



A review of
**Merpeople:
A Human
History**
Victoria Leslie

When Animal Planet's docufiction *Mermaids: The New Evidence* was aired back in 2013, the American National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association received so many enquiries from credulous viewers that it had to release an official statement denying the existence of mermaids. Despite the network's disclaimer that the programme was entirely fictional, the combination of computer graphics and interviews with actors duped viewers into believing. Likening the programme to the furore surrounding P.T. Barnum's famous 19th-century fraud, the 'Feejee Mermaid', Vaughn Scribner considers in his new book, *Merpeople: A Human History*, our perpetual fascination with the fabled sea folk and our readiness to believe in their existence.

Scribner provides numerous examples of our unwavering belief in the existence of merpeople in his comprehensive study spanning the last thousand years: from 16th-century cartographers peopling the seas of the New World with mermaids, to Benjamin Franklin's candid reportage in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of a 'Sea Monster' just off the coast of Bermuda in 1736. 'Mer-mania' reached such a peak in the early 19th century that a mermaid sighting, specimen or show appeared in printed media at least once a month. This eagerness to believe was often stoked by unscrupulous purveyors of 'mermaid' specimens, showmen like P.T. Barnum or the sea captain Samuel Barrett Eades, who passed off Japanese-crafted forgeries as the real thing. Though the likes of Barnum and Eades capitalised on the public's credulity, they tapped into what Scribner highlights as the driving force behind his book, our insatiable preoccupation with subaqueous realms and their inhabitants.

As Animal Planet's docufiction suggests, our own era is no less obsessed with these denizens of the deep. But while earlier periods exaggerated the monstrous female power of the mermaid – her image furnished medieval churches, for instance, as warnings to the laity about female lust – the 20th century sees the mermaid swim into more commercial and consumerist channels. The subject of advertisements and

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films, the modern mermaid is the poster girl of commodity culture, selling everything from coffee and tuna to movies and theme parks. On the silver screen, the mermaid of mid-20th-century blockbusters *Miranda* (1948) and *Mr Peabody and the Mermaid* (1948) conforms to the femme fatale archetype, seducing married men and luring them away from domestic safety. In all of these representations, sex sells, with the mermaid unable to shield herself from the objectifying gaze of those eager to behold and possess her.

The fact Scribner's research focuses so heavily on the female form of the mermaid is explained as the product and legacy of the Christian Church's concerted effort in medieval times to 'dethrone femininity'. Depicting salacious and sexually overt representations of mermaids, including the two-tailed mermaid parting her tails to expose her genital area, religious leaders sought to destabilise female power while highlighting the virtues of piety and self-denial. But the history of merpeople is not just the story of objectification, exploitation and consumerism. As Scribner asserts, in more recent times the mermaid and her kin have moved into new channels, reflecting changing ideologies and evolving understandings of identity and gender, with mermaids and tritons elected as symbols of feminism, body positivity and LGBTQ+ rights.

It is also in more recent times that scholarly work about merpeople has proliferated. This constitutes part of Scribner's own research and prompts the question, what it is about *Merpeople* that makes it unique? Drawing on monster theory, Scribner explains that his study of merpeople, in the words of historian Erica Fudge, is enacted through the process of 'reading through humans'. The examination of aquatic folk in this way sheds light upon the 'ever-changing, often-contradictory ebbs and flows of the human condition'. Though Scribner succeeds in charting the impact and influence of merpeople on human history, why humankind is perpetually looking toward the water is more slippery. Nevertheless, *Merpeople* is a rich and rewarding read and a comprehensive and engaging addition to the merfolk corpus.

Author: Vaughn Scribner.

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