexpectedly a gorilla, which struck me as a powerful metaphor that emphasizes how much humanity has to learn from nature.

After reading Ishmael, I was inspired to change the way I lived my life. I became more environmentally conscious. I joined my school's environmental club and initiated a school-wide recycling program. I placed recycling boxes in every classroom, and once a week, the club and I would gather all the paper and drive it to the recycling center. After the program had a successful couple of years, we were able to purchase recycling bins to place outside of the school so that the community was able to recycle as well. When I began working at a public library my senior year of high school, I realized how much paper was wasted there. Employees threw away newspapers, program leaflets, faxes, and letters. I volunteered to start a recycling program there, too. Even though I no longer work there, the recycling program was so popular that the library still recycles.

Ishmael also inspired me not only to be environmentally conscious myself, but also to educate others to be aware of how their actions affect the natural world. Thus, every year I went with my environmental club to the elementary school and taught sixth graders about everything from water pollution to how to make a compost pile.

In high school, I took a two environmental science courses to further my understanding of the world. I learned how to conserve gasoline even though gasoline was under \$2 a gallon then. I encouraged my parents to recycle. I have donated to Defenders of Wildlife, which is a nonprofit organization whose goal is to protect our delicate ecosystem. In addition, I still recommend Ishmael to everyone I meet.

The mythology of our culture is essentially this: “Man was born to turn the world into a paradise, but tragically he was born flawed. And so his paradise has always been spoiled by stupidity, greed, destructiveness, and shortsightedness” (83). However, it is simply a story that Mother Culture tells us from the moment we are born. Reading Ishmael underlined this fact for me and allowed me to see the world as it truly is. The world is not something we should conquer or even call “*our* world”. Nor is man inherently flawed in some way. Modern humans existed long before the Agricultural Revolution, which was only about 10,000 years ago. The only evidence we have on the failure of humanity is the devastating impact that civilization has had on the environment, and that is only a fragment of human history. Since realizing that an unseen force is not against humanity, I have gained more faith in my own species. I realize now that it is quite possible for us to halt our destruction of the environment and to become an environmentally conscious species.

For me, reading Ishmael was simply a first step towards an eco-friendly mindset. As I attempt to reduce, reuse, and recycle while encouraging other to do the same, I realize that this book did not just open my eyes. It changed my lifestyle. If all people were able to read Ishmael with an open mind as I have, the world might just be a better place in the coming generations.