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David Quammen. *Monster of God: The Man-Eating Predator in the Jungles of History and the Mind.* New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003. 485 pp. $26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-05140-7; $15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-393-32609-3.

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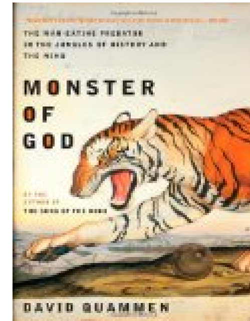

"Tyger, Tiger, Burning Bright"

It isn't at all accidental that Sy Montgomery's review of David Quammen's *Monster of God* in *Discover* magazine appeared side by side with a review of Jean Clottes's *Chauvet Cave: The Art of Earliest Times*, or that a single photograph of the amazing wall of lions in that cave served there to illustrate both books.[1] In addition to full analyses of works like *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf*, Quammen offers an analysis of cave art, including the 35,000-year-old Chauvet paintings, as proof of the hold large predators have over the human mind and imagination. Montgomery tells us that the Chauvet *Panthera spelaea* was the largest lion ever to exist. "The ancient portraits," she writes, "tell us about an extinct species and even more about our own," adding, "[a]las, the landscape is now bereft of them" and soon to be bereft, in less than five human generations according to Quammen, of the northern Australian saltwater crocodile, the Carpathean bear, the lions of Gir, and Siberian tigers–his subjects in *Monster of God*.[2]

For years now, I've found the most provocative sources of literary criticism to be not the traditional analyses and journals, but works of natural history and animal studies. But then, my interest is in animals in literature and art rather than the more conventional–anthropocentric–concerns of literary and art criticism. For example, when I require commentary on *Bambi*, Salten's or Disney's, I turn to Matt Cartmill's *A View to a Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature through History* (1993). When I want commentary on Charlotte of *Charlotte's Web* fame, I turn first to Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), and, now, when I want analysis of works treating large predators, I will turn first to Quammen's *Monster of God*.[3]

I am not suggesting that *Monster of God* should be valued first and foremost for its insights into art and literature, though certainly such insights are valuable and Quammen's realization of the deep role animals have played in human creativity and thought is far too rarely acknowledged by most writers. These insights are but one of many proofs the author presents to suggest how deeply embedded in the minds of *Homo sapiens* such "monsters" are. As a number of other reviewers have mentioned, humans tend not to enjoy being thought of as a prey species. In fact, in *An Instinct for Dragons* (2000), David E. Jones also argues that fear of predators that prey upon man, extending to the remains of dinosaurs and their latter-day kin, dragons, both relatives of Quammen's crocodile, is coded in our genetic memory from our prehuman evolutionary journey and that those memories continue to haunt our dreams, whether or not we are in any real and present danger of predation from any except our own fellow humans.[4] Killer grizzlies and cougars still roam with Godzilla and mutant insects in adventure and horror films and newspaper headlines! Quammen's studies of four highly endangered species of mega-predators would suggest there is substance to Jones's theory. In fact, it would seem, after finishing *Monster*, that the humans who fear them most are not those who share their worlds and actually sometimes find themselves their prey, but those of us who dwell on the distant boundaries of the shrinking areas of wilderness such large predators depend on and for whom they, like totem beasts, define the Heart of Darkness.[5] As Tim Flannery points out in his *New York Re-*

view of Books review, "The problem arises when we lose contact with one another," human and nonhuman, prey and predator. Indigenous peoples like the youthful Masai shepherd Flannery encountered in Kenya "and his ancestors had never lost touch, never forgotten the rules of the game."[6]

The indigenous peoples who share the habitats of these particular large predators certainly respect them as potentially dangerous and powerful predators. Many also worship them, perhaps to propitiate them. Flannery suggests they are rather like competitors in the human worlds of business and politics, perfectly willing to "ruthlessly pounce," but "rarely presented" with opportunity "because we all know the game." They know it because they have not "lost contact with one another" as Western man has with the wild and its wild creatures. In his relatively brief visits to each habitat, Quammen (prepped with biological and anthropological research) seems to get to know these humans quite well. Unfortunately, the nonhuman side of the equation emerges less convincingly; each of the four species, though we know an incredible number of facts about their biology and interactions with humans, remaining elusive as beings in their own rights. In a way, the author's conjuring up the vast encyclopedia of monster epics and art seems intended to fill that void. And while, as I have written, I value Quammen's literary analyses, they are no substitute for a sense of these remarkable creatures as living, breathing presences, immersed in their own life stories.

Actually, I had the same reaction as I read Peter Matthiessen's *The Birds of Heaven: Travels with Cranes* (2001), although to some extent that book was saved for me by the paintings and drawings of wildlife artist Robert Bateman.[7] These studies brought the real subjects–or at least what were purported to be Matthiessen's real subjects–to life for me. *Monsters of God* lacks even photographs of the four predator species explored. The maps provided helped me locate the remote areas they inhabit, but also made me nostalgic for fictional animal fantasies like Richard Adams's *Watership Down* (1972) since, when supplemented by the magic of imagination, Adams is able to bring his subjects to life, allowing his reader to imagine them in the territories shown in the maps he provides. Neither Matthiessen nor Quammen sparks the essential imaginative leap and the accompanying empathy for the individual animal–exactly what each requires if readers are to be moved to care and to take action in behalf of these animals. Nor does such a leap require fiction.

Carl Safina's *Eye of the Albatross: Visions of Hope and Survival* (2002) achieves everything Quammen succeeds in (and adds a masterful reading of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"!) but also, by entering imaginatively as well as scientifically into the life journey of a single albatross, Amelia, achieves the balance of the anthropocentric and nonanthropocentric that neither Quammen nor Matthiessen manages.[8] Amelia comes alive and gives the researchers and indigenous people as well as the reader reason to care about her survival. Perhaps that also explains why Safina's is a vision of hope and survival while Matthiessen and Quammen cry doom and extinction.

Not that I underestimate the dangers such large predators, in fact wilderness itself, face. Each of these predators, Quammen tells us, is a keystone species essential to stabilize the food chain. Their loss, as Montgomery puts it in her review, "signal[s] an ecological collapse" by the year 2150. As Norman Rush recognizes in his *New York Times* review, Quammen's book is "an expansion and gloss on Thoreau's prophetic 'In wilderness is the preservation of the world.' " While I appreciate the significance and, again, the literary gloss, and agree with Rush that Quammen actually focuses more on efforts to save these magnificent creatures than on efforts to eradicate them, those efforts seem themselves anthropocentric.

They comprise the crocodile farms which are successfully turning Australia's monster into a commercial product to support the peoples who, in return, ensure the crocodile's survival. They are the wild and domestic breeding programs and protective legislation and licensed hunting of the Carpathean bear. They are even the author's effort to convince us that somehow these great beasts define our humanity and that, in order to do so, they must remain wild and free–"Tyger, tiger, burning bright/ In the forests of the night"–not captive populations in zoos. Only in the wild, he argues, can they enrich our dreams and nightmares and, through them, become the cultural icons of our religions, literatures, myth, and lore. Bronzed and enameled, the monsters who can crunch our bones and drink our blood are distilled into words and symbols and images nonetheless, captive and safe. The living, breathing crocodile, bear, lion, tiger going about the business of their own lives seem–in all these projects–somehow irrelevant.

Monster of God is in many ways a recasting of Quammen's earlier *The Song of the Dodo* (1996).[9] The living creatures, as though they were already extinct, are like ghosts haunting his text and imagination, but never

sparked into a living reality.

Notes

[1]. Sy Montgomery, "Ravenous Lords of a Lost World: Disappearing Man-eaters Could Signal an Ecological Collapse," *Discover* 24 (2003).

[2]. In her review of Quammen's book, entitled "It's a Jungle Out There for the Fearsome Beasts," *New York Times*, 26 August 2003, p. E6, Michiko Kakutani finds Quammen's choice of "monsters" arbitrary. She questions why he ignores, for instance, the great white shark and snakes like the python and anaconda, although it seems clear to me that the reason is in the extreme vulnerability of his four chosen species.

[3]. Matt Cartmill, *A View to a Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature through History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

[4]. David E. Jones, *An Instinct for Dragons* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[5]. Pamela S. Turner's review "In the Forests of the Night" in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 18 September 2003, p. 18S, identifies the subject of *Monster* as "[t]he fascination we feel towards animals capable of using us as lunch meat," and Norman Rush's and Michiko Kakutani's *New York Times* reviews, as well as Clea Simon's review in *The San Francisco Chronicle* ("The Hunted Becomes THE HUNTED," 31 August 2003, p. M1), agree. Rush's review (31 August 2003) is titled "The Better to Eat You With, My Dear," while Steve Minsky's *Scientific American* review is called "Biting Us and the Dust" (August 2003), but they all move on to focus on what each sees as a more important if less interesting theme: the human tendency to annihilate what we fear.

[6]. Tim Flannery, "The Lady, or the Tiger? " *The New York Review of Books*, 9 October 2003: p. 13.

[7]. Peter Matthiessen, *The Birds of Heaven: Travels with Cranes* (New York: North Point Press, 2001).

[8]. Carl Safina, *Eye of the Albatross: Visions of Hope and Survival* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002).

[9]. David Quammen, *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions* (New York: Scribner, 1996).

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