



The Bear: History of a Fallen King

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The oldest discovered statue, fashioned some fifteen to twenty thousand years ago, is of a bear. This title considers how this once venerated creature was deposed by the advent of Christianity and continued to sink lower in the symbolic bestiary before rising again in Pyrrhic triumph as a popular toy.

The Bear: History of a Fallen King Details

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Orsolya says

On a quick, personal note; I have a strong affiliation with bears. This began on the day of my birth as my name means, “Little Bear” or “She-Bear” in Latin. The connotation has shaped much of both my personality and journey in life with bears serving as one of my two spirit animals. Naturally, I would find myself interested in the social, cultural, and symbolic history of bears. That’s where Michael Pastoureau comes into the picture. Pastoureau explores these facets of bears in his work, “The Bear: History of a Fallen King” (translated by George Holoch).

Pastoureau configures “The Bear” with a chronological outline dating back to the Paleolithic era to the present and focuses on the many incarnations, interpretations, rise, fall, re-growth, and manifestations of bears. Or, more accurately, this is what Pastoureau *attempts* to accomplish.

“The Bear” begins with a rather strong inception which sweeps the reader away and sets the stage for an excellent discourse on the history of bears. Pastoureau combines intellectual scholarly writing and extensive research with beautiful text (in terms of language skills which translate equally magnificently); with interesting material/content. Sadly, this isn’t maintained and “The Bear” dwindles quickly.

In respect to writing chops, Pastoureau’s “The Bear” holds a high-caliber spot. The issue arises with the content. At the end of the day, “The Bear” only focuses on bears mentioned in stories, fables, myths, and the Bible and 95% of the book is about medieval times. This becomes insanely repetitive (with certain passages literally being repeated), tedious, dry, and a loss of reader attention results as a consequence. Credibility suffers and not much knowledge is truly gained.

Yes, this coverage obviously showcases the symbolism of bears in literature/stories; but, this does not depict or cover the overall cultural and social history mentioned in Pastoureau’s thesis. Again, “The Bear” is well-written but is noticeably weakened unless a reader is only seeking an insight into the mentioning of bears in stories.

Another issue with “The Bear” is Pastoureau’s habit of wandering off on tangents and highlighting anything BUT bears. This gives a sort of overview of the factors involved with and/or effecting bears but more so provides skimmable material that won’t interest the average readers whom were expecting the focus to be on bears.

On a positive note, some of Pastoureau’s analysis and interpretations are truly inspired and thought-provoking. His line of thinking in this respect is highly intelligent and readers gain the ability to view the facts from different, monumental angles.

For those readers turned off by nonfiction writers whom pepper their pieces with comments such as, “I argue that...” and “I discuss this...”; will be aggravated by “The Bear”. Pastoureau including himself in the writing comes off as too casual or as though “The Bear” is a transcript of a lecture. It is best to keep oneself and opinions out of this type of writing. This is added to the list of distractions within “The Bear”.

The concluding chapter of “The Bear” which sets out to foray on the modern life of bears is noticeably ‘lighter’ and more accessible than the previous chapters. However, even this is still off-topic (the medieval

era is still mostly the main conversation) and repetitive which results in a weak and less-than-memorable ending. Not to mention, much of what one would expect to be on the pages off current pop-cultural or trending of bears is missing from the text. Pastoureau's Epilogue (discussing teddy bears) is the only bright highlight in "The Bear" but this can't, naturally, single-handedly save the entire book.

"The Bear" includes two sections of photo plates and is supplemented by lengthy notes and a bibliography.

Although the subject matter of "The Bear" is an exciting one and the execution isn't terrible in terms of outline and writing; Pastoureau is repetitive, dry, and off the aim and thesis of the work. Bluntly, the author misses his mark and causes "The Bear" to be weak and without any 'oomph', spirit, energy, or memorable facts. "The Bear" is only recommended for research value on the symbolism of bears in medieval fables/literature (as this is the emphasis of the writing) or those who have to read everything bear-related. Otherwise, "The Bear" can be skipped.

Jory Dayne says

A deeply fascinating, almost haunting study of man's relationship with bears. I will be thinking about the contents of this book for some time. It has changed the way I think about many stories and studies with which I was already familiar, and repeatedly inserts itself into narratives I am currently working with.

Tanya says

Started out wonderfully interesting, quickly spiraled into repetitive, boring stories from the vast amount of medieval research that only this author cares about. Would have loved it to relate to today, maybe discuss why I should be reading this, why it's relevant, but it really just became a vessel to impart useless knowledge on an increasingly bored reader.

Will says

More of a 2.5 than a 2, and a book that I knew going in would be more academic in tone than I maybe wanted.

A great concept, incredibly well-researched, and some scholarly analysis/synthesis that's really thought-provoking, but the middle of the book really sags under the weight of examining individual artifacts and primary sources. The book's translation (originally written in French) gets the job done, but it's not great and I felt like some turns of phrase were distractingly clunky.

That said, it's really fun to learn about the evolution of the bear in its relation to humans, mostly as a symbol. The stuff about prehistoric cave art was great, as was the medieval church's war on the bear because of its ties to pagan cults. There's a lot to like here, but it's not presented quite as concisely or clearly as I was hoping. It's short page-wise, but not always the quickest reading.

Recommended for anyone willing to sift through a few laborious academic passages to get a new look at

European history & its relation to the natural world.

vlthm says

Beyond the bear you will go through history of Europe in a very interesting way. This is a history book with a point of view, but doesn't limit to it (while trying to stay focused). Lots of informations and observations are included which will please thos who look for christianity inner workings in Europe.

Amanda says

An excellent, thorough exploration of how humans' and bears' histories intertwine and why, as Pastoureau says, "It has never been a good idea to resemble human beings too closely." A must read for anyone interested in cultural, ethnographical, or folkloric histories, and the meaning behind animalistic metaphors and imagery.

Dan Nelson says

Fascinating - Lot of research went into this but it is not a dry book of facts but a well reasoned and argued history of how the Bear has been thought of in Europe from way back to the present.

Mary Stephanos says

Once venerated and feared, the bear was supplanted by the lion as King of the Beasts in the middle ages. Today the bear is a disappearing species subject to the related indignities of neglect and misunderstanding. In *The Bear: History of a Fallen King*, French cultural historian Michel Pastoureau traces the descent of this majestic beast in religious history and in the popular imagination. The roots of the bear's fall, he argues, lie primarily with Christian leaders in Europe, who effectively hid the bear's historic importance by appropriating ancient bear festivals, bear cult sites, and even bear names for their own use. Pastoureau relies primarily on religious and especially literary evidence from the middle ages to make an impassioned argument for the bear as ancient brother to all humanity. The book might have benefited from a deeper investigation into the ancient and prehistoric evidence, and its overall dry, academic tone may put off the casual reader. Recommended for medievalists, cultural historians, and anyone with an interest in the relationship between human and bear.

Christian Kiefer says

Some feeble arguments but a good solid overview of the role of the brown bear in French culture (particularly of the 12-18th centuries).

Mark says

Seemed pretty interesting, but just ... too much bear. :D

The author also wrote like he had an axe to grind. I was more interested in the symbolism of the bear and its importance to early European cultures than an academic/religious feud.

Jess says

I enjoyed this book very much. It was very well researched and the material was accessible. It is, however, an academic book and thus a bit slower to get through.

Samantha Moras says

An amazing and in-depth look of not only the anthropology, dig site finds, and behaviour of the bear, but also the historical references and research into bears in our past, as well as it's cultural and religious significance. While this may sound quite dry, and parts of the book that discuss dig sites, and the more archeological, and anthropologic parts of the bear are a bit of a push to get through, overall I loved this read. I found it to be incredibly encompassing, and learned so much about the bears significance and participation in not only myth and religion, but also in terms of real life, in how people interacted and treated bears. Really is a good read.

Adam says

I'm left scratching my head.

On the one hand, I'm glad someone sat down to look into the historical place of the bear in the cultural pantheon. It has always struck me as odd that the lion figures so prominently in the Western bestiary--they aren't easy to come by in, say, England. There is a promising story here, and a neat, focused history to render.

On the other hand, this book feels like an article being stretched to fit the needs of a hardcover. Certainly clear that a lot of sleuthing went into this. But the claims here struck me as unexciting: the bear was once important in iconography; then it ran afoul of early Christian geopolitics, so it declined in importance; finally, today the picture is somewhat less dire for the bear, but still not great. And that last chapter on the bear's plight foreshadowing that of humans? Oof. Felt tacked on.

So I thought the early archaeological and ethnographic speculation was fascinating. And I found some of the early Middle Ages stuff interesting. By the end, I felt like the liberal sprinkling of historical anecdote impeded the forwarding of new and interesting claims. Repetitive. I'd recommend this book, but probably to people with very specific interests.

SrMrm says

Non avevo dubbi sulla validità di questo lavoro. Già dalla prima sbirciata in libreria avevo notato l'impianto saggistico accurato, a livello di costruzione del discorso, di note e di bibliografia. Qualche tempo fa ho letto un libro che pensavo analogo, ma dedicato al lupo: ora so quello mi aveva deluso perché mi aspettavo un lavoro come invece quello che Pastoureau ha dedicato all'orso.

Il taglio dell'opera è non tanto zoologica quanto culturale: ad essere ricostruita è la parabola dell'orso in quanto simbolo. Qua e là viene in effetti considerato anche da un punto di vista più biologico ed ecologico, ma incidentalmente. Le informazioni sono sempre precise e corredate di fonti, per verificare o approfondire i vari spunti, e non manca un repertorio fotografico a supporto di alcuni dei temi trattati. Inoltre la prosa è molto fluida, a dispetto della natura non propriamente divulgativa del testo.

Le prospettive offerte sono molte, e vanno dalla mitologia al marketing (molto carino l'accento alla nascita del Teddy Bear), ma sicuramente lo sforzo principale dell'autore si è concentrato sull'analisi religiosa e sui motivi - questa la sua tesi - che avrebbero spinto il Cristianesimo medievale a colpire mortalmente l'Orso non solo come animale fisico, ma anche e soprattutto come simbolo potente di un paganesimo che doveva a sua volta morire. La strategia della Chiesa sarebbe stata spietata e avrebbe causato, oltre che una netta riduzione nel numero degli orsi in Europa, anche la loro trasformazione da Re degli animali temuto e rispettato a goffo saltimbanco o personaggio stupido e ghiottone di favole e racconti popolari. Non so quanto le conclusioni di Pastoureau siano corrette o meno, ma sono rimasta molto colpita nel constatare quanto nell'antichità il valore simbolico dell'orso fosse diverso da quello che penso la società odierna gli attribuisca (animale sì grosso e selvatico, ma quasi "pacioccone"), per cui è indubbio che l'Uomo nel corso dei secoli debba aver cambiato le carte in tavola piuttosto radicalmente. In questa denuncia forse l'autore a volte non riesce ad essere del tutto equidistante, perdendo un po' dell'obiettività che un saggista dovrebbe mantenere. In compenso, con questa sua - pur discreta - partecipazione, il libro ne acquista in sensibilità e la storia triste di un re decaduto riesce a evocare nel lettore una certa empatia che, nel complesso, non guasta.

Donovan Foote says

It was an interesting and enjoyable book although it felt like a compilation of information more than a theory or argument. Informative, but lacked in intrigue and connecting ideas.
