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Mean And Lowly Things



Synopsis

In 2005 Jackson ventured into the remote swamp forests of the northern Congo to collect reptiles and amphibians. This book is Jackson's unvarnished account of her research on the front lines of the global biodiversity crisis—coping with interminable delays in obtaining permits, learning to outrun advancing army ants, subsisting on a diet of Spam and manioc, and ultimately falling in love with the strangely beautiful flooded forest.

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Customer Reviews

What's it take to be a crackerjack field biologist? First, scrape up miscellaneous funds to do a snake survey of a remote patch of the Republic of Congo, where no snake-expert has trod. Second, arrive during a brutal civil war with dead bodies lining the streets. Third, hire the two worst-recommended pygmies in the village as guides who think you are a witch. Fourth, wade alone at night in a tropical swamp catching snakes and other creepy-crawlies. Fifth, cut short your first expedition by coming down with blood poisoning from a leg scratch and be medically evacuated. You think that's enough? Oh no. Let seven years pass while earning her PhD from Harvard studying the venom delivery systems of venomous snakes and she's right back in the

Republic of Congo to continue what she thinks is pure heaven. This time there's no grisly war afoot, but she spends weeks and weeks mired in third-world bureaucracy, and then is prevented from doing fieldwork at her preferred site by a jackass official who won't put his signature on her permit. Having to choose a site outside the original reserve, she negotiates hiring a cook and guide in two languages, French and Lingala. Lungfishes, geckos, termites, and tropical downpours precede nights she sleeps on the ground for a month. Plunging into the rainforest the next day she learns to run like hell to avoid African army ants crawling up her shorts and affixing themselves in her flesh with their big pincers. Far into the forest she reaches an abandoned pygmy camp, swatting big tsetse flies on the way. Hard rain falls and soaks the camp and clothes. Swamp water to drink. Mosquitoes. Then night falls and Kate Jackson is now in her element when she disappears into the dark with headlight and a searching eye. This is a book difficult to put down. It is the saga of an intrepid scientist bent on her field research no matter the physical demands, or even worse, the stress of negotiating, hiring, working with other people who do not share her passions. However, trapping snakes in underwater nets, checking pitfall traps along a terrestrial drift fence, backpacking a 2-meter water cobra that she cut from a net, lugging an enraged 2.5-meter forest cobra half an hour down a narrow rainforest trail, wading up to her chest in tea-stained swamp water, counting belly scales, and fixing snakes, frogs, and lizards in standard museum poses in the mud and the rain is what thrills her. Kate's evocative narrative reveals a dedicated scientist with a lust for her specialty—amphibians and reptiles, especially snakes—no matter the inconvenience of sweat bees, biting flies, wasps, army ants, blisters from wet boots, rotting clothes, scrounging people, cut-up feet, incessant rain, sleeping on roots on the ground, local superstitions, Ascaris worm infection, and sullen hirelings. Reading Kate's text rewritten from her daily journal during three expeditions, one feels her excitement telling of the encounters and captures of *Dasypeltis*, the egg-eating snake; dozens of *Grayia ornata*, a swamp watersnake; quick-jumping *Ptychadena* frog; flat *Xenopus* clawed frog; *Psammophis phillipsi*, the olive grass racer; a bad-mannered *Aepel* African rock python; numerous skinks and geckos; ten frogs of at least 5 families; and, of course, the already mentioned large cobras. Her book chronicles what it is to be a modern field biologist, but in the best tradition of the naturalists of yore who braved the same inconveniences for the sake of science. Oh, did I mention that she had to eat rotting fish whose disgusting taste was covered up by smoking it? Or the painful bumps that were flesh-eating maggots growing under her skin? Or that when pulling from a brick pile a black snake with white patches that she thought was a harmless *Mehyla* snake, she became a member of the Order of the White Fang (snake-bite club)? Suddenly realizing that it was a forest cobra, she got her thumb

pricked instead of releasing it because children were standing around watching! If that weren't enough, she had two ampoules of antivenom dissolved in 20 cc of rainwater and table salt injected through her belly wall into her abdomen. She survived, went on to a career as a professor, continues to love snakes and herpetology, and write this book. In short, every naturalist and budding young naturalist will be mesmerized reading about her African fieldwork, the title of which she borrowed from Aristotle who once called such animals "Mean and Lowly Things."

What a great read! I thoroughly enjoyed this terrific account of actual field work in one of the remote regions of the world. So many of the tales ring true and her keen observations of personal dynamics in this type of endeavor were fantastic. It is rare to find books with this much detail and she weaves real science and compelling narrative effortlessly. Bravo!

I was really rooting for her to find a black mamba. I appreciated all the highs and lows of her trips. Respectfully navigating different cultures while having a very focused agenda is not easy. It was nice to see her finally loosen her grip and go with the flow a little more by the end. Glad she shared her story.

This was a very interesting read, full of scientific information related to herpetology, and the nuts and bolts of organizing a field research trip to Congo. It satisfied my love of travel, as well as the science geek part of me. The author has a genuine writing voice. She explained her thoughts, motivation, worries and joys of a young research scientist, as she accumulates experiences, as she makes mistakes, and as she learns from them. The details of real research work in the Congo was very informative, but the personal narration made everything interesting. She explained how and why basic scientific research is done in a bigger ecological sense and in a museum collection sense. As a bonus, I think this will be a good book to recommend to young people who are interested in going into science, particularly young women.

Great read no it may not have all the high-risk herps that some demand but real field work seldom does unless you are studying a hot species. I found the dealing's with the people in Africa to be so classic "first time in Africa I don't understand the culture mistakes" were a plenty. I look forward to watching her fieldwork mature through future books. I found her unassuming innocent nature both compelling and real. Many might want a more sit on the edge of your seat "will that hot herp kill

her?" kind of story but I really enjoyed this as a more accurate reflection on fieldwork. If you don't love the herps you just won't put up with the conditions. Besides how can you not love a girl whose favorite herp is Nerodia?

Kate Jackson is a great writer who has written a thoroughly marvelous true-life tale of adventure. I thoroughly admire her amazing journey into the African wetlands to catch, identify, and acquire tissue from snakes, many of them deadly. Make no mistake, this is a woman with the truest grit and the rightest stuff anybody ever saw. With her eye always on the truths she can deliver to other scientists, she shies from nothing, whether it is attacks by biting ants or having to stab herself in the stomach with a needle filled with suspect anti-venom. She's also got just enough of her tongue in cheek to elicit a few chuckles. All in all, just a delightful read and highly recommended for anyone who likes to read true-life adventures.

I loved this book! Although Kate Jackson is first a scientist and second a writer, she weaves a descriptive and engaging memoir. This is a book that if you have any bit of "science geek" in your soul, will make you want to make everyone around you read it. For example, the color photos in the middle of the book are primarily of the snakes and frogs she caught. Of course they are! Why would you want to see pictures of the people she describes and the conditions she lived in when you could see cool pictures of snakes?!? The photo selection sums up this book in a nutshell. It is a tale of a passion, her passion for science.

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