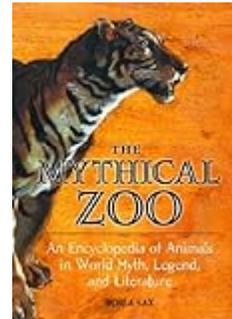




Boria Sax. *The Mythical Zoo: An Encyclopedia of Animals in World Myth, Legend and Literature.* Santa Barbara and Oxford: ABC-Clio, 2001. 279 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57607-612-5.



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Myth is Finally the Only Truth

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It is always easy to fault such a gigantic venture as *The Mythological Zoo*, pointing out creatures omitted, cultures overlooked, authors missed, sources ignored. Reviewers who choose that route to this impressive collection of hard-to-obtain information about the roles of animals in the world's myth, legend, and literature ought instead to devise their own encyclopedias (and like-minded reviewers of their volumes should do the same). In time the total weight of such volumes might come to adequately represent the importance of animals to the creativity of human beings as well as the importance of human stories about animals to how the animals themselves have fared in an increasingly human dominated world. Both are vast and, unfortunately, neglected areas of knowledge—to the detriment of human and non-human animals alike. Sax's volume, with the more than one hundred beings he includes listed alphabetically and each entry appended with a useful bibliography, is intended to urge researchers on to further shores. In the interim it fills a gap in our pursuit of the human/animal bond.

While the roles of some of the animals, insects, birds, reptiles, and amphibians have been explored in more depth in articles and books like Sax's own *The Frog King* (1990) and *The Parliament of Animals* (1990), such works by necessity are focused either on particular animals, particular cultures, particular historical periods, or particular literary genres. In contrast, this volume suggests the myriad and intricate ways all other animals function in the human mind. Sax reminds us that human attitudes toward animals have evolved from long before our earliest attempts to depict them in art and story and also that much of our original relationship with them has been lost as humans have attempted to separate and differentiate themselves from the animal world. Remembering the "traditional perspectives" that are "intimately linked to cultural values that we have developed over millennia," as Sax's entries urge us to do, is one way of repairing the gap between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom. His reason for compiling such an encyclopedia is clear:

"Over the millennia, the greatest trend in our understanding of animals has been an increasing secularization. In early human settlements, animal gods re-

placed the totems of tribal societies. These deities, in turn, were generally subordinated to anthropomorphic gods and goddesses. By the Middle Ages, the predominant view of animals was symbolic and allegorical, and it has become increasingly naturalistic in the modern period.... To regard each sort of animal as a tradition also encourages respect. Why should we care about species extinction? Why should we care about the welfare of strays? Appeals to transcendent reasons do not satisfy people in our secular society. Appeals to pragmatic reasons, such as preserving the ecosystem, are easily subject to challenge. Tradition links animals to the ideas, practices and events that make up human culture” (p. xix, xi).

Sax’s contribution is strongest in his areas of expertise: myth and legend and Germanic literature—all areas with which many contemporary readers are not at home—and with the animals in which he has special interest, although no extra space is extended to, say, crows and ravens, a group Sax is currently writing about. Inevitably, however, his knowledge of the use of the corvids in contemporary stories as well as in myth and legend and classical and folk literature is more extensive than in some of the entries. That makes such personal-interest entries richer. Future compilers will similarly enrich their encyclopedias.

The Mythological Zoo provides essential grounding for those interested in understanding the traditional as well as more modern or contemporary treatments of animals in art, literature, and popular culture. It is equally valuable for those concerned with gaining a better understanding of how attitudes toward animals are established and changed. As such, it will be an important tool for students and scholars in many fields as well as for storytellers, teachers, and naturalists who use stories about animals to enrich their students’ or audiences’ appreciation. The volume is a must for libraries and a helpful addition, even at its rather hefty price, for personal

libraries. In fact, it may be the layperson who simply loves or is interested in animals who will most enjoy a trip to *The Mythological Zoo*. Indeed, my first visit there was in just that guise: here was a place, like the Bronx or National Zoos, where one could spend days without end and still not exhaust its wonders or its ironies. I particularly appreciated and enjoyed the space devoted to the noncharismatic species I seem automatically to champion—the fly, louse, and flea; the rat and mouse; scorpion, snake, spider, and worm—as well as predators such as the coyote, wolf, and large felines.

Indeed, Sax’s title struck me as particularly appropriate since, in as real a way as animals in any zoo are in captivity, it is important for readers to realize that every animal included in Sax’s encyclopedia—even Spot and Fluffy—is caught in a cage of human language and tradition. He points this out (doing it so well, there is no need for a reviewer to paraphrase it!) in his Introduction:

“To study tradition is to track a creature, as though one were a hunter, back through time. The names we give animals carry intricate expectations and assumptions. As we learn of the traditions that have grown up around animals, they regain some of the magical quality that they had in cave paintings of prehistoric time.... Every animal is a tradition, and together animals are a vast part of our heritage as human beings. No animal completely lacks humanity, yet no person is ever completely human. By ourselves, we people are simply balls of protoplasm. We merge with animals through magic, metaphor, or fantasy, growing their fangs and putting on their feathers. Then we become funny or tragic; we can be loved, hated, pitied, and admired. For us, animals are all the strange, beautiful, pitiable, and frightening things that they have ever been: gods, slaves, totems, sages, tricksters, devils, clowns, companions, lovers, and far more. When we contemplate the inner life of animals, myth is finally the only truth” (pp. x, xx).

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