



A review of
On Monsters:
An Unnatural History
of Our Worst Fears

Miles Leeson

Being unfamiliar with Asma's work previous to this new monograph I undertook a little research to discover more and was both impressed and surprised to find that he is what we might term a 'celebrity' academic of sorts, with numerous publications on a variety of subjects that meld the philosophy of mind, general science writing and cultural discussion. Normally an academic writer has to wait a rather long time for reviews considering the impact of one's work on one's peers – in some cases up to two years. Asma has no such issue here as the *Washington Post*, the *Telegraph*, the *New York Times* and a range of other international publications have already offered positive feedback and promoted his work to a far wider audience than any subject-specific journal ever could. This review focuses on Asma's intended audience – academics with a deep love of the fantastic and imaginary.

So does Asma's work offer a new, enhancing vision of the monstrous in fiction or a collection of various thoughts on, as he puts it, 'an unnatural history'? Firstly there is much to praise, as the remit Asma has given himself is vast. Not only does he move across continents, time and cultures, but between the imaginary, the fictive and the 'real' – or rather the historical. The book has the feel of a collection of the grotesque – indeed some of the accompanying pictures are both uncanny and chilling in equal measure – and the movement between, say, Freud, torture porn and creeping flesh segue well. Chapter titles such as 'The Monster Killer', 'Darwin's Mutants', and 'The Art of Human Vulnerability: Angst and Horror' are just a taste of what Asma has in store for us.

Having said this, there is a case to be made that this is a monstrous banquet of overindulgence which may well leave the reader feeling rather dissipated. This is certainly not a book to be read in one sitting nor one that goes deep into the dark heart of 'monsterism'; the material provided is, perhaps, nothing new (unless Asma's alchemy with the 'real' and the fantastic is considered) and this may dissuade the likely reader of *Gramarye*. At times there is a sense of superficiality to it that is lacking in other, perhaps more academic,

monographs on singular aspects of fantasy and the monstrous, and the ground covered – as a piece of cultural history perhaps – may not be to everyone's taste. At times themes are left hanging and I wanted to hear more on a specific idea but was soon moved on to notice the similarities between, for example, attitudes to deformed humans and the policies of the Khmer Rouge. It is certainly an example of what Tolkien called the 'bubbling pot of faerie', and ladles of monstrous broth are offered with a dash of cultural history and a *souçon* of sociological theory.

But does this approach work? It is unlikely that this book will be returned to time and again for in-depth study but, for those working in this area, it may well be a useful first reference point when refreshing one's mind or uncovering a new subject area. Asma has given us a preliminary sketch only and presents to a range of academic disciplines the outline for new and original research opportunities.

It would be wrong for an academic reader to dismiss this book for its perhaps overly populist approach as there is much here that, if taken in small amounts, has the ability to engage and inspire. The most important contribution of the book is to reflect the darkness of monsters back towards the creator – the storyteller – and ask why it is that humanity's darkness must always be told and retold.

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