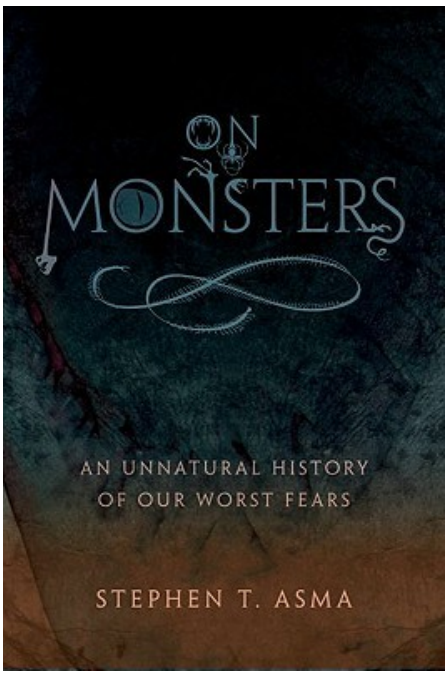

On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears

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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.

On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears Details

Date	:	Published October 1st 2009 by Oxford University Press, USA (first published January 1st 2009)
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From Reader Review On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears for online ebook

Robin Bonne says

This started out strong, but reading it in 2018, nine years after publication, some of the conclusions the author draws about gender seem dated.

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peaseblossom says

Not very insightful or interesting if you're already familiar with the subject. Wanted more about monstrous institutions. Wanted much less evo-psych and manly men.

Caleb says

This is a remarkably well-researched, thoroughly engaging and awfully thought-provoking (Western) cultural history of the concept of the "monster," in all its myriad forms—mythical and legendary monsters, malformed birth-defect created monsters, religious monsters, criminal monsters, symbolic monsters and so on. Asma covers a lot of very specific subjects while keeping the overall focus of the book on the conceptual level. That's no mean feat, and yet there's an effortlessness about the book that makes it a pleasure to read. If Asma sweat very much in its production, I certainly couldn't tell from reading it.

Chris says

Three stars for the first half of the book; two stars for the second.

The first part of the book is intersting. It is look at how people viewed or defined monsters at various points. Asma then moves into the changing view of monsters. The second half (more like the last 1/3) seems to ramble. It feels like little more than a list and obvious statements about mass media. He almost seems to go off topic and wants to avoid offending anyone. It isn't boring, but it isn't very interesting.

The part on the anicent Greeks and Biblical times was the most intersting and fasinating. Asma does an in depth look at how the anicents viewed the other. He does not group Romans and Greeks together, but takes each and examines them. The discussion in this section of the book is lively and quite present to read. This section really makes the book. Also of note was Asma's look at the once popular freak shows and how the views on biology changed the way we looked at monsters. This seciont, it should be noted, includes pictures that if you can not handle the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia, you should skip.

Average rating of 2.5. The first half of the book is worth reading; the second isn't.

Theodora Goss says

I should have rated this book ages ago because I used it for my doctoral dissertation and now teach a class in which it's central. It's SO good! It's thoroughly scholarly, but also a fun read--clearly and engagingly written. It's the best scholarly book I've found on monsters, going through all the eras and ideas about monstrosity in a systematic way. Thank you, Stephen Asma! I found your book both enjoyable (even through the gruesome bits) and immensely helpful.

C. Varn says

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.

Woowott says

I was quite excited about this book. I waited a while to plunk down money for it. But, sadly, it wasn't really what I thought it would be, nor was it as engaging as I hoped. It was not slyly and cleverly written, as reviews on the back intimated. It was not a feast. It was difficult to slog through, actually. It was uneven and unfocused. And whilst he decided to summarize Beowulf and Blade Runner and make inaccurate assessments of certain aspects of horror, he neglected to dissect certain elements of his psychological and philosophical lingo. There are parts where one feels as though one is reading around in circles. Tell me more of what I DON'T know; don't tell me the plot of something that is a complete no-brainer.

That being said, since my education lacks in certain sciences (due to a highly conservative Christian education), I was interested in information with which I was not familiar. It gave me a brief introduction to things I didn't know I wanted to know. And so, I don't really regret reading it, problematic as it is.

Also awkward. He talks about things that he, as a white male, doesn't necessarily understand. That's almost always awkward.

Paul says

Less an individual history of famous monsters and creatures of folklore, but more a history of the monster and the monstrous. Asma does a particularly nice job linking social morays and beliefs with our need to create "the other" throughout the history of civilization. Highly recommended for monster and social philosophy geeks alike.

Vanessa says

I'm really torn about this book. It was fascinating overall, and I've amassed a whole list of further reading thanks to Asma, but a fair amount of the book (especially toward second half or so) seems to fall a little flat. The conversation about how we define monsters was really interesting, as was the discussion of ancient monsters (I'd never heard of the Blemmyae and I never knew that Saint Christopher is sometimes depicted as having a dog's head, for instance). I frequently dashed over to my computer to do more research about the different topics that came up. And maybe, in the end, that's what's making me feel so conflicted. "On Monsters" is a great springboard - if you're into the creepy and macabre, it will have you staying up late Googling a serial killer you never heard of or a list of Victorian circus "freaks" - but the book itself might linger too much on the surface of the topics it touches on. I understand there was a ton of ground to cover, but the book may have worked better if Asma had taken an even narrower approach so he could really dive in. That said, I'd still recommend this to anyone remotely interested in monsters, psychology, and the nature of human fear.

Kevin says

Reviews of this are all over the place. Some people are disappointed because it wasn't an encyclopedia of mythical creatures; others are disappointed because it wasn't deep and insightful and philosophical enough. I think it strikes a fascinating and fun balance.

It does begin by telling some interesting legends and reports from ancient times, like the monsters Alexander the Great was recorded to have faced while in India or the weird stories of a race of people with no head but faces on their chest. There are lots of entertaining and interesting stories and factoids here and throughout the book. We hear about the Greek natural philosopher, Thales; how Roman culture developed over time in its treatment of "monstrous" newborns; various theories 16th and 17th century physicians had about how the experiences and thoughts of pregnant women could lead to monstrous children; Mary Shelley's Frankenstein monster; and a treatment of Freud and his concept of the uncanny ("unheimliche") among other things. And all of these are not simply listed or cited but explained, explored philosophically, and put in context.

It is not a simple bestiary, nor is it groundbreaking philosophy. I didn't know anything about the book when I got it and didn't expect anything in particular. I was looking for an audiobook to listen to during commutes and grabbed this. It quickly drew me in and sustained my interest throughout.

Will Byrnes says

Asma takes us on a stroll down horror lane, from monsters of our imagination to those of a more concrete origin. Are monsters merely what is different, unknown, upsetting? How has our view of the monstrous changed over time? What was once considered monstrous is now often considered merely anomalous. What was once thought the creation of Satan is now seen as genetic damage or diversity. And why is it that people across cultures and history are so willing to seek out the monstrous and exclude it, sometimes terminally, rather than studying and trying to understand the nature of difference?

Asma has written a fascinating book that addresses just what it means to be a monster, in different times, in various places, in sundry aspects. While it is written for a general readership, I did get the sense that Asma was more comfortable with an academic audience, particularly in the latter third of the book. It might be useful to have a dictionary handy if you don’t know your epistemological from you teleological.

In all, I found this to be a worthwhile, informative and entertaining read. There be monsters there.

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"Us-versus-them thinking comes remarkably easily to us," says the primate biologist Frans de Waal. He finds the demonization of others to be strong in primate communities as well: "There is no question that chimpanzees are xenophobic." Jane Goodall described some chimp aggression toward out-group members as so violent and degrading that it was clear that the chimps were treating the enemies as members of some other species. de Waal also describes such behavior: "One attacker might pin down the victim(sitting on his head, holding his legs) while others bit, hit and pounded. They would twist off a limb, rip out a trachea, remove fingernails, literally drink blood pouring from wounds, and in general not let up until their victim stopped moving." Chimps, like humans, can perceive their enemies as monsters and then respond with torture and other forms of excessive brutality. Perceived monsters bring out monstrous reactions.

Christy says

I am so disappointed in this book. Not only is not what I expected when I ordered it but it is bad. It rambles, lacks a clear argument, reiterates a lot of stuff that is already widely available elsewhere, sets up straw man arguments about postmodernism (which seems rather off-topic for a book about monsters), includes way too many endnotes that distract from the main body of the text, lacks a cohesive style or tone (sometimes condescending and overexplaining and sometimes forgoing explanation of complicated or unfamiliar terminology altogether), and, for no good reason, casually reinforces gender stereotypes (Men are heroes who fight monsters because this narrative of the monster-killing hero is something that all fathers who want to protect their children identify with; boys play video games and invent play narratives that are about monsters--where do the girls and women fit into this? One mention of Ripley from *Alien* isn't going to cut it, especially when most mentions of women in the book are to show them as the monsters themselves (e.g., Medea, Susan Smith, witches, Grendel's mom) or as victims).

I began the book expecting to enjoy it and my estimation of it gradually decreased as I read. The first half of the book is somewhat interesting if you are not already familiar with the material he covers, but otherwise I recommend skipping it.

Hudson says

Stopped reading at page 7 after I read this:

Over and over again one hears the same story of torturers: whether Nazis, Pinochet lackeys, American soldiers at Abu Ghraib or Khmer Rouge teenagers at S21...."

Comparing the actions of soldiers at Abu Ghraib with the actions of the Nazis?????? And no mention of Japanese atrocities against the Chinese or any number of examples that would have been more appropriate???

Fuck you and your anti American bias Asma.

Zach says

[image error]

Caitlin O'Sullivan says

Asma has collected and given perspective to an interesting collection of monster history and psychology in *On Monsters*. It's generally an interesting and informative read for both monster experts and monster novices. He doesn't seem to have quite decided whether his audience is academic or popular, sliding back and forth between formal academic language and informal discourse. (The latter is dominant in the beginning of the book, while the former becomes more prevalent towards the end.)

I was a bit disturbed by his descriptions of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, which repeat popular (and erroneous) tropes which were thoroughly debunked in *Columbine*, Dave Cullen's authoritative book on the 1999 shootings. *Columbine* was published six months before *On Monsters* which, yes, is cutting it fine for changes to the text, but it seems strange that no one involved in the production of *Monsters* was aware of Cullen's research. This definitely affected my perception of the authority of the author.
