A review of

Eaters of the Dead: Myths and Realities of Cannibal Monsters

B.C. Kennedy

Last year the BBC Two mini-series 'The Terror' highlighted an example of survival cannibalism, one of the unsettling practices examined in this fascinating book.[1] *Eaters of the Dead* is not a comprehensive survey of all corpse-eaters – there is not mention, for example, of Jérémy Rimbaud, the 'cannibal of the Pyrenees' – but rather a cultural history of corpse-eating and how that activity and those who practise it generate meaning within cultures. The dual purpose of this book examines our innate fear of being eaten, but also the horror of becoming a cannibal ourselves. We have, the author Kevin Wetmore writes, not only an atavistic fear of being eaten alive but also a fear of being eaten after death; of becoming food for someone or something else. Every culture has stories about corpse-eating monsters, historical tales of cannibalism, or chronicles of bodies being consumed, and how the corpse is regarded and treated, Wetmore argues, reveals how a society understands death and the body.

Vampires, werewolves, shapeshifters, ghosts and zombies are prevalent in myth and popular culture, but corpse-eaters are less so, yet the cultural history of monsters is replete with eaters of the dead, from Polyphemus, the cyclops in the *Odyssey*, to ogres, ghouls and wendigos. Eaters of the dead violate two taboos; one, interactions with the dead – in some cultures dead bodies are perceived as 'unclean' – and two, eating human flesh, which is taboo in most, but not all, cultures. This book explores eaters of the dead – mythological, historical, and contemporary – as well as their representation in art, literature, theatre, and film. Wetmore carefully differentiates between cannibalism, where species eat the same species as themselves, and anthropophagi, creatures that eat humans, regardless of the eater's species. He acknowledges the complexity of making this differentiation since cyclops, giants, ogres and even Grendel from *Beowulf* have a quasi-human status, while the wendigo refers to both the spirit creature of famine among First Nations in Canada and to people who, believing they were once possessed by the/a wendigo, develop a taste for human flesh.

This book is organised thematically. Chapter One, entitled 'Sky Burial, Cyclops and the Conqueror Worm', examines the tension between the Tibetan and Persian practices of feeding the dead to carrion birds for religious and practical reasons, which is seen as completely natural and part of the cosmology of those respective people. This is sharply

contrasted to the terror of being eaten found in the *Odyssey* and Euripides' play *Cyclops*. The horror found in Euripides is that not only does the Cyclops kill, cook and eat men's flesh, but Odysseus and his men (and us as reader) must watch/read as he does so, powerless to stop the killing and corpse-eating.

The following chapter considers Greek and Roman mythology and the stories of gods and men being consumed, before turning to other religions in which bodies are eaten, such as corpse-eating among the Hindu Aghori, and transubstantiation within Roman Catholicism to achieve salvation. Perhaps the Aristotelian distinction between philosophical essential and accidental properties, employed by theologians such as Thomas Aquinas in articulating the theology of the Eucharist, may have been helpful as a footnote here.

The third chapter places *Beowulf* and fairy tales side by side, to see the shaping influence of Christianity on the medieval monsters that emerged out of a pagan pre-Christian Europe into the popular culture of later societies. European history is fraught with examples of man-eaters such as Grendel, ogres, Norse *draugr* and trolls. The tales often develop out of places or periods of food scarcity, where survival cannibalism may occur. The monsters never starve but exist on the margins of societies that fear famine and represent, the author argues, the fear of what kind of monsters famine may turn us into. Hansel and Gretel are in no danger from the witch until they are driven into the forest by their parents due to a lack of food.

The following three chapters focus on specific corpse-eating monsters. Chapter Four, 'Ghuls and Ghouls', explores the evolution of the ghoul from its pre-Islamic origins in the Middle East to modern popular incarnations of a monster whose name is synonymous with corpse-eating and a disturbing preoccupation with the morbid and the macabre. The 'original' *ghul* was a female demon, a shapeshifter who uses the illusion of beauty to distract and then consume travellers. Featuring prominently in *The Arabian Nights*, the *ghul* developed into the Gothic ghoul of Western literature as evidenced in, amongst others, Lord Byron, Hans Christian Andersen and Edgar Allan Poe. By the mid-19th century the ghoul was firmly ensconced in Gothic literature, inevitably digging up corpses to mangle and devour, and remained the mainstay of early 20th-century Gothic fiction.

This is followed by a chapter that examines corpse-eaters in Asia and Australia, with a particular focus on the Filipino aswang, while Chapter Five considers the wendigo, the spirit of famine and cannibalism of the indigenous peoples of North America that has also evolved through time and has been appropriated to become a staple of popular culture.

In his final two chapters, Wetmore focuses on cannibals from the historical to pop culture, to entire societies in which cannibalism is practised for a variety of reasons such as food scarcity. Questioning what drives human beings to consume the dead, he investigates the circumstances in which we turn cannibal and the five types of cannibalism that exist, for example, survival cannibalism during the siege of Leningrad in World War II.

Cannibals are clearly the most widely recognised form of corpse-eaters, and stories of them in fiction and film entertaining, terrifying and fascinating us is explored in the final

chapter; in 2003, for example, Hannibal Lecter was named the greatest villain in American cinema by the American Film Institute. While cannibalism can be read as a metaphor for appetite, desire and exploring new identities, the consumption of the human body remains a powerful draw within international popular culture.

Overall, this is a well-researched book, with good use of primary sources that will have popular appeal for a general audience as well for students across a wide range of academic disciplines – gender, post-colonial, historical, children's literature (think 'Jack and the Beanstalk'), to name a few. The book has been well received in the USA where the author lives and teaches. It is well referenced although some references have been overlooked such as Gothicism. Many of the illustrations are disquieting, particularly some of the photographs, but this should not deter from what is a fascinating read.

Author: Kevin J. Wetmore Jr.

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Notes

1. https://www.bt.com/tv/drama/the-terror-arctic-thriller-bbc2 (2021).

NB: There are some graphic photographs that some potential readers may find distressing such as the photo of a couple selling body parts, including a human head and the corpse of a child during the Russian famine, 1921.

A review of

Pan: The Great God's Modern Return

B.C. Kennedy

In Mary Beard's 'Forbidden Art' series, 'Vile Bodies?',[1] the classicist discusses two sculptures – both versions of a marble sculpture dug up in Herculaneum – showing the mythical creature Pan copulating with a she-goat. Beard explains that they are not mere examples of bestiality or fertility. For, as she reminds us, the ancient Greek god Pan is half-human and half-animal, a point that Paul Robichaud also references, depicting

Pan as a god who transgresses the boundaries between human and animal. With the horns and legs of a goat but the torso of a man, Pan is a god whose very form confounds the distinction between animal and divine.

Exploring the ways in which Pan has been imagined from antiquity to the present in mythology, art, literature, music, spirituality and popular cultures, Robichaud shows how portrayals of the god reveal a shifting anxiety about our own animality and our relationship to the natural world, whether this is understood as the wilderness beyond civilisation or the cosmos as a whole. Pan is the cosmic god of all; symbol of bestial lust, demon, protector of forests, cipher for Stuart monarchs, symbol of the latent powers in nature, terrifying god of the abyss, source of occult knowledge, guardian of wild animals, horned god of witches, symbol of gay love, ruler of nature spirits, and archetype of the unconscious are just some of Pan's rich variety of identities that shift and change through the centuries.

This book is a comprehensive and thorough study, focusing on those works and individuals that reimagine Pan in original ways or are recognised as important in their own right. In addition to a Preface and Conclusion, there are six chapters that are meticulously referenced, as well as a select bibliography. In the Preface Robichaud writes that this book is written for readers interested in learning more about Pan and he has not assumed any prior knowledge on the part of the reader. His approach to individual texts, works of art and musical compositions is to introduce them and consider how they imagine Pan, relating them where possible to the larger tradition of which they form a part. He has occasionally included material simply because he thought it would appeal to readers interested in this subject. Particularly in exploring Pan's role in occult and New Age spirituality, Robichaud has taken the accounts of believers seriously and does not attempt to explain them away, leaving open the question of the existence of the gods.

The first chapter explores the origins of Pan in ancient Arcadia and the spread of his cult throughout the classical world. For his earliest worshippers, the pipe-playing god acted as sacred guardian of the flocks and presided over the hunt. The pastoral character of Pan is reflected in the etymology of his name which links him to the pastoral but was also confused with the Greek word for 'all', a confusion with long-lived consequences for his later development. The power to induce panic or fear is among Pan's oldest attributes persisting through classical myth and literature and lends him an 'otherness' distinct among the gods. His later mythology included the pursuit of several nymphs, but he was also portrayed as a compassionate helper. Of particular note is Pan's musical presence in the pastoral tradition of Theocritus' *Idylls* and Virgil's *Eclogues*, and he is one of the gods worshipped in Orphic mythology. However, of all the gods worshipped in the ancient world, only Pan is reported to have died, an event recorded by Plutarch and an apposite ending to this chapter.

Chapter Two examines the role of Pan through to the medieval and Early Modern period. With the rediscovery of classical antiquity in the Renaissance, Pan is interpreted in a variety of allegorical senses in pastoral poetry by writers such as Sir Philip Sidney, and in the art of

painters including Peter Paul Rubens and Nicholas Poussin. He is included in the philosophical speculations of Francis Bacon and Edmund Spenser, and John Milton identifies Pan with Christ, but this association did not outlast the 17th century. For other writers, Pan is simply one more otherworldly being: in English popular culture he is associated with Robin Goodfellow, but, as Robichaud points out, this is a mischievous spirit, not an evil one, evidence against the assumption that Pan was identified with the Devil in this period. In addition to assuming a political mantle, symbolising the exiled James II and Jacobite support for writers such as John Dryden, the 18th century also brought the first appearance of Pan as defender of the environment against human despoilment, a role he would resume in the late 20th century.

The following chapter focuses on Pan's rebirth during the Romantic period of the late 18th century, which saw a revival of interest in all things Greek. Using Thomas Taylor's 1787 translation of the 'Orphic Hymn to Pan' as a starting reference, Robichaud traces Pan through all the major Romantic poets from William Blake to Byron as well of those of their lesser-read contemporaries. He follows Pan's first crossing of the Atlantic where he appears in the belated Romanticism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Most of the Romantics viewed Pan as an invisible power within nature, but this chapter also analyses how Pan could provide an encoded way to explore sexuality without directly confronting Victorian morality, as seen in Robert Browning's poetry. In visual art Pan makes appearances in the work of Edward Burne-Jones and Aubrey Beardsley and begins his modern musical career in operetta and orchestral music. The first major modern study of *Ephialtes* by Wilhelm Heinrich Roscher argues that the god embodies the experience of nightmare. These 19th-century developments provide the foundation for Pan's resurgence in the early 20th century and his role in the occult revival that are explored in the next two chapters.

Chapter Four discusses the new medium that Pan occupied in the 20th century – children's literature, the most famous example being *Peter Pan* which, Robichaud argues, revises several elements from the mythological and narrative traditions surrounding Pan. Equally important, I think, is the discussion of Kenneth Grahame's transformation of Pan as a god of the English countryside in *Wind in the Willows*, which explores urban and rural tension in the modern world. Inclusive in this chapter are numerous examples of the appropriation of Pan in gay literature throughout this century and Robichaud argues that when homosexuality was still a criminal offence, 'Pan may have seemed an apt symbol for the powers of nature manifesting in ways that trouble modern heterosexual culture.' For Robichaud, it is D.H. Lawrence who offers the most profound exploration of Pan in his 'Pan in America' and *St Mawr,* and this is followed by considering the place of Pan in Irish and American literature. The chapter concludes with how Pan endures in the musical scores of composers such as Ravel and Elgar.

The penultimate chapter looks at Pan as an occult power from antiquity to present day. Robichaud agrees with Ronald Hutton that the identification of Pan with Satan – an image

that persists in modern culture – may only date to the 19th century, citing Éliphas Lévi's Baphomet figure and Stanislas de Guaita's *The Key to Black Magic* in popularising this idea. Robichaud continues with an examination of occult revival literature and Pan's appearance in the rise of modern witchcraft as a source of danger and power that connects the cosmos and human sexuality.

The final chapter follows Pan's place in our contemporary world. From his near-extinction in high culture post World War II, through to his re-emergence with American poets such as Frank O'Hara, Pan's mythology is not only transformed into an expression of homoerotic love but also a means of exploring questions of gender, identity and sexual liberation. Pan's presence is traced through the 1960s New Age movement, moving forward to the present vast array of depictions in literature, art, music and film such as Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006). This chapter concludes with a psychological perspective, offering Sukey Fontelieu's *The Archetypal Pan in America: Hypermasculinity and Terror* (2018), a critique of how contemporary America's culture of 'panic and apathy' correspond to the terror induced by Pan as well as his self-absorption in his own desires.

In Robichaud's short conclusion, we are told that this book was written during the current Covid-19 pandemic, another word that evokes the image of Pan. He juxtaposes the scapegoats of the ancient world who were banished into the wilderness – Pan's habitation – to the contemporary scapegoating carried out against Black Lives Matter protesters and immigrants. The plight of those scapegoated invites our empathy, Robichaud suggests, but also provides us with the opportunity to reconsider how we are all 'interconnected', which extends to the natural world in the face of global warming. With all that this phenomenon entails, Robichaud challenges us not to allow panic to overwhelm us but to accept this gift from Pan by taking responsibility for the wellbeing of our planet.

This book is a superb compendium of Pan-related literature and references. A minor criticism is that it would have been helpful to have the illustrations referenced, and other reviewers have noted the missed references to Pan particularly in comic books. It is a keynote text for Pan studies and the general reader; it certainly encouraged me to go back and read some of the source material, particularly Kenneth Grahame's 'Wind in the Willows'.

Author: Paul Robichaud.

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1 https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m001447x/mary-beards-forbidden-art-series-1-1-vile-bodies (February 2022).