



The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the 12th Century

T.H. White (Translator)

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If a serpent swallows the spittle of a fasting man, it dies. Trees felled in the wrong season breed termites. If eels are drowned in wine, those who drink it get a loathing for liquor.

These and similar flights of fancy were articles of faith in the twelfth century — the era of the fascinating Latin prose bestiary translated in this volume. The translator is T. H. White, author of *The Once and Future King* and outstanding medievalist. Of *The Book of Beasts*, White writes: "No Latin prose bestiary has ever before been *printed*, even in Latin. This is the first and *only* English translation in print."

The bestiary was a bestseller in the Middle Ages, a kind of natural history cum-zoological survey that presumed to describe the animals of the world and to point out the human traits they exemplified. Combining the surprisingly accurate with the endearingly phantasmagorical, the bestiarists came up with a bewildering array of real and exotic creatures. The behavior or attributes of the animals often functioned as a metaphor for teaching religious, moral, and political precepts.

In addition to a multitude of real mammals, birds, reptiles, and fish, described here with varying degrees of zoological accuracy, the bestiarist introduces a swarm of fanciful denizens thought to haunt the Dark Ages: *manticore*, a creature with a man's face, a lion's body, and a ravenous appetite for human flesh; *dragon* or *draco*, the biggest serpent and the embodiment of the Devil; *amphibia*, a fish that could walk on land and swim in the sea; *jaculus*, a flying serpent; the familiar *phoenix*; the *griffin*; and other exotic fauna. Much of the charm of this edition lies in the copious footnotes compiled by T. H. White. With immense erudition, wit, grace, and a singular lack of condescension, the author illuminates literary, scientific, historical, linguistic, and other aspects of the bestiarist's catalog. He further enhances the volume with informative discussions of the history of the bestiary from its origins in remote oral traditions; through Herodotus, Pliny and Aristotle; during the medieval period and the Renaissance; and up to Sir Thomas Browne's *Vulgar Errors* (1646). Both amusing and amazing, *The Book of Beasts* is not only a rich survey of the proto-zoology on which much of our later science is based, but also a revealing, illustrated examination of how pre-scientific man perceived the earth's creatures.

The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the 12th Century Details

Date : Published December 22nd 2010 by Dover Publications (first published 1125)

ISBN : 9780486246093

Author : T.H. White (Translator)

Format : Paperback 296 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Mythology, Historical, Medieval, Classics, Reference



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From Reader Review The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the 12th Century for online ebook

Bethany Wade says

I feel like any book that can use both "awhoring" and "bugaboos" successfully deserves at least two stars!

Igor says

The way of thinking of the 12th century towards animal is needless to say completely outdated. It is interesting to know how they thought, but it is much more interesting because it made me ask myself if what we know today for truth or fact is really that.

LobsterQuadrille says

This is a very interesting book to read for a number of reasons. Not only is it an interesting glimpse into the culture of the Middle Ages, but it can also be very entertaining to read about the bizarre things people believed about various animals all those centuries ago. There are even a few mythical animals featured. T.H. White enhances the experience with his insightful and often humorous footnotes, which not only provide extra information, but add a personal element as well. The original illustrations depicting the animals range from the faithfully rendered to the comically inaccurate(as in the case of the crocodile and the elephant), but all are quite elegant in their distinctly medieval style.

I think T.H. White's translation of the bestiary is an overlooked classic that deserves much more recognition than it seems to get. It was a very enjoyable read for me, and would probably be enjoyed by fans of classics, history buffs, and anyone interested in the strange and fantastical.

Sal says

White brings out-- or just matches, himself-- the wackiness of the Middle Ages.

Douglas Summers-Stay says

There is really only one Bestiary; everybody who wrote one copied liberally from everyone else. T.H. White's translation is accompanied by numerous footnotes and a long essay at the end. The footnotes often try to figure out what real animal the book could be referring to. The entry on the dragon, for instance, is clearly describing a boa constrictor in this version. The monk who wrote it clearly liked and identified with bees-- how they all did their jobs, and lived in little cells, and worked for the good of the community. If you've never read a bestiary, you really should at least once: otherwise you're missing a lot of allusions in Shakespeare and other literature from the 1200s through the 1800s. Every animal has its moral lesson. It's like

zoology by way of Sunday School.

Sarah Sammis says

I remember reading this at UCLA but my book diary tells me that's not possible. I was already done with school by the time I read it.

Carolyn Page says

I wonder what the middle-ages would make of a modern biology textbook? Witchcraft, most likely. This is a book of science, as far as they knew, with helpful hints and medicinal know-how. Nowadays, we'd be more likely to call THAT witchcraft!

Nilsson says

One of the better books I've read on magical beasts. I was thankful there was a mention of fire stones for once. Interesting to compare with my other books on fantastical creatures. I'm still comparing notes though, it's always so hard to find reliable sources.

Baal Of says

This was a peculiar book, due to the mix of mythology, misinformation, and moralizing. The author even spent a good deal of time shaking his finger at anyone who might dare criticize the lack of accuracy as being condescending, and justified the moralizing. That's all fine and good, I still found it annoying. However, the insights into the kinds of ideas people had about various creatures are interesting. White calls this a science book, but that seems a bit of a stretch, since it is more a collection of claims, and doesn't really provide any kind of theoretical framework. Worth reading from a historical perspective.

Katherine Sas says

A wonderful peak into the medieval mind and imagination. This translation of 12th century Latin bestiary, providing first-hand exposure to one of the most fascinating literary genres of its age, combining biology, fantasy, mythology, and theology into one seamless whole. TH White's erudite and witty commentary, as ever, further elevates the whole thing.

Catherine Alber says

Fascinating and, since the field of zoology has come a long way since the 12th century, unintentionally

funny, like this description of the hyena:

"This is an animal called the YENA, which is accustomed to live in the sepulchres of the dead and to devour their bodies. Its nature is that at one moment it is masculine and at another moment feminine, and hence it is a dirty brute" (White 31).

Or this one:

"There is an animal called an ELEPHANT, which has no desire to copulate" (24).

Enhanced by charmingly inaccurate illustrations from the original manuscript and White's humorous footnotes.

Mike says

An interesting literary translation of the ancient transcriptions of historical myth and facts about animals and beasts. Filled with notes in regard to Greek and Latin terminology relating to the descriptions and annotations to explain the derivative description of a real world species or how the myth of a beast might have developed. The book of beasts is not a story, nor is it a linear form of text but rather a compilation of information broken down into categories of a few chapters and Greek, Latin or English names of Animals and Beasts from reality and fiction. A great read for anyone interested in animals or creatures, as it provides a great deal of information that could lend itself to creativity in art or a good source of knowledge for literature.

Suellen Rubira says

It is an indispensable reading for those who try to understand the bestiary universe and the relationship between humans and nature.

Laura says

This book is full of Medieval drawings of all animals and creatures they believed existed from A-Z. Unicorns, dragons, deer and dog. Need I go on? Yes, they also describe the animals qualities as they thought fit. Weirdos.

Bryce says

The Bestiary is a fascinating peek into the Medieval mind. The contents of this book represent how even the "learned" saw their world, and suggests the "logic" behind the thought of the pre-Renaissance world.
