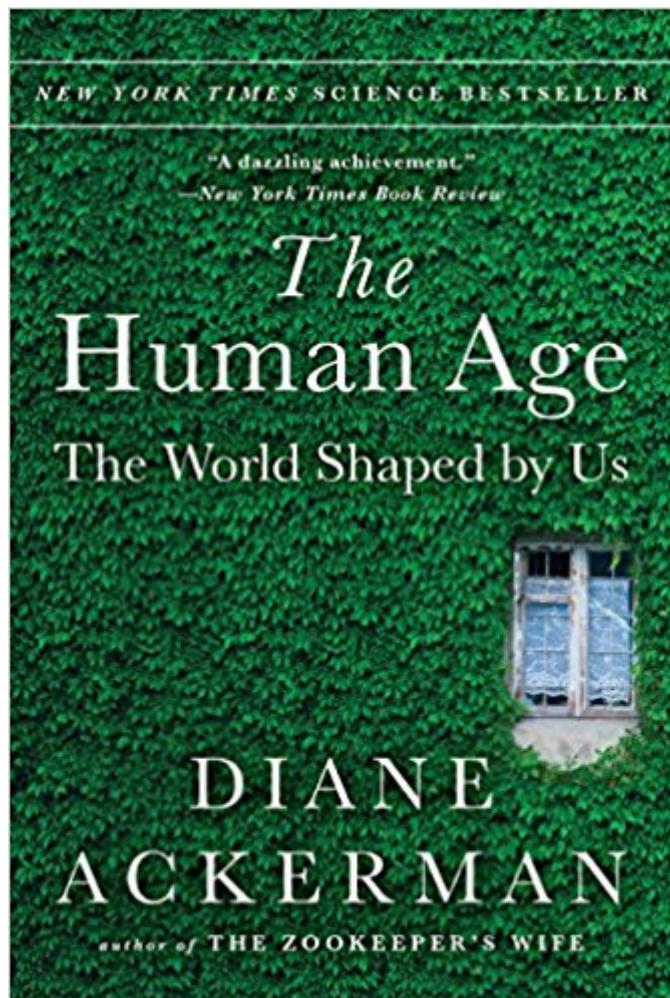


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The Human Age: The World Shaped By Us



Synopsis

Winner of the 2015 National Outdoor Book Award for Natural History Literature and the 2015 PEN New England Henry David Thoreau Prize. A dazzling, inspiring tour through the ways that humans are working with nature to try to save the planet. Ackerman is justly celebrated for her unique insight into the natural world and our place in it. In this landmark book, she confronts the unprecedented reality that one prodigiously intelligent and meddlesome creature, *Homo sapiens*, is now the dominant force shaping the future of planet Earth. Humans have "subdued 75 percent of the land surface, concocted a wizardry of industrial and medical marvels, strung lights all across the darkness." We tinker with nature at every opportunity; we garden the planet with our preferred species of plants and animals, many of them invasive; and we have even altered the climate, threatening our own extinction. Yet we reckon with our own destructive capabilities in extraordinary acts of hope-filled creativity: we collect the DNA of vanishing species in a "frozen ark," equip orangutans with iPads, and create wearable technologies and synthetic species that might one day outsmart us. With her distinctive gift for making scientific discovery intelligible to the layperson, Ackerman takes us on an exhilarating journey through our new reality, introducing us to many of the people and ideas now creating—perhaps saving—our future and that of our fellow creatures. A beguiling, optimistic engagement with the changes affecting every part of our lives, *The Human Age* is a wise and beautiful book that will astound, delight, and inform intelligent life for a long time to come.

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Customer Reviews

Diane Ackerman is concerned about how humans, after living at the mercy of the natural world for millions of years, have for the past century few centuries changed the world in radical ways. We are no longer at the mercy of weather, the tides, the winds, or even evolution, as our technology, and our hubris, have advanced through the years. Ackerman thinks we need to change how we look at the world, and concentrate more on using science to live in harmony with nature, rather than as a tool to overcome it. That's certainly not a new thesis, of course. Aldo Leopold was writing about the need to live in harmony with nature in a modern, technological, world back in the 1920s, and there have been many since then. What Ackerman brings to the debate is a collection of stories regarding how humans have used technology to replace, supplant, or in some case, work with nature. She talks about the military use of dolphins, aquaculture, artificial intelligence, evolution, biomass, solar energy, 3-D printing and dozens of other topics. Her range is great, and so is her passion, but in that range sometimes her focus is hard to perceive. What, exactly, Ackerman thinks the role of technology should be, beyond the fact that it shouldn't be harmful, is a bit vague. Ackerman is a good writer, if a bit florid at times ("we not only bespangle the night, we broadloom the day") but for a science writer she's sometimes remarkably unfamiliar with science, and often speaks with just one person on any given topic. She doesn't seem to do any fact checking, either, otherwise she'd know arrows do not ricochet, and no one has made 3-D printed brass knuckles (although a plastic model has been made). Ackerman also tends to neglect the economics of the policies she or her interviewees propose. The idea that we could all grow much of our fruit and vegetables has a seductive, utopian allure, (Ackerman lives in a rural area, bordered by cornfields, she tells us, which may shape her thinking here) but there's a very good reason that most people stopped growing their own food. It's not terribly productive, either on a personal or a societal level, for a surgeon or an engineer to spend an hour a day tending a vegetable garden rather than doing something they're far more productive at. It's also not necessarily the most efficient use of space in a city in which the infrastructure of power, light, and sewage has to be maintained whether a block is used for housing, industry, or a bean field. Even so, Ackerman does a good job of presenting a number of stories of technologies, projects, and areas of research that most readers may well be unfamiliar with, and for that reason I think it's worth reading. But it should be read with a critical eye.

Then *The Human Age* is your little book of meditations. I'd say something I don't much in reviews: I haven't made my way all the way through this yet, and certainly not in a linear fashion, because as much as Diane Ackerman works to give structure to her latest work here,

it's not that kind of book. Ackerman's prose can indeed run to the florid, as other reviewers have complained, but as much as I don't go for the flowery stuff in general, I find her to be a pretty straightforward sensualist who notes the finer points of smells and sounds and textures because they are not something she is hardwired to ever ignore. I think it's telling that she focuses in several pieces on Budi, the Toronto zoo's adolescent orangutan who is so like a human child, and yet so not. As someone who has taken on the topic of how humans came to bring this planet to its current pass, and what more we might do for good and ill with our current capacities (read technology), she really, REALLY had ought to be more than a little discouraged and depressed. Instead, the author sees all the potential for us to remediate the damage we've done, at least in some measure, and it's weird. It's also necessary. We aren't going to raise future generations to fix our mistakes if we bring them up on a diet of regret and resignation. Peering into vertical mariculture farms or the potential to actually bring back the wooly mammoths is just the thing to spark imaginations not yet dulled by real world experiences of avarice, short-sightedness, and inadequate political will to face whatever crisis du jour. (At this writing, it's Ebola - in Liberia and potentially at home.) I'm a little old for the more formative influences in Ms. Ackerman's writing. But if she has been fast and loose in places with the fact checking (as pointed out again in other reviews), I suppose I failed to notice because I was too swayed by her tales of cricket symphonies and architectural living walls. You can get the facts nailed down in a million peer-reviewed online papers or, in a more general sense, from NOVA. There's not much here that's new, really, for even the casual layperson/consumer of science shows and articles. But for those who have pretty much given up on our species as stupid, destructive, malignantly over-replicative marauders, there needs to be the odd opposing voice. Ackerman is telling the kids to go save the future. Here's hoping they listen.

Apes playing with iPads, Japanese tourists visiting industrial sites, the great black marble that is the earth ringed with lights at night: all these are manifestations of the Anthropocene Era, the era in which man is the dominant force shaping the world. The book is a series of essays each in a separate chapter ranging from nature to technology to the human body. I found each chapter well written, almost poetic. Whether you agree with her position that the way man has used and abused the environment is remediable not necessarily by using more technology but by modifying our behavior, including industrial and social behavior, she makes interesting points. The ending chapters on the human body, particularly the factors we are beginning to understand in how our DNA

influences what we become and the role played by the environment, were my favorite chapters, but there are other excellent sections ranging from the sea to outer space. I highly recommend this book if you're interested in science, technology and the study of the human body. It's not a text book. It's an enjoyable read that gives you ideas to challenge the way you view the world.

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