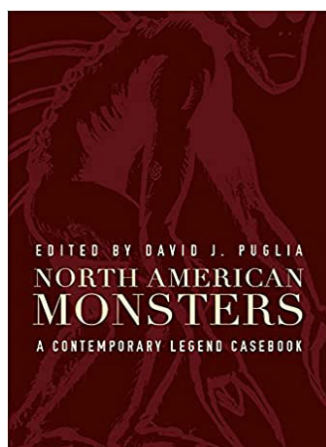


BOOK REVIEW

North American Monsters: A Contemporary Legend Casebook (Ed.) David J. Puglia

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Bloomington, Indiana



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Who doesn't love a good monster story? A delicious chill shimmies up the spine and tingles the hairs of listeners huddled around a dying fire on an autumn night as clouds cross the moon and extinguish its light, while the narrator's hushed voice winds the taut wire of terror to the breaking point. And then dry leaves crackle somewhere off in the dark. Anyone indifferent to the monster lurking just beyond the firelight is surely a dead soul . . . though I hesitate even to think the thought, lest a new monster be born.

This world and every world visited by the human imagination comes well-stocked with monsters. They have always been with us and remain robust in modern times. The realm of folklore with its giants, witches, trolls, and dragons gave many of us our first unnatural scares, and no scholarly discipline than folklore seems more tailor-made to study their cause. *North American Monsters* undertakes that responsibility with an anthology of nineteen articles, fourteen drawn from scholarly journals and five written for this volume, each committed to the understanding of monsters in contemporary legends.

Ah, the scholarly anthology. It often suggests a dutiful assemblage of dust-dry writing where the reader soon sleeps a sleep akin to coma and where all hopes of joy and excitement go to die. Well, this one is quite something more. Far from dull and dreary, here is a collection worthy of its subject. Editor David Puglia has chosen lively articles based on the authors' field research to introduce a range of fearsome creatures, some long-lived, some deceased, some recent and still walking among us. Beyond passing acquaintance, these articles familiarize the reader with their subjects, how these monsters are born and grow and die, the environments that favor them, the human energies that feed and sustain them. We get to know them. Sometimes they are villains, forces of nature, even tragic figures, but all of them have a purpose in the human realm that goes beyond eating people or leaving tracks and turds in the forest.

Puglia picks his contents with multiple purposes in mind to create a book that is layers deep. He brings together a scattered literature for the convenience of every reader interested in the subject, whether scholar or layman. Each article spotlights a distinctive monster, but rather than the usual field guide to the weird life of a state or region, each selection also illustrates how the theories and understandings of folklore studies illuminate the social and psychological functions of monsters, how narrators tell and audiences receive monster stories, and the ways historical and cultural forces shape the things we fear. Puglia intends the book as a teaching tool that introduces undergraduates to legend scholarship through its application to one familiar and popular type of story. It reaches far beyond mere entertainment to affirm that monsters are a legitimate subject for study, one that holds a mirror to the creators, perpetuators, and

consumers of those stories.

His ambition to combine varied contents and balance them with multiple goals sets a high bar for Puglia to clear. Not only does he succeed in this, but thanks to his introductions to each chapter and to the book as a whole, a collection of articles becomes an organic unity where each chapter contributes to a coherent understanding of the subject matter. Anyone intrigued by monsters stands to gain by reading this book, but it holds particular value for Fortean and anomalists. They will recognize the familiar names of David Clarke, Loren Coleman, and Benjamin Radford, contributing authors who join with the folklorists to consider influences of media treatment and local dynamics on a subject of mutual interest. For anomalists who overlook the insights of folklore studies, and for academics unfamiliar with extramural cryptid research, these chapters introduce worthy new vistas that broaden understanding of a cornerstone anomaly.

The monster hunter committed to finding hard evidence for a physical phenomenon will not appreciate this book. It has nothing to do with fur or footprints or photographs. It has little to say about the A-list celebrities of monsterdom—no Bigfoot, no Loch Ness Monster, Champ, or Ogopogo, no sea serpent, Yeti, Piasa Bird, none of the unknown animals promoted by Bernard Heuvelmans or the subjects of cryptozoology magazines and websites. Nor will the literary or cinematic monster buff find Cthulhu, Frankenstein, or the mutant giant bugs of 1950s science-fiction movies. While Mothman and Chupacabras are widely recognized, perhaps too the Jersey Devil, most of the monsters appearing here are unknown outside of their locality. They shun the limelight as readily as sunlight, content to star exclusively in local legends, scaled for size as word-of-mouth traditions passed along within a receptive community. In place of physical evidence for unknown animals, the folklorist searches out the human meanings of monster legends. Puglia identifies four general themes to account for the uses, appeal, and staying power of these stories—socioenvironmental anxieties, otherness, commercial interests, and a sense of regional identity. If not the snarling beast of the hunter's wishful dreams, these issues answer many questions about what really lurks beneath the surface of stories we fear and love.

Who or what do we meet on this tour of legendary monsters? Perhaps the most numerous—and unsung—monsters in folk legend are highly localized creatures said to inhabit swamps, forests, the

undersides of bridges, and other such desolate and forbidding areas, from which they emerge to scare or kill hapless intruders. The victim may be a motorist whose car engine dies in the wrong place at the wrong time, or an unwise teenage couple that parks to make out within the monster's stamping grounds. As the story usually goes, the monster has established a reputation for killing, but exactly who and when remain vague, the sources hearsay from nameless friends of a friend. Lately, the monster appears only to frighten—but be warned, it is still there, ready to dine on anyone foolhardy enough to tempt it out of the shadows.

In the first chapter, noted folklorist James Leary recounts how his boyhood experience at summer camp included warnings of a bogeyman nearby. When a graduate student at Indiana University, he contacted a local scoutmaster and found that a nearby campsite had its own swamp-dweller, the Boondocks Monster. Its identities during the 1950s included an alien from a flying saucer, a swamp creature that left big footprints in the marshy mud, or even a giant turtle, then it morphed into a crazy killer on the loose during the 1960s, only to fade from campers' thoughts in the 1970s. This monster had few rumored kills to its credit and more often simply scared campers with its footprints or, more often, the stories told of it. More bloodthirsty was the Cropsey Maniac, a respected citizen turned into an insane axe murderer after some campers started a fire that killed his wife and children. Though human, his vengeful crimes multiplied to supernatural proportions among New York campers retelling the stories.

Other local monster legends exploit human disfigurement or hybrid human-animal creatures to turn up the dial on horror. A man in the Ojai Valley of California became terribly marred by a wildfire and lived as a crazed hermit beneath a bridge. Many young people in the area converged on the bridge at night in hopes of glimpsing the Char-Man, and he sometimes obliged with an attack. When the original bridge site became more populated, the Char-Man and his would-be onlookers migrated to a more remote site. The Goatman has much in common with local camp monsters. He lives (or did) beneath a bridge, was a hermit, and frightened away teenagers when they invaded his territory. In some versions he has a human head and a goat's body; in others, a goat's head on a human body. He may have burned to death when children set fire to his hut, but he continues to frighten motorists driving across his

bridge, sometimes throwing bricks through windshields and occasionally causing a wreck, though he is not a murderer. Nor is he limited to a single locale, having occupied three at the same time and separated by several miles, whereby his reputation expanded until he became recognized as the Maryland Goatman. A sadder case of the San Antonio Donkey Lady concerns a solitary old woman with a beloved donkey who lived in a hut by a bridge. Considered abnormal in her personality and way of life, she became fair game for children who taunted the woman and goaded the donkey. The violence escalated when a mob set fire to her hut, resulting in severe disfigurement so that she resembled a donkey and raising the question of which is the monster, the woman or her persecutors.

A relationship with water or swamps characterizes many legendary local monsters. Turning from camp to campus, the Lake Lieberman Monster enjoyed a storied career from its home in an overgrown slough behind a SUNY-Binghamton residential college. This swampy-lake dweller shared features of the Loch Ness Monster and dragons during its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. The Webber is a local monster of a town in Newfoundland. Said to have been a very young child when his parents were killed in an accident, he survived in the wilderness, perhaps with the help of an animal, and grew into a web-footed hybrid half human and half reptile. In the late 1860s, one of North America's many lake monsters, serpentine in form but outfitted with legs, excited the Mormon population of Utah. This Bear Lake monster enjoyed considerable newspaper coverage and the promotion of prominent citizens. Sharlie, also like a sea serpent, occupies an Idaho mountain lake with continued sightings, newspaper reports, and popularity in the local Winter Carnival.

Some landlocked creatures on the border between wilderness and human habitation have endangered rural folk for a long time. Frontiersman Daniel Boone is the authority for having killed a hairy creature more than ten feet tall late in the 18th century. This man-ape even had large feet and serves as an anchor-point for cryptozoologists tracing the earliest Bigfoot sightings on record. The Jersey Devil, born in the 1730s to a woman named Leeds, began life as a deformed child so terrible in its actions that his father must have been Satan. He flew up the chimney one day then haunted the Pine Barrens of New Jersey for decades as the Leeds Devil. His depredations suddenly spread until he acquired statewide notoriety as the Jersey Devil in 1909, an-

nounced by frequent newspaper accounts of his antics and portrayals as a skinny horse with bat wings or a dragon-like reptilian Jabberwock.

The most contemporary of widely known monsters deviate somewhat from older legendary models. Mothman and the Chupacabra share a relationship with UFOs. Mothman, a six-foot winged biped with large shining red eyes, flew in pursuit of cars at speeds up to a hundred miles an hour in remote areas around Point Pleasant, West Virginia, from late 1966 to late 1967. The Chupacabra was spawned in conspiracy rumor as either an escaped experimental animal or as an extraterrestrial visitor. This vampiric creature appeared as a canid-like animal to some and to others as a bipedal humanoid three to five feet tall with spikes along its spine and an elongated head with big dark eyes similar to the well-known gray UFO alien. Stories of Chupacabras sucking the blood from livestock spread from Puerto Rico to South America and the southern U.S. The Internet spread and amplified Chupacabra legends, but it created Slender Man, a tall, thin manlike form with abnormally long or tentacle-like limbs, dressed in a black suit and having a face devoid of features. Contrived as an imaginary monster, he flourished in games, comics, and online fantasies, acquiring a following that traded fabricated rumors and becoming real enough for two twelve-year old girls in 2014 that they stabbed a third girl to show their loyalty to the monster. Creepy fiction mutated into bizarre legend and finally sensational fact.

At first sight, these legendary monsters fulfill the usual expectations for all monsters: They are typically ugly, frightening, and unsettling. Most of the time they menace and threaten, and keeping the root meaning of the term "monster," they often warn—of future events, to avoid dangerous places, against violating rules or customs, but with a subtext that bad outcomes are avoidable for those who heed the warning. The monster stories told to campers serve as more than atmospheric entertainment. They intend to instill fear of unfamiliar dark places and bodies of water where accidents can happen, and to keep the kids in their bunks rather than prowling outside at midnight. But not all monsters live to scare. Some are humorous or even endearing when they serve as mascots, expressions of communal pride, or subjects of inside jokes. The Lake Lieberman Monster did not need a murderous rampage to establish his fame, but received it from the campus residence that adopted him and promoted him with fevered student humor and public ceremonies

organized in his honor. Lieby and Sharlie are names that echo affection rather than fear of a threat. Loren Coleman backtracks the alligators in New York City sewers to a 1935 newspaper report. The legend flourished in the 1960s, fleshed out with explanations that small pet alligators brought back from Florida grew too large and were flushed down the toilet, entering the sewers where they grew to monstrous size feeding on rats and sanitation workers. New Yorkers embraced the story with a wink and a nod as a piece of their urban identity.

Monsters may be supernatural, like the earliest versions of the Jersey Devil; but characteristic of most contemporary legends, biological and rationalized actors have supplanted ghosts, demons, and fairies. Modern monsters have very material skin or scale, flesh and bone, feathers or fur. Even so, a sense of the strange and uncanny suffuses them. They are different in ways that transgress the bounds of the ordinary and expected, unnatural like the hybrid goat-man or man-goat of Maryland, against nature like the child that mutated into the half-reptilian Webber. What counts as monstrous about Daniel Boone's hominid is its place in between human and animal categories, unlike any familiar and naturalized species. Add that this creature is big, aggressive, and dangerous, and the result qualifies unmistakably as a monster.

Some monsters are animal, some alien, some unclassifiable, but readers of *North American Monsters* will find that most contemporary examples are all too human. For bygone writers like Homer, Herodotus, and tellers of Medieval travel tales, one had only to journey past familiar bounds to land in the company of monsters. Beyond the known and civilized, natural and social norms broke down. Odysseus, Alexander the Great, and John Mandeville found themselves beset by cyclopes, dog-headed men, people with their faces on their chests, cannibals, and savages once they stepped into unknown territory, and this strand of tradition continues today as outer space provides inexhaustible habitats for alien beings. But meanwhile back on earth, its unknown places have diminished to the point that if Skull Island existed, it would now have its own McDonalds. Such a loss might have spelled disaster for monsters left with nowhere to run, no place to hide, but adaptiveness of human imagination averted the crisis.

Strangers, whether the new kid in school or the immigrant, anyone different in appearance, customs, religion, or just unfamiliar, often meet with

suspicion and rejection. The very term "illegal alien" piles on negative implications of outside the social rules and from another planet. Human deformity in particular has long met with fear, revulsion, and rejection. The Romans recorded monstrous births as portents of disaster; prodigy collectors of the 16th and 17th centuries like Conrad Lycosthenes gathered extravagant claims of the monkfish and pope-ass to further Protestant portrayals of Catholicism as demonic. Teratology, the study of monsters, especially deformed humans, occupied both religious and early scientific thinkers for centuries. Seeming hybrids of human and animal were especial objects of dread, but in recent times beings fully human in appearance have stocked monsterdom with some of its most chilling denizens. Whether in history, the news, literature, or movies, humans repeatedly check all the right boxes for monstrous behavior—Hitler, Stalin, bin Laden; Jack the Ripper, John Wayne Gacy, the school shooter of the week; Dr. Frankenstein, Dr. Mengele, Dr. Strangelove. They look normal but do what is horrid. The human monster replaces distance with dementia, outer difference with inner evil, proper behavior with revolting acts. Anywhere, at any time, a passerby, a neighbor, or the person sitting in the next seat may pull out a gun or be exposed as a serial killer or child molester. The human monster is real enough and raises few "possibility hurdles" for our credulity to overleap. With such undeniable possibilities, we always have monsters in our midst.

Several chapters track the rise of murderous maniacs as the legendary monsters of choice, an adaptation of the legend to secular and realistic expectations influenced by slasher movies and real events. Where deviation of man and beast from physical norms has created many a monster, violation of behavioral, social, and moral norms also sets some people outside the pale of society and human empathy. A crazed killer supplanted aliens and swamp creatures as the preferred Boondocks Monster of 1960s campers. The Cropsey Maniac spent his entire known career as an insane murderer, the Webber's desire to harm stemmed from a traumatic childhood experience. Another characteristic often shared by modern monsters and the reason given for their malevolence is disfigurement, explicit in the Char-Man and Donkey Lady legends. They share along with the Goatman a solitary, anti-social lifestyle, hiding in isolation because of their hideousness, but pursued and persecuted by streams of people seeking to see the freak show. A superficial glance at the Donkey

Lady legend shows only another birth-of-a-monster story, but deeper consideration unfolds layers of social meaning, among them intolerance of a non-conforming person by the normative community, violence to expel an undesirable resident, blaming the victim for her own persecution and injury, revulsion toward a disfigured person, and exploitation of her as a spectacle. The legend reaches beyond an individual case to symbolize the unequal power relationship between marginalized and dominant communities.

Another facet of monster legends to understand is in what sense they are legendary. Why does it matter? Doesn't every story about monsters qualify as a legend because of its subject matter? The monsters of folklore certainly belong to "unofficial knowledge," things the folk public says exist but which science, history, and official news deny. In this sense fairies, ghosts, Bigfoot, Slender Man, and certain crazy killers become folk entities and proper subjects for folk narratives, but not all such narratives are legends. Folklorists distinguish memorates, accounts of personal experiences that sometimes include folk entities, from legends, where the subject matter may be the same entities but further qualifications apply. Legends are not just personal stories. They are stories that have persisted to become traditional. To be legendary, they must be shared knowledge, preserved and actively recirculated as full or partial narratives, or passively carried in memory by people who do not themselves tell the stories but know them and the claims they make. Each account of the same monster contributes to its legend, which comprises all experiences, accounts, retellings, and variants of it. What we see in each monster included in this book, from the most localized camp terror to a widely known creature like the Chupacabra, is a cluster of related but individually different narratives, changing from teller to teller and morphing over the years, but unified by some common characteristics and a community of participants that treats the central figure as one and the same.

These legends have passed primarily as oral traditions, but printed and electronic media have supplemented person-to-person communication with updated grapevines for disseminating talk of the strange. In the 19th century, newspapers became daily or weekly channels that spread the story of the Bear Lake sea serpent, along with countless reports of wild men, prehistoric animals still alive, Fortean phenomena, phantom airships, lunatics on the loose, and improbably large snakes. Newspapers

were sources of entertainment as well as news, and monsters provided sensations that customers paid to read about. The papers printed both stories reported as news and, when news was scarce, fabricated them whole cloth. Production of such "nature faking" articles fell to a newsroom writer designated as the "snake editor." The legend of alligators in the sewers profited from collaborative interactions of oral and press transmission, with helping hands from literature, movies, art, and jokes. Everyone now knows the story. It serves as a distinction, a quirky New York identity feature, even a source of humorous pride.

With the advent of electronic media, the spread and penetration of legendary material into public awareness redoubled—and as stories passed back and forth between folk and mass or popular culture, distinctions between the cultures blurred almost beyond recognition. Puglia focused on monsters as folk tradition and excluded from the book's purview such literary and cinematic figures as Dracula or Jason from *Friday the 13th* movies, but he acknowledged that their inescapable influence has shaped contemporary folklore. In a chapter on "American Vampires," an investigation of college students found that some knowledge of these monsters traced to Bram Stoker's novel, but still more derived from classic Bela Lugosi movies seen on TV late shows and from a TV series current at the time. How vampires look, dress, and become undead reflected information received via "tube transmission." None came directly from folk traditions. Rather than an obituary for folk vampires, their media attention nurtured a pop culture rebirth so appealing that some survey respondents believed vampires exist and even identified as one. Vampire admirers and imitators respond to the immortality, power, and sexual allure of this fictitious role model, one that symbolizes American values of youth, success, and sexual prowess, and to the romanticized media image of a tragic hero who lives by his or her own rules. The supernatural and monstrous can thrive without a community, in the usual folk sense, when a media-dominated environment connects disparate individuals into a quasi-community where nothing more than their fantasies intersect.

No example better illustrates how the Internet drives innovation in monster-making than the Slender Man saga. Dr. Frankenstein brought his monster to life with a piecemeal body, a spare brain, and lightning. Slender Man began in a group effort to create a scary pseudo-legend by assembling various

ideas to resemble the real thing. Made of imagination and supported by photos, news reports, and rumors, all fake, he emerged using no more electricity than needed to e-mail a forum network. The tall blank-faced figure and ominous associations with a fire and vanishing children struck a chord with recipients, who began adding to the fiction, interpreting and discussing it as if it were real, and spreading it to an ever-wider audience that responded as participants and sometimes believers. Computer networking allowed a collective creative and editing process among this far-flung, largely anonymous community. Online variants circulated and faced criticism when narrators' versions went against majority expectations among the audience. Negotiations, the clash of custom and creativity, worked out the differences with reconciliation or a parting of the ways, as happens in face-to-face folklore. Slender Man's popularity gained him entrance into such popular culture channels as games and movies, and into real-life news and an HBO documentary after the legend led to attempted murder. Here another monster came to life and escaped control of his creator—and this time his home was cyberspace.

How old and ethnic traditions fare against mass-culture interests is a subject for two chapters. From *Night of the Living Dead* to the *Walking Dead* franchise, the zombie has become a superstar of movies and TV in the U.S. and internationally. A rotting, lurching body and mindless quest for brains or flesh to eat define these creatures, and images of their tireless hordes overrunning civilization sustain the cultural meme of a zombie apocalypse. Their brainlessness invites humor and their convergence on malls out of postmortem habit serves as a heavy-handed dig at American consumerism. Like vampires, zombies have authentic folk roots; also like with vampires, few folk elements survive the transition to popular icon. The zombie of Haiti has a deep folk and religious presence in differing local forms throughout the country, but a key characteristic, the distinction between captivity of the body and of the soul, remains unknown in popular-culture representations. Another indigenous entity with a checkered modern history is the windigo, widespread among native peoples of Canada. Though human in form, the traditional monster was several times taller than a man but very thin and bony, forever hungry, ashen gray with eyes deep in their sockets, and tattered bloody lips. It was a giant cannibal that hunted humans or an evil spirit that turned humans into cannibals, but also a religious figure that

cautioned against selfishness and reminded people that communal relationships were important. In mass culture the windigo became a one-dimensional agent of death and evil, probably an influence on the icy White Walkers in *Game of Thrones*. The creature stripped down to its horrific image set off on a new career in Hollywood, while some Indigenous authors rewrote it as an avaricious monster underneath a handsome human façade to criticize capitalism and commercialism. The tradition split as it adapted to differing cultures and concerns.

A similar dynamic of conflicting interests has played out over Mothman. He gained sensationalized appeal through John Keel's book, *The Mothman Prophecies*, and much wider recognition through the movie of the same name. Keel amplified the weirdness while the movie made sparing use of the actual monster and concentrated on a mood of continuous and effective foreboding. Both of these treatments offended one faction of local residents. The Mothman festivals that followed the movie brought tourists to Point Pleasant; but for people who lived through the Silver Bridge collapse, it remained traumatic, sacred, and still surrounded by an aura of the preternatural. Not the monster but the tragedy was what mattered. For the festival promoters, for people too young to remember, and for anyone who welcomed the money that came to town, the fun and excitement of the festivities overshadowed the solemn memory of the disaster. Two strands of memory diverged, one that enshrined history, another that embraced the paranormal, the carnivalesque, and the commercial.

A legend may have a lengthy tradition with deep historical roots. Vampires and water monsters are widespread and age-old, the Jersey Devil has been around for hundreds of years, and the Donkey Lady bears similarities to the La Llorona legend, the Goatman loose ties to the Great God Pan. Still, as legends go, the typical local monster has a shallow and self-referencing lineage. Individual narratives tell of a sighting or encounter, followed by running and screaming perhaps, but the story is usually short on plot. The legendary character of a monster legend is mostly a summation of memorates, background history explaining origins and motives, and third-person accounts where the first persons are no longer alive to speak for themselves. Few local monster narratives evolve the structural distinctiveness of familiar contemporary legends like *The Boyfriend's Death*, *The Hook*, and *The Killer Upstairs*, though some plagiarize it. Especially in cases where the lo-

cal monster is a crazy killer, narrators may graft the plots of these legends onto their stories as a way to add a dimension of drama. But overall, the traditional content of monster legends remains limited to descriptions and a few generic events.

Certain distinctive motifs also recur in monster legends old and new. Types and appearances of monsters show a convergence of thinking attributable to traditional models, but the repetition of bridges in the Char-Man, Goatman, Donkey Lady, and Mothman legends seems an unlikely coincidence. A bridge can serve as home base for crazed, solitary, and ostracized characters, and did make sense as the focal point for portentous events after the bridge collapse at Point Pleasant, but these instances share no self-evident connections. On deeper consideration, monsters are liminal creatures. They belong on the threshold between the known and the unknown, the realm of human rules and understanding versus the inscrutable and uncontrolled. The bridge stands between the safe side of the human protagonist and the dangerous side of the monster, and it brings them together for inevitable conflict. Such recurrent features hint of deep traditions, currents of symbolism or cognitive patterns liable to surface in unexpected places.

The legend trip suggests a primal lure of confrontation and combat when people, often teenagers, seek out the haunts of monsters in hope of engagement with the frightening Other. Though few believe the monster is real, a setting that includes darkness, remoteness, perhaps a bridge, ruin, or graveyard, perhaps the Halloween season and plenty of stories to set the mood, primes the questers for anything that goes bump in the night. With other teenagers at large in the area, a volunteer monster or two may assure that everyone will have the desired fright. On the darker side, such trips overlook the exploitation of otherness and misfortune for the sake of thrills, but social and ethical considerations are too cerebral for the immediate purpose of these excursions. They provide communal participation, excitement in localities where other sources are limited, an irresistible test of courage, and an experience that reaffirms both specific legends and ingrained, even universal ways of thinking about the monstrous.

Are legends true? Popular opinion says yes; scholars say no, or hedge that there might be a kernel of truth surrounded by much fiction. A more tractable criterion for defining the legend allows that some people believe it is true, or that it is believable even if false. Though monster legends may

stretch credulity, they seem plausible enough to win over some believers while others doubt, leading to a dialectic over pros and cons, alternate understandings and different meanings. Such discussions keep the legend alive as a matter of continuing interest. They shaped the Slender Man conversation in ways that had real consequences for the two girls who believed it enough to attempt murder, and for their victim. Campers may not take their local monster seriously, but if the possibility is enough to keep them inside and out of trouble at night, the legend has had the desired effect on them. Legend trippers get a thrill of adventure out of monsters they laugh at by daylight and only briefly suspend disbelief at night. For a friendlier monster like Lieby, his ontological status was as certain as it was irrelevant. The students who boosted his fame knew he was fictitious and played along, willfully pretending he was real for his services to campus fun and humor.

Monsters live when people believe in them, but then belief in the monster itself is not the only perpetuator of the legend. As long as monsters hold meaning for the individual and community—be it as reality, expression, symbol, commercial prop, group identity, source of humor, entertainment, or excitement—then the legend thrives. Its truth need not be objective as long as the story embeds social codes and enacts the concerns of the community that preserves it. The legendary monster has a social reality whether it exists or not, and its substantiveness is as real as the actions and beliefs it inspires.

In a sense, all monsters exist as willful human creations. They become our way to give form to the shapeless dangers and names to the sources of the fears that forever stalk us. The older monsters were conceived as physical animals and belonged to the wild unknown. By rendering them physical, we reduced them to mortal creatures and they assumed mortal weaknesses, no matter how strong and fierce. By the old magic of naming, we drew them, however unwelcome, into the human sphere where they fell subject to social rules and assailable by physical power, no longer either supernatural or superman. The human monsters that replaced the older vessels of fear simply adapted to the urban jungle that replaced the natural one as the prevailing arena of danger. Again we knew the names and faces of our monsters, and ways to deal with them. Technology has opened the new unknown and already we have filled it with monsters—nuclear weapons, radioactive mutants, space aliens, genetic engineering, robots, androids, sentient computers, runaway ap-

pliances, artificial intelligence, Big Brother, thought control, the Matrix, and novel ones yet to come. The Internet, our new backyard fence for rumors, beliefs, and legends, spreads the word and invites participation in imaginary monsters and endless conspiracies. Anyone can now choose his or her truth according to individual preferences, and, for the still dissatisfied, create their own in an ideational ecosystem of one.

Still, the old monsters retain their appeal. A stubborn romantic spirit still drives people into the forest in search of Bigfoot. One chapter author in the book, Lisa Gabbert, confessed her sighting of something in Payette Lake that might have been Sharlie. Thousands of people every year report UFO sightings to MUFON and NUFORC. Even in this ostensibly secular, disenchanted, materialistic, and tech-savvy age, many people crave the mysterious and want to believe in things unknown to science. Legend trips fulfill a desire to experience the paranormal in person rather than on TV, while monster festivals allow people to play with monsters, make friends with them, and enjoy the fun in relative safety. But the element of fear continues to underlie the monstrous, ready to rear up again at any time in legends, movies, or the midnight hour to touch us with a primal chill. The scientific truth may be out there, but the more compelling truth is within us, even when it is imaginary.

Some wisdom derived from this book holds particular value for anomalists and anyone else dealing with anecdotal evidence. The truth of witness testimony is a slippery matter. Too many contenders claim the authority to decide what is true without awareness of their own shortcomings. Rather than privilege the viewpoints of non-witnesses, cultural outsiders, or those whose made-up minds think they already know the answer, a better approach is to center inquiry on the experience as a witness describes it. This experience-centered approach advocated by folklorist David Hufford recognizes that no one has a God's-eye view of what really happened, but we can know what the witness says happened. A long gauntlet through perception, conception, memory, interpretation, adaptation, and verbalization separates the objective event from the version communicated by the witness, with opportunities for error, distortion, and motivated alteration all along the way. The experience may be misperceived or misconceived from the start. Then too, it may involve something quite real even if the reality is not what the witness thinks. Of course observations work reliably enough that we get through most days

unscathed, but the more unknown and unfamiliar the experience, the less certain its account may be. No method opens a window to objective truth, but starting with the experience sets inquiry off as close to the actual event as we can hope to come.

For historians and monster hunters alike, understanding how witnesses experience their monsters should be a priority concern. Were they eyewitnesses or did they repeat a hearsay account? Chances are they brought expectations to the experience, memories of a local legend or what the movies show, evidence for exposure to prior traditions. After the fact, they try to make sense of what they saw, how to categorize it, how to put it into words, how to reconcile facts with personal beliefs or agendas. Communication means placing personal experience at the mercy of an audience with its own expectations and agendas. This confrontation may pressure the narrator to conform to cultural norms of the community, attend to local tensions and anxieties, repeat prejudices coded in legend traditions, or try to impress listeners with an exaggerated self-image as the hero who confronted a monster.

These considerations assume the narrator even intends to tell the truth. That is not always a safe assumption. In his chapter on monster stories from Southern Appalachia, Carl Lindahl notes that the narratives span a spectrum of complexity and credibility from sightings (simple reports of seeing a creature), legends (accounts of an interaction with a plot), tall tales (longer and more detailed stories with questionable aspects but treated with tolerance), and unreasonable lies (stories so unbelievable that everyone knows they are fiction). Daniel Boone's story of a hairy giant reads like a Bigfoot encounter and has been taken for such, but it includes an extended plot as the monster nearly kills Boone's son, Boone kills the assailant in the nick of time, and he undertakes an autopsy of the dead monster. The result is a thrilling story but likely a tall tale. Its plot is stylized and the action paced. Fictitious details embellish it but do not stretch credulity to the breaking point. Even if it has a kernel of truth, Boone's version aims not to report facts but to entertain. Motives like entertainment, self-aggrandizement, profit, and fooling an audience clash head-on with factual honesty to raise witness reliability as a vital concern.

A chapter on "Sasquatch-Like Creatures in Newfoundland" introduces the issue of how to inquire about extraordinary phenomena. The author, Michael Taft, begins by wondering why Sasquatches are not reported in Newfoundland. The province has

an abundance of supernatural and monstrous beings and ample gifted raconteurs, but no tradition of a Sasquatch or any identical being by another name. Old reports of giant Indians, a ghostly guardian of pirate treasure, a gorilla, and exceptional bears in the woods share certain characteristics of the Sasquatch. Are all such reports due to bears, or is Sasquatch lurking around after all and do the witnesses, bound by the categories they have learned, rationalize their experiences in acceptable terms? Language not only provides the vocabulary to describe an experience, it also teaches how to see, what to expect, what is and is not real. It sets limits on possibilities. British folklorist Gillian Bennett doing fieldwork asked people if they had seen ghosts and got only negative responses. Ready to give up, she changed the question to “what do you know about the stranger side of life,” and her informants suddenly opened up about their extranormal experiences. Maybe “ghost” was a pejorative term that indicated superstitious ignorance to which no one would admit, or a category that did not fit the experience as witnesses understood it. But she too found that cultural filters in a given place and time made all the difference in the answers she received.

North American Monsters is a teaching book of the best sort. Students meet the basics of folk legend theory in an engaging context, anomalists have their eyes opened to the social pressures and ulte-

rior motives underlying historic and contemporary monster reports. Everyone learns to think ethnographically, to look beyond the monster in the story and understand how it belongs to its community. Getting to know the people, their economic problems and social concerns, traditions and history no longer seems like a waste of time: To know the culture is essential to know the creature. The reader also pauses in amazement at the complexity of our monstrous frenemies. They pose as the ultimate outsiders, the irreducible Others; but the visible monster is only at the tip of a long thread of relationships that ties them to enduring human issues, and for that reason they are our always—and often uncomfortable—companions through life. To mention one last lesson from the book, we can enjoy the scare and thrill but also appreciate that monsters drive our thoughts beyond the everyday, raise doubts about the settled order and intimations of a bigger, stranger world that stretches our minds to imagine. Perhaps that is the most generous gift our monsters give us. This book is also a generous gift. It says much and suggests far more, stirring up ideas that echo back and forth in mind long after the reader turns the last page. David Puglia and his band of authors inform and delight in heaping measures and deserve well-earned thanks. Feel none of that gratitude and though you yet walk, know your heart and mind and soul have already joined the dead.