



David Quammen, *The Chimp and the River: How AIDS Emerged from an African Forest*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015. 176 pp. Paperback \$13.95.

Situating the AIDS pandemic within a broader discussion of zoonotic diseases, *The Chimp and the River* first appeared as a long chapter in David Quammen's *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic* (2012). In this revised standalone text, Quammen examines the origins of AIDS – the when, where and how of the disease.

Most stories about AIDS begin with its seeming emergence in the early 1980s, but Quammen identifies this moment as a midpoint in the epidemic – “the stage at which a slowly building, almost unnoticeable phenomenon suddenly rose to a crescendo” (23). Nevertheless, the 1980s are a good place for Quammen to begin tracing the crucial discoveries of those early years – the gradual, compounding realizations that the

cause of AIDS is an infectious agent, blood-borne, and far too small to be captured in the routine blood-screening processes of the time.

The details of those discoveries – the virus's isolation, its genomic sequencing and eventual division into different strains, groups and subgroups – could easily overwhelm any lay reader in less adept hands than Quammen's. And, along the way he identifies and explores several false leads and controversies (the Manchester sailor and OPV theory, for example), offering insight into the processes through which scientists approach and attempt to locate the origin of such a virus.

Although, the precise time and place of that fateful spillover can never be known, scientists have traced it to southeastern Cameroon around 1908. In a speculative, but not baseless, section Quammen imagines that spillover and the virus's subsequent travel from southeastern Cameroon along the Sangha and Congo rivers to Brazzaville and Leopoldville where it was in the population by 1960. From there the virus spread to the rest of Africa, to Europe, to Asia and to South America. It arrived in Haiti around 1966 and in the United States around 1969. A decade later it arrived in the public consciousness.

Quammen upends much of what we think we know about the origins of HIV/AIDS, how it entered the human population, and how it spread so disastrously, so (seemingly) fast; and, he does it without over-dramatizing or fear-mongering. He balances the science with respect and compassion for the human and animal cost of the disease. As Quammen is so fond of writing, “everything comes from somewhere,” and understanding that somewhere is essential to understanding the virus and the disease it causes.

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