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Boria Sax. *The Serpent and the Swan: The Animal Bride in Folklore and Literature.* Blacksburg, Va.: McDonald & Woodward, 1998. vii + 268 pp. $18.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-939923-68-7.

Reviewed by Gary Kern

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This is a beautifully produced and beautifully reasoned book. The author, Boria Sax, begins his exploration by stating that he prefers not to follow any particular school of interpretation; his goal is not to reconstruct, deconstruct or ideologically exploit the oft-repeated story of the animal bride, but to find the human meaning in it. This approach is refreshing, rewarding and eminently readable: we are introduced not to pedantic terminology and academic analysis designed to demonstrate the brilliance of the analyst, but rather to a calm and thoughtful voice speaking to us as reasoning and feeling human beings. The method is open, eclectic, directed by expert knowledge and common sense like that of Joseph Campbell, but perhaps with fewer preconceptions than even that great guru.

Having dismissed the "isms," Sax asks a number of direct and disarming questions: What is nature? What is animal? What is human? What is gender? What is marriage? He devotes a brief discussion to each. The picture that emerges is that mankind in the course of its development separated itself conceptually from nature, but ever after felt the need to return. Yet the concept of "nature" is not fixed; it changes with society and remains largely a mystery, as do the animals within it. One way of re- establishing the connection is through imagination, storytelling, mythmaking. Add the reminder that humans and animals, representative of nature, can form a bond as close as a marriage, that a man may call his sweetheart his pet, and you have the psychological preconditions for the story of the animal marriage.

There are animal brides and animal grooms, and they figure not only in remote legends and tales, but in literature central to the development of our civilization. Such are Gilgamesh and Enkidu; Adam, Eve and the Serpent; and the accounts of animal worship or reverence that punctuate the narratives of the Old and New Testaments: the Golden Calf, fiery snakes, Beelzebub. Such outbreaks of zoolatry, which continue on through the Middle Ages and up to the weird cults of our time, Sax interprets as revolts against the anthropomorphic gods that replaced the original animal ones. He shows how many peoples traced their origins back to animals, how noble families

liked to claim a romantic or mysterious link to mythical beasts. He touches on the fears animals awaken in humans, such as lawlessness, sensuality, incest. In telling examples he demonstrates Christianity's uneasy truce with animals, as in its imagery and designations of Lamb and Lion. He mentions the magical powers of animals, released in ceremonies such as snake-handling.

Coming to his chief subject, Sax explores the protean power of the serpent and the swan, the one shedding its skin and achieving rebirth, the other moulting, swimming and taking wing, both sinuous and mysterious. The crucial story here is Melusine, a water nymph who agrees to marry a smitten young hunter on condition that he leave her in peace on Saturdays and not visit her in her room; they live happily, beget a brood of children with animal traits, till Count Raymond, moved by evil rumors of her faithlessness, looks in one Saturday on Melusine and sees a serpent's body sprouting from her waist. In the ensuing argument, she rises up birdlike and flies around the castle, then leaves him forever. Yet she watches unseen as a good spirit over her family. The story relates to Orpheus and Eurydice; Medea; mermaids; pagan and neo-pagan goddesses.

Sax's rich discussion of the the theme, taking it up through the twentieth century, concludes with a plea for "a sacramental view of animal rights." In a world where machines have replaced animal helpers and assumed their qualities--the car in place of the beloved horse, the security system in place of the trusty dog--people long for a return to the past and a supposed golden age of harmony with nature. They keep pets--there are more pets in America than children--but convert them into semi-humans. "Man makes dog in his own image," one dog-trainer used to say. The scholarly among them create new myths of indigenous peoples living ecologically balanced lives, or of pre-patriarchal societies united in reverence for a great goddess. Sax unsentimentally debunks these visions as permeated by nostalgia and unsupported by scientific research. Likewise he rejects attempts to extend human rights into the animal realm as inadvertently maintaining human primary and exclusion; so too the practice of vegetarianism, which meat-eating animals themselves do not observe.

Instead, he thinks meaningful contact with nature can be reestablished by a "principle of fair compensation." That is, paying back the animals that support us in medical research, nutrition and commercial imagery by performing small rituals of thanksgiving and by giving donations to benefit others of their species. He thinks the image of fair Melusine, serpentine in her form, human in her love, elusive in her mystery, can inspire us. She is, writes Sax, "the humanity glimpsed in the eyes of a squirrel. She is the whale sinking beneath the waves."

The question whether this way is open to many, or only to the few, is not addressed. My guess is that most men will lose all contact with animals, save perhaps their pets, and satisfy themselves with TV images and falsified nature films. The animal world will arise only in their unconscious mind, their dreams and fears. The few who practice rituals of compensation will fall into the category of isolated kooks. That is where most individuals are headed.

The book is wonderfully illustrated with line drawings, some quite rare, taken from many ages and cultures, and includes retellings of the outstanding animal bride stories.

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