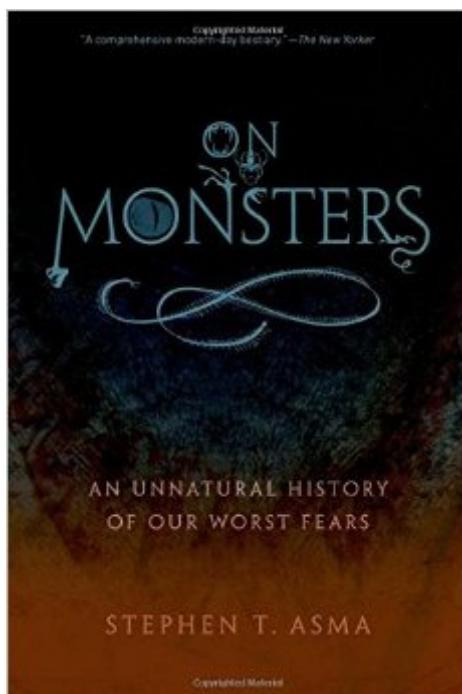


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# On Monsters: An Unnatural History Of Our Worst Fears



## Synopsis

Hailed as "a feast" (Washington Post) and "a modern-day bestiary" (The New Yorker), Stephen Asma's *On Monsters* is a wide-ranging cultural and conceptual history of monsters--how they have evolved over time, what functions they have served for us, and what shapes they are likely to take in the future. Beginning at the time of Alexander the Great, the monsters come fast and furious--Behemoth and Leviathan, Gog and Magog, Satan and his demons, Grendel and Frankenstein, circus freaks and headless children, right up to the serial killers and terrorists of today and the post-human cyborgs of tomorrow. Monsters embody our deepest anxieties and vulnerabilities, Asma argues, but they also symbolize the mysterious and incoherent territory beyond the safe enclosures of rational thought. Exploring sources as diverse as philosophical treatises, scientific notebooks, and novels, Asma unravels traditional monster stories for the clues they offer about the inner logic of an era's fears and fascinations. In doing so, he illuminates the many ways monsters have become repositories for those human qualities that must be repudiated, externalized, and defeated.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*On Monsters* takes you down a dark stair into the cellar of the human mind. A place where all that is horrible and inconceivably wicked in the universe scurries about in the shadows ready to leap out upon you from the darkness. Mankind's fascination with, and dread of, monsters is a part of the human experience that stretches back in the past as far as we are able to see. What these ideas are have changed and grown through the centuries in step with the growth of our understanding of

the world and our place in it. To the ancients monsters were outside, outside of us and outside the world that the gods had made. Rapacious and insatiable it was up to the great heroes, Beowulf and St. George, to slay them. And to some extent this is still valid today. But by the time of the Greeks people had begun to realize that things were not that simple. There could be human monsters too, Medea serving her children for supper. Dr. Asma undertakes to lead you through the entire conceptual history of monsters. A compendium of monsterology beginning with Alexander and his battle with monsters in India on up to the present, every type of monster is given its turn. As our understanding of monsters develops you can see the monsters evolving. The cyclops of the ancients, the witches of the medieval church, the physical mutants of science, the Frankenstein's monster and the werewolves of popular culture, the Hitler's, the John Wayne Gracie's and the monsters of our own psyche. What they are and how they are understood in today's world the understanding of monsters is not simple and has simple answers. Perhaps this is the lesson of the whole book for in the end the monster's are within us all. And if we are ever to control them it is here that they must be faced. This book will give you some fresh insights into some of the darker recesses of the human mind which in turn gives one a better understanding of how you can control them in your own life.

On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears by Stephen Asma attempts to answer this question from a wide range of fascinating perspectives. Asma begins with the origin of the word monster: "Monster derives from the Latin word monstrum, which in turn derives from the root monere (to warn). To be a monser is to be an omen." From there, Asma explores symbolic and literal monsters, the perception of monsters throughout history to the present day as well as their role in the future. Asma's overall definition of what has been perceived as monsters is broad, encompassing mythological ones such as griffins and manticores to serial killers like John Wayne Gacy. Asma even delves into horror movies or "torture porn," such as Hostel. The Loch Ness Monster is mentioned briefly a couple of times. Bigfoot doesn't make an appearance at all. This isn't that kind of book. Instead, Asma explores all the facets and connotations of the monstrous: As detailed in the ancient histories of Pliny and Herodotus-Greek mythology-as archetypes-Modern-day criminal monsters-Future monsters-literary monsters such as Grendel and Frankenstein's creature-Biblical monsters-psychological-biological: mutants-historical-cultural-medical-scientificIn chronicling the role of monsters throughout history, Asma lists some idiotic, once widely-held beliefs. One of the more outrageous ones (at least from a modern-day, enlightened point of view) is that in the middle ages, it was thought that the following caused a mother to give birth to a monster

[meaning a mutant or freak]:Too great a quantity of seedToo little quantityThe imagination the narrowness or smallness of the womb the indecent posture of the mother, as when, being pregnant, she has sat too long with her legs crossed, or pressed against her womb Surprisingly, rather than assembling a menagerie of fearsome and fantastic creatures, Asma gathers human monstrosities, such as psychopaths. The demonization of "the other" in society (other races, religions, cultures), he argues, is a form of monster-making. Given the many and varied examples of monsters throughout history, Asma concludes that there isn't "one compelling definition of monster"; however, most monsters share the same characteristics: "Monsters cannot be reasoned with. Monsters are generally ugly and inspire horror. Monsters are unnatural. Monsters are overwhelmingly powerful. Monsters are evil. Monsters are misunderstood. Monsters cannot be understood...They reflect the fears of specific eras. But they also reflect more universal human anxieties and cognitive tendencies, the stuff that gives us human solidarity...."

Asma's book is valuable from many perspectives, but especially so with regards to the psychology of "monsterology." His comments about Freud's theory of the Uncanny, the familiar-foreign dichotomy that evokes curiosity, trepidation and fear, is an example of Asma's observations about the ambiguous nature of terror. Frankenstein, Dracula and the Wolfman scare us because they are like us but at the same time not us, a near-familiar limbo that confuses and disorients. Similarly, he observes that CGI cartoon figures that are humanoid but clearly not human can entertain us, until the imagery enters a murky nether region of human-likeness imagery, where the distinction between a real human and a faux computer duplicate is difficult to make. Again, the "near-not near" aspect creeps us out in the same manner as the once-human monsters of lore did with their similarities to us. The change in attitude towards monsters, from biological anomalies to moral degenerates, reflects the cultural attitudes of a society where the secular world's judgements outweigh those of the religious. To be sure, the medieval church appropriated monsters for instructional as well as terrorizing purposes; the Devil, of course, was their favorite pew-filling bogeyman, while witches, Jews and Muslims also made credible near-not near monsters. But with the wane of this influence, "enlightened" civilization created a whole new spectrum of monsters. Interestingly, the first Cold War sci fi flicks leaned heavily on the humanoid monster as its principle scaremonger. "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" personified the Uncanny aspects of like-not like terror with its podpeople quasi-duplicates, a not so subtle metaphor for America's Red Scare hysteria over commie monsters disguised as red blooded Americans. Asma's book is a must read for anyone interested in how human psychology, culture and religion interact synergistically to create imagery of terror.

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