

BOOK REVIEWS

The Field Guide to Lake Monsters, Sea Serpents, and Other Mystery Denizens of the Deep by Loren Coleman and Patrick Huyghe. New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2003. 358 pp. \$16.95 (paper). ISBN 1-58542-252-5.

It would take a very dull mind not to enjoy this book. It conveys much information with no detectable bias and without a trace of didactic pedantry. Readers are thereby stimulated to think for themselves about the mysteries and the problems, and are freed to form opinions that may differ from those of the authors (who make their views plain enough but do not insist on them).

An accurate picture of the subject is conveyed through citing from the whole range of the relevant literature—skeptical, even scathing comments as well as purported descriptions and frank speculations. Possible reasons for a declining rate of reported sightings are judiciously considered.

The text is admirably short on errors. I noticed only the computer-spell-checker type of glitch of “30° F(sic) North latitude” (p. 162) and conflicting numbers for the maximum weight of alligator snapping turtles (176 or 200 pounds on p. 170, 403 on p. 176). Would that I could find so few in my own writings!

“Field Guide” implies descriptions of specimens and types. This one provides a judicious selection. It covers the actual range of what the literature of cryptozoology offers, from descriptions of creatures virtually certain to be acknowledged by science at some future time—say, the giant octopus or Steller’s sea cow—to monstrosities that even the most gullible wishful thinker would be unlikely to regard as real. But a field guide should also offer ways to categorize ideas for connecting individual specimens to some over-arching framework for the topic. This one does a fine job of that as well, which is no easy task when equally informed opinions differ as much as they do about cryptids (the creatures that cryptozoology studies).

The introductory chapter sketches the history of relevant discoveries and the basis for confidence that major new discoveries will be made far into the foreseeable future. The observation, analysis, and identification of sounds will become a useful tool in cryptozoology, one that has so far been only occasionally tried because the database of sounds made by known species remains so far from complete. The role of Nessie, the Loch Ness Monster, as a cultural icon for all sea “monsters” is pointed out. Soundly surveyed are both the numerous ways in which observers can be deceived—including by the almost inevitably present hoaxers—and the tendency for fanatics of the *status quo* to offer ludicrous attempts to explain away what could not be identified.

Coleman and Huyghe summarize earlier attempts to classify sightings into types of creatures, and offer their own version. In several places they discuss the

problem in connection with specific claims. These are among the occasions where the book invites readers to ponder how they themselves would tackle the problem. One pleasure offered by that pursuit is the same as we derive from solving puzzles in general—and perhaps in believing that we can do it faster or better than others. But here the facts to be fitted together are slippery, and much depends on judgments of plausibility. To my mind, a 100-foot-long creature thrashing about in the ocean, with many birds and sea-lions following it (p. 69), is more likely to have been a school of fish than a 100-foot-long creature; but who can *know*?

Examples like this show why only actual specimens can resolve most, if not all, cryptozoological claims. But they must be specimens that remain available for further study. The book includes a good survey of the “Carcasses and Globsters” that have been washed up in various places over the centuries and have been claimed to represent unknown species. Perhaps the likeliest may have been a giant octopus, and that instance illustrates one of the salient dilemmas for investigators of the unorthodox: there are no reliable depositories for potentially valuable evidence. The provenance of any material that is brought forward, especially long after the actual event, is thereby automatically suspect.

Decades of research (p. 301) are acknowledged as the basis for this book. That was driven home for me by the striking number of instances where, despite a fairly good acquaintance with the relevant literature, I learned something new. The possible identification of James Gavin as Gavin Maxwell (p. 180) is a convincing bit of detection, in a matter that I didn’t even know to be a mystery. I was surprised by how many searches there have been for the Mokele-Mbembe. I was fascinated by the discussion arguing that the identification of this cryptid as a sauropod reflects a now-outdated view of sauropods as typically swamp dwellers (p. 233). I found instructive the etymology of the term “dracontology”.

I enjoyed this book thoroughly. Entering the details at the head of this review, I find myself surprised that it has more than 350 pages; the reading was so easy and interesting that it seemed a shorter book. Yet its trove of information is such that it will often serve me as a useful reference in the future. I recommend this field guide unreservedly, to fans of cryptozoology of course, but also to those who do not yet know how fascinating this topic is.

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