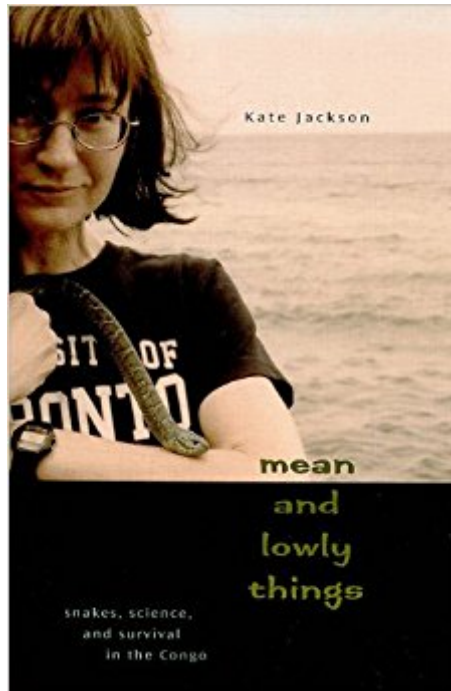




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# Mean And Lowly Things: Snakes, Science, And Survival In The Congo



## Synopsis

In 2005 Kate Jackson ventured into the remote swamp forests of the northern Congo to collect reptiles and amphibians. Her camping equipment was rudimentary, her knowledge of Congolese customs even more so. She knew how to string a net and set a pitfall trap, but she never imagined the physical and cultural difficulties that awaited her. Culled from the mud-spattered pages of her journals, *Mean and Lowly Things* reads like a fast-paced adventure story. It is Jackson's unvarnished account of her research on the front lines of the global biodiversity crisis—dealing 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. The reptile fauna of the Republic of Congo was all but undescribed, and Jackson's mission was to carry out the most basic study of the amphibians and reptiles of the swamp forest: to create a simple list of the species that exist there—a crucial first step toward efforts to protect them. When the snakes evaded her carefully set traps, Jackson enlisted people from the villages to bring her specimens. She trained her guide to tag frogs and skinks and to fix them in formalin. As her expensive camera rusted and her Western soap melted, Jackson learned what it took to swim with the snakes and that there's a right way and a wrong way to get a baby cobra out of a bottle.

## Book Information

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press (May 1, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674048423

ISBN-13: 978-0674048423

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 36 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,207,575 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #89 in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Zoology > Reptiles #319 in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Animals > Reptiles & Amphibians #1133 in Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Natural History

## Customer Reviews

Herpetologist Jackson is candid, funny, and precise as she chronicles her demanding and

illuminating experiences collecting snakes, frogs, and toads in the flooded forests of the Congo. A Canadian in love with snakes practically since birth, Jackson wanted to do her part in extending our knowledge of the planet's precious and endangered biodiversity and had no idea of just how grueling fieldwork would be in the Republic of Congo. Sharply observant, disciplined, considerate, and tough, Jackson is immensely entertaining in her exuberantly detailed descriptions of swarms of termites, ants, and mosquitoes; unpalatable food; and painfully rugged campsites. Add to that nearly surreal negotiations with officials, confounding and emotional relationships with guides and assistants, medical misadventures, and moments ludicrous and dramatic as she chases down poisonous snakes, handles a motley animal remains, and struggles to preserve and identify priceless specimens and forge cross-cultural scientific partnerships. Jackson is a dynamo, and her riveting, amusing, and revealing tales from the biodiversity front line awaken fresh appreciation for hands-on scientific inquiry and the wonders of nature. --Donna Seaman --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Indiana Jones, step aside! Kate Jackson is an intrepid adventurer and explorer, and her passion for research, discovery, and snakes resonates from every page of this gripping account of a woman in science. (Meg Lowman, author of *Life in the Treetops* and *It's a Jungle Up There*) This is the sort of book that makes hardcore field biologists cry out, "take me to the rainforest." For the rest of you, enjoying the sanity and comforts of the armchair adventurer, I suggest you hang on and enjoy the ride. (Mark W. Moffett, Research Scientist, Smithsonian Institution and recipient of the Lowell Thomas Medal of the Explorer's Club) Kate Jackson's field memoir detailing her experiences in the Republic of Congo is a delight that thrills and informs the reader. In relating her adventures conducting a herpetological survey and collecting venomous snakes, she brings to vivid life the harsh realities of fieldwork with its frustrations and disappointments. We're with her as she battles loneliness, parasites, and uncertainties and adapts to a foreign culture. And we share her personal highs and the swamp forest's allure. Bravo to this intrepid herpetologist! (Marty Crump, author of *Headless Males Make Great Lovers and Other Unusual Natural Histories*) This is what exploratory natural history in a remote place, embedded in a very different culture, is really like--frustrating, confusing, scary, and fraught with prospects for failure. Jackson tells the truth even when it doesn't necessarily reflect well on her, and did I mention she's a small woman working in places where, I'm not kidding, most male herpetologists wouldn't dare to go? *Mean and Lowly Things* is genuine adventure, without the swashbuckling! (Harry W. Greene, Cornell University Professor and author of *Snakes: The Evolution of Mystery in Nature*) It is always exciting to read about remote, natural

places in the world and even more so when the story is told by a field researcher. In the tradition of Jane Goodall...Jackson has written a fascinating, adventure-filled memoir, describing how her love of snakes led her to become a herpetologist. She was eventually able to raise money for a survey of reptiles and amphibians in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, specifically in the flooded forest habitat around Lac TãfÂ©IãfÂ©. Drawing from her journal entries, Jackson takes us through the planning, permits, and travel, as well as her actual time in the field catching animals. Jackson learns to work with her native field staff during her two collecting trips and shows appreciation for all the local people she meets and employs. (Margaret Henderson Library Journal 2008-03-15)Herpetologist Jackson is candid, funny, and precise as she chronicles her demanding and illuminating experiences collecting snakes, frogs, and toads in the flooded forests of the Congo... Sharply observant, considerate, and rough, Jackson is immensely entertaining in her exuberantly detailed descriptions of swarms of termites, ants, and mosquitoes; unpalatable food; and painfully rugged campsites. Add to that nearly surreal negotiations with officials, confounding relationships with guides and assistants, medical misadventures, and moments ludicrous and dramatic as she chases down poisonous snakes, handles animal remains, and snuggles to preserve and identify priceless specimens and forge cross-cultural scientific partnerships. Jackson is a dynamo, and her riveting, amusing, and revealing tales from the biodiversity front line awaken fresh appreciation for hands-on scientific inquiry and the wonders of nature. (Donna Seaman Booklist 2008-04-15)In our age of Google Maps, it's comforting to learn that a few places remain relatively impenetrable to the outside world. Nowhere is this more true than the Congo, which has long held a fascination for explorers and scientists and continues to guard its secrets...Descriptions of ant invasions, maggots under the skin, sleepless nights, bad food and even the odd venomous snake bite all keep the pages turning. Against the odds, Jackson's efforts in the Congo eventually pay off--not only does she discover a new species, she also finds romance. This intriguing blend of science and human interest, related in a matter-of-fact style, brings to life a little-known part of the world. (Dan Eatherley BBC Wildlife 2008-07-01)This book will serve as an inspiration to future field biologists. It is also an exciting adventure story for those who would rather avoid the ants, termites, wasps, and the fly maggots that burrow into the biologists' skin and grow larger there. (M. P. Gustafson Choice 2008-09-01)Fieldwork is very important but unsung. Jackson deserves respect for her drive, ability to organize and manage her fieldwork alone, train local students, and to learn the local language without losing sight of the scientific aims...She is refreshingly honest about the failures, mistakes and difficulties of her fieldwork as well as the successes...Mean and Lowly Things is full of incident and cultural as well as scientific insight that should carry non-scientific readers right

to the end. (David J. Gower Times Literary Supplement 2008-12-12) As a travel book, Kate Jackson's account of snake collecting in the tropics is both humorous and dramatic... As an account of biological fieldwork under trying conditions, however, Jackson's book is both elegant and appealing... There are probably only a few specialists who can fully appreciate the professional journal articles on the biodiversity of the Congo forest that resulted from Jackson's expeditions. And only a few adventurous readers may share her "irrational longing to return" to the Lac TÃ©fÃ© forest, which, judging from her online blog, she did in the summer of 2008. But we can all hope that she will continue writing, and that we won't have to wait too long for the next installment of Kate Jackson's Excellent Adventures, wherever they may lead. (Laurence A. Marschall Natural History 2008-11-01)

WhatÃ©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 thatÃ©s enough? Oh no. Let seven years pass while earning her PhD from Harvard studying the venom delivery systems of venomous snakes and sheÃ©s right back in the Republic of Congo to continue what she thinks is pure heaven. This time thereÃ©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 "pet" 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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