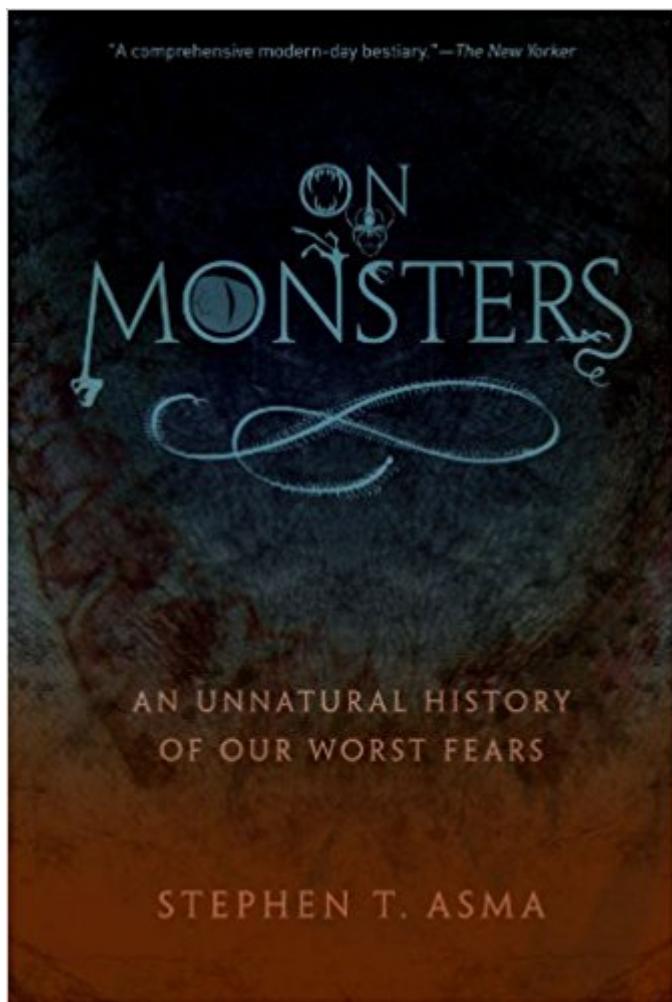


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On Monsters: An Unnatural History Of Our Worst Fears



Synopsis

Hailed as "a feast" (Washington Post) and "a modern-day bestiary" (The New Yorker), Stephen Asma's *On Monsters* is a wide-ranging cultural and conceptual history of monsters--how they have evolved over time, what functions they have served for us, and what shapes they are likely to take in the future. Beginning at the time of Alexander the Great, the monsters come fast and furious--Behemoth and Leviathan, Gog and Magog, Satan and his demons, Grendel and Frankenstein, circus freaks and headless children, right up to the serial killers and terrorists of today and the post-human cyborgs of tomorrow. Monsters embody our deepest anxieties and vulnerabilities, Asma argues, but they also symbolize the mysterious and incoherent territory beyond the safe enclosures of rational thought. Exploring sources as diverse as philosophical treatises, scientific notebooks, and novels, Asma unravels traditional monster stories for the clues they offer about the inner logic of an era's fears and fascinations. In doing so, he illuminates the many ways monsters have become repositories for those human qualities that must be repudiated, externalized, and defeated.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Real or imagined, literal or metaphorical, monsters have exerted a dread fascination on the human mind for many centuries. Using philosophical treatises, theological tracts, newspapers, films, and novels, author Stephen T. Asma unpacks traditional monster stories for the clues they offer about the inner logic of our fears and fascinations throughout the ages. Take a Closer Look at the Mythical Creatures from *On Monsters* Click on image to enlarge The manticore monster was thought to

favor human flesh. Descriptions of the beast appear in the natural history texts of Ctesias, Aristotle, and Pliny. Pencil drawing by Stephen T. Asma © 2008, based on a sketch from Edward Topsell's seventeenth-century bestiary.

The Golem is a bumbling monster of Jewish folklore. The clay creature was animated by Rabbi Judah Loew to protect the Jewish ghetto but could not be controlled and wreaked havoc in Prague. Pen and ink drawing by Stephen T. Asma © 2008. The Cyclops legend was fueled by ancient Greek misinterpretations of mastodon skulls found in Mediterranean caves. Pencil drawing and collage by Stephen T. Asma. Symbolic of God's power, the biblical Behemoth appears in the Book of Psalms and Job. Pencil drawing by Stephen T. Asma © 2008. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Asma's book zooms in on the subject of monsters, both mythical and real, past, present and future, detailing how they have fascinated and frightened the human imagination through all of recorded time. Conjuring dread, the mind's eye has embraced the Philistine giant Goliath, Grendel, the golem of Jewish lore, Frankenstein's monster, freak shows, monster spectacles and werewolves with equal parts affection and terror, writes Asma, a philosophy professor at Columbia College Chicago. Using varied media sources, from history to legend and literature, Asma studies the symbolic meaning of monsters (e.g., biblical monsters represent arrogance in the face of God's power) and their psychological function. He concludes that humans need an excuse to fight, protect and defend, as well as to transfer those horrific qualities, our own monstrous desires, to inhuman beings. A wide-ranging exploration of fear and evil, Asma's presentation and theories are original and practical, depicting those dark, repulsive notions of an unstable, turbulent world in which everybody must struggle to remain human and civilized. 30 b&w illus. (Oct.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Asma's history is fascinating in the first section of the book, which is more of a literal history of the development and conception of the predominant idea of "monsters" in the (mostly) European world. This portion of the book is strong and the sociological information Asma lays out matches the history. Sadly, the second section, loses focus. It dwells in the moment world and mostly a series of reflections on the ideas of monster with various (some-what meandering) theories for the different aspects discussed. However, all sorts of things bubble up in the contemporary miasmas, including half-baked straw man about "post-modern" relativism, long contemplations of Freud, essay like reflections on ethics, etc. This actually causes the book to loss any sense of focus and starts to feel

like reading semi-related essays than a history. It really does feel like two very different and only tangentially connected books attached by breaking it down into two sections.

A scholar's book (I refer to the writer, not the reader). Asma digs deep into the factors that manifested themselves as "monsters" both in the distant past and now. Far from being a "creepy, crawly" tome, this book makes one think about the creatures that inhabit our conscious and unconscious minds and, by so doing, helps clear away the mists that often keep us from seeing clearly what it is, or might be, that makes us declare a thing -- or a person -- to be "a monster". Asma adds to the mix a number of drawings, many of which are his own, and photos to provide visual reference points for many of his written descriptions. This is a book that will hold your interest.

In a world of Cryptozoology, Asma very practically looks at the nature and categories of monstrosity, not just monsters. His intro lets you know this isn't a book about bigfoot or chimeras alone, but he doesn't shy away from them. He goes piece by piece through history, starting with the classicists and moving up. It's a very accessible entrance into the academic pursuit of what can be attached to otherness theory, Asma himself is an excellent writer and evokes an energy of excitedly sitting down with you to talk about all these connections he's made. What is a monster? Why are they a monster? How are they a monster? What do we do about monsters? Read the book, find out.

"On Monsters" is written in a conversational style that is easy and pleasant to follow. Facts and ideas are arranged in logical ways that build on each other so as the reader accumulates the information, he or she is also zooming along with that unique pleasure that comes from reading a book that truly engages one's mind. I never felt I was reading a textbook, but each paragraph made me hungry for the next in such a way that I consumed the book and finished with a great sigh of satisfaction. I have read other books on "monsters", but this one, while building from a familiar starting place, added insights and new information peppered throughout enough to add to my knowledge and entertain me for a couple of nights. I enjoyed it so much I am going to read the Author's other books. Who can resist the title, "The Gods Drink Whiskey: Stumbling Toward Enlightenment in the Land of the Tattered Buddha"? That's the next one for me.

Excellent

The book was extremely well-researched and I learned quite a bit. But it didn't feel approachable for

a mass audience. The author's frequent use of three-dollar words may contribute to that. Perhaps it was intended for a more academic audience.

Just finished this book. A very good study. I've been interested in monster since I was a child and this is the first nonfiction book on the subject I've read. For anyone who seriously wants to study the subject this is an excellent book. It's easy to understand, it looks at the subject from many different vantage points. An enjoyable read and it opened my eyes to aspects about the subject I wasn't aware of. Since getting into eBooks I've been reading a lot of monster fiction. Most of it as bad as bad as most of the monster movies. This book shows there is no reason why monster fiction/movies can't be intelligent.

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