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The World Until Yesterday: What Can WE Learn from Traditional Societies?, by Jared Diamond, Penguin, 2012

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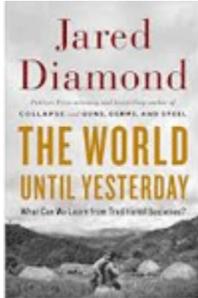
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Recommended Readings



The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?

by Jared Diamond, Penguin, 2012

Reviewed by Larry Riggs

This new book by the author of *The Third Chimpanzee*; *Guns, Germs, and Steel*; and *Collapse* is even more ambitious than those works. Here, Diamond continues his effort to give sweeping, well-informed, and readable accounts of important aspects of human evolution and of vital issues in contemporary civilization. This endeavor maddens many specialists, whose cautious findings Diamond often oversimplifies, but this reader-an unregenerate humanities professor-feels enriched by what Diamond provides. Diamond's thesis in *The World Until Yesterday* is that there may be practices common in many traditional societies -small-scale, stateless groups of hunter-gatherers, herders, horticulturalists/farmers, or of practitioners of combinations of those economies-from which members of modern, industrialized societies might choose to learn. Diamond does not idealize traditional life; in fact, his accounts of low life-expectancy, chronic insecurity and endemic warfare in and among traditional societies, and the alacrity with which many traditional people have embraced modernity, weaken his argument. However, the information he provides in passing is often fascinating and though-provoking. Most interesting, to me, are Diamond's analyses of the origins and evolution of religion and of language and linguistic diversity. The one area of life in which traditional practices, as Diamond describes them, seem intriguingly superior many modern practices, is child-rearing. Here, too, though, as specialist critics have pointed out, both traditional and modern societies differ so much that generalizations are always questionable. All-in-all, if read for interesting information and food for contemplation and speculation, this is an excellent book.

- Larry Riggs is Professor of French at Butler University.