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The Well-Dressed Ape: A Natural History of Myself by Hannah
Holmes, Random House 2009

Michael Zimmerman

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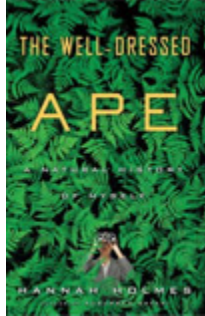
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Recommended Readings



The Well-Dressed Ape: A Natural History of Myself

by Hannah Holmes, Random House 2009

Reviewed by Michael Zimmerman

When science and travel writer Holmes turns from writing articles to books, she looks close to home.

Her first two books (*The Secret Life of Dust* and *Suburban Safari*) focused on the dust in her house and the life in her yard. In her third outing she continues this trend, examining herself and hoping "that defining my animal self would clarify my identity in the natural world....I've been uncomfortable with the notion that I was an animal apart, a sort of extraterrestrial on my own planet."

As in her previous works, she successfully uses the mundane to make larger points about life and the human condition. She situates *Homo sapiens* within the animal kingdom, looking at similarities and differences between humans and other species while offering evolutionary explanations for both.

Chapters deal with such diverse topics as brain architecture and function, reproduction, diet, behavior and communication. Throughout we learn that humans are not nearly as different as many would have us believe; perhaps we are different by degree but not by kind. For example, a surprising number of species communicate fairly well and some, like prairie dogs, actually have a not insignificant vocabulary!

Holmes concludes with a chapter on environmental degradation and notes that we began transforming the planet even before we were fully human. Her optimistic conclusion is that we are the only species capable of thinking about the effect of its actions and acting against narrow self-interest, even if we don't always do so. Her writing is provocative and enjoyable if occasionally a bit too cute.

-Michael Zimmerman is Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and professor of biology at Butler University.