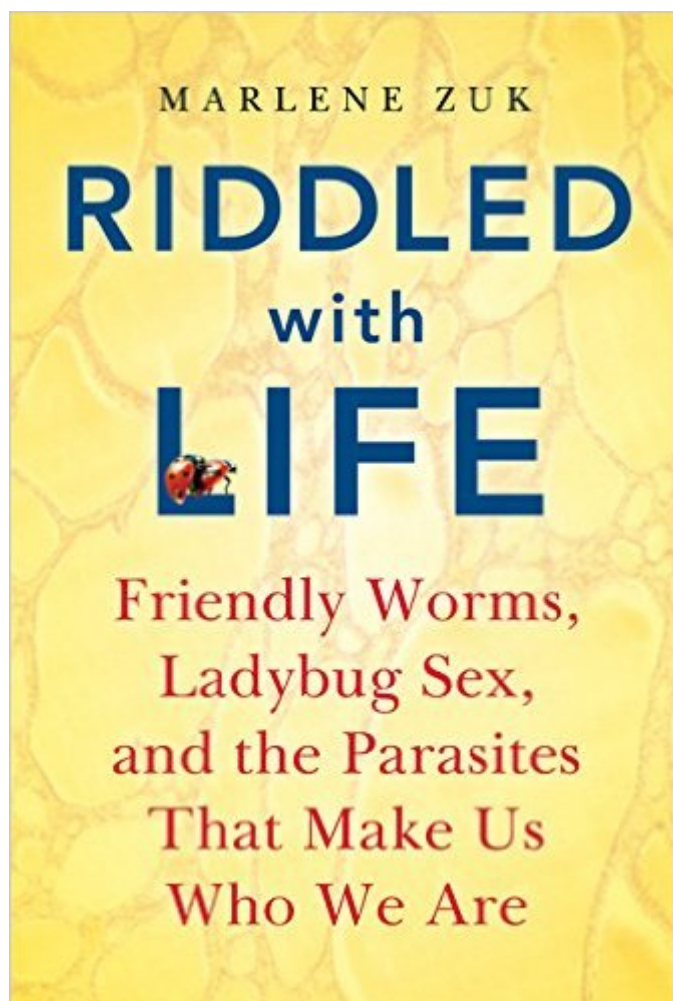


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Riddled With Life: Friendly Worms, Ladybug Sex, And The Parasites That Make Us Who We Are



Synopsis

We think of disease as our enemy, something we try to eradicate; germs and infections are things we battle. But in this witty, engaging book, evolutionary biologist Marlene Zuk reveals that, in fact, disease is our partner, not our foe, and is responsible for everything from how we look to how we have sex. Since the earliest days of life on earth, disease has evolved alongside us. Drawing on the latest research and studies, Zuk explains the role of disease in answering a fascinating range of questions such as: Why do men die younger than women? Why does the average male bird not have a penis? Why do weâ and lots of other animalsâ get STDs? How is our obsession with cleanliness making us sicker? And how can parasites sometimes make us well? Using her own work on sexual selection as well as a sampling of stories from the natural world, Zuk makes us reconsider the fearsome parasite.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If you are an extremely squeamish person, this may not be the book for you. On the other hand, if you share as I do, an intense curiosity about the natural world and all its inhabitants regardless of their status and contributions to the natural order, then I think you'll find "Riddled with Life" to be an exciting journey into an almost-ignored and little-known world of fascinating creatures. Marlene Zuk, a professor of biology at the University of California (Riverside), studies parasites -- among other living things -- and not only knows about all these critters but can write about them in a style that is very readable and enjoyable. I have become impressed lately by the many talented academic

scientists who have the ability to write for the ordinary reader. Zuk is certainly to be included among them. Her book deals with parasites, worms, and other creatures, and also with disease and health. Interestingly, she has a positive point to make about disease. For instance, she points out that "Disease is not merely ubiquitous. It is normal. It is natural. It is even essential. Illness has shaped all living things for millions of years, and life as we know it -- we, as we know ourselves -- would not exist without disease." I had never thought about that, but the point she makes is explained and justified throughout the book. She makes another important point which I found interesting: "Although most historians are probably blissfully unaware of it, one of the marked changes in our lives since the nineteenth century is in the number and kind of microorganisms we carry in our guts. We harbor hundreds of species of bacteria in our gastrointestinal systems when we are healthy, an internal forest of biodiversity.

My life began with a years-long struggle against life-draining parasites (I refer to viruses and bacteria, not members of Congress). Unlike most kids, I spent most of my first decade making my parents wonder if I'd see another birthday. As you might suspect, this book is very interesting to me on a personal level. And that brings us to the question of whether this book would be interesting to you. If you have spent much of your life fighting off one disease after another, then obviously yes. But what if you're the typical person who had the usual childhood illnesses and occasionally gets a cold? You take all of the precautions, and you even use antibacterial soaps. If that's the case, then this book is even more applicable to you than it is to me. Zuk tackles one myth after another, to help the reader gain valuable perspective. I haven't seen any negative reviews of this book so far, but invariably someone will cherry-pick excerpts and argue that Zuk is contradicting herself. Zuk says our bodies and environments are so full of bacteria and other parasites that obsessing over getting rid of them is rather pointless and probably harms us. But she also talks about the benefits of sanitation and hygienic practices. So, is she trying to have it both ways? This is like asking if it makes sense to get both rest and exercise, which are two seemingly contradictory activities. In fact, they are complementary activities. You need a balance of each. Balance is exactly what Zuk brings to the discussion of parasites. She gives the example of installing an antibacterial welcome mat for the "safety" of your baby. This might make a parent feel good, but serves no other purpose.

I can still close my eyes and see Thurber's little cartoon guy slouching dispiritedly past an embracing couple on the park bench, and asking his famous question. If he knew that most complex organisms evolved into two sexes because of parasites, he would probably have thrown his jacket

over his head and screamed. Marlene Zuk, a professor of biology at the University of California, provides 'parasites' as the answer to many evolutionary conundrums, as she brings us face-to-proboscis with some of the natural world's most bizarre adaptations surrounding the continued survival of genomes, including our own. What causes auto-immune diseases? Why do female peacocks go for males with the fanciest tail feathers? Are some people more accident-prone than others? Why did Debbie Estis Greenspan invent Dr. Doormat? Are all of these phenomena caused by parasites? 'Yes,' according to Professor Zuk. If you don't believe that parasitized people have more accidents, read the chapter "Bad but Not Weird: The Real Emerging Diseases." Not only might the parasite that causes toxoplasmosis be responsible for a higher automobile accident rate, it might also trigger schizophrenia: "Children of mothers who were infected with toxoplasmosis during pregnancy show higher levels of mental retardation, brain malformations, and seizures. Ewald and coworkers believe that the reason more people with schizophrenia are born at certain times of year is that their mothers were more likely to have come into contact with cats and their feces." "Riddled with Life" presents a very clear thesis: evolution is driven by parasitism. It is backed up by fascinating proofs.

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