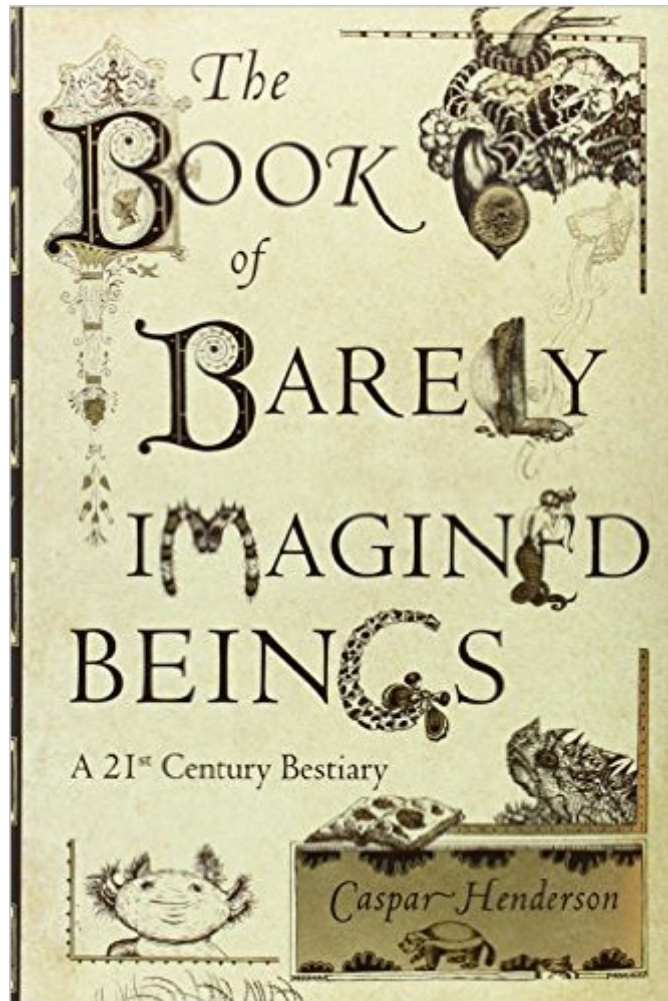


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The Book Of Barely Imagined Beings: A 21st Century Bestiary



Synopsis

From medieval bestiaries to Borges's *Book of Imaginary Beings*, we've long been enchanted by extraordinary animals, be they terrifying three-headed dogs or asps impervious to a snake charmer's song. But bestiaries are more than just zany zoology—they are artful attempts to convey broader beliefs about human beings and the natural order. Today, we no longer fear sea monsters or banshees. But from the infamous honey badger to the giant squid, animals continue to captivate us with the things they can do and the things they cannot, what we know about them and what we don't. With *The Book of Barely Imagined Beings*, Caspar Henderson offers readers a fascinating, beautifully produced modern-day menagerie. But whereas medieval bestiaries were often based on folklore and myth, the creatures that abound in Henderson's book—from the axolotl to the zebrafish—are, with one exception, very much with us, albeit sometimes in depleted numbers. *The Book of Barely Imagined Beings* transports readers to a world of real creatures that seem as if they should be made up—that are somehow more astonishing than anything we might have imagined. The yeti crab, for example, uses its furry claws to farm the bacteria on which it feeds. The waterbear, meanwhile, is among nature's extreme survivors, able to withstand a week unprotected in outer space. These and other strange and surprising species invite readers to reflect on what we value—or fail to value—and what we might change. A powerful combination of wit, cutting-edge natural history, and philosophical meditation, *The Book of Barely Imagined Beings* is an infectious and inspiring celebration of the sheer ingenuity and variety of life in a time of crisis and change.

Book Information

Hardcover: 448 pages

Publisher: University Of Chicago Press; 1 edition (April 10, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 022604470X

ISBN-13: 978-0226044705

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.6 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (44 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #165,517 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #142 in [Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Natural History](#) #160 in [Books > Arts & Photography > History & Criticism > Themes > Plants & Animals](#) #363 in [Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Zoology](#)

Customer Reviews

As if there were not already a extraordinary range of strange animals in the world, the bestiaries of the medieval times included such creatures as barnacle geese growing on trees. In 1967, Jorge Luis Borges brought out *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, which chronicled animals imagined in *Gilgamesh* and in the works of Kafka. When Caspar Henderson was looking through Borges's book, he realized that there are many real animals that are stranger than fictional ones. He isn't a biologist; he is a journalist and editor, but he realized he wanted to go exploring to find out more about the very strange creatures that evolution has come up with. He has brought out *The Book of Barely Imagined Beings: A 21st Century Bestiary* (Granta; to be published in America by the University of Chicago Press in April). This is a handsome book, with lots of whimsical illustrations; it is an abecedarium, with 27 chapters (the letter X which is often shortchanged in such books, here gets an extra chapter) from axolotl to zebra fish. Each chapter starts with an illuminated letter, incorporating something within the chapter. It is full of surprises, and Henderson's enthusiasm and wonder are infectious. Let me describe just the first chapter on the axolotl, whose name we Americans who are old enough first encountered as one of Harvey Kurtzman's non sequitur running gags in *Mad Magazine*. The weird word refers to a weird little animal, a salamander with pink skin, arms with fingers and legs with toes, gills that branch out from its neck, and an oversized spheroid head with a fixed, placid smile. Henderson writes, "Axolotls have this advantage over many other species in a human-dominated world: many people find them cute." They are popular for the home aquarium trade.

This great book presents a prismatic and at times kaleidoscopic view of a very grand swath of almost everything. Well, not quite everything, but an amazing cross section of interesting and obscure material is fair game for author Caspar Henderson. In the introduction, he explains what he was up to as follows: "I have tried to look at a few ways of being from different angles and, through 'a wealth of unexpected juxtapositions,' explore how they are like and unlike humans (or how we imagine ourselves to be) and also how their differences from and similarities to us cast light on human capabilities and human concerns". That pretty much sums it up. The book is organized as an abecedarium, with 26 (actually 27) chapters, (there are two for X) each one nominally dealing with a creature whose name begins with that letter. I say nominally, because the subject of the chapter is nothing more than a gateway into a labyrinth of free association that at times will almost take your breath away. To provide a flavor of this, here's one sentence from each of the chapters (one X only this time)...1. Axolotl - Three or four thousand years ago in Mesopotamia people imagined that a

being called Oannes, half-man and half-fish, rose from the sea to teach wisdom to mankind.² Barrel Sponge - Even if we accept the idea of deep time as a reality, it is still hard to understand because its dimensions are so far outside our normal cognitive range.³ Crown of Thorns Starfish - The drug addict, drunk, wife-shooter and writer William Burroughs used to tell a story about a man who teaches his anus to talk.⁴ Dolphin - Spinner dolphins of both sexes sometimes engage in orgies of more than a dozen individuals, known as 'wuzzles'.

I heard about this Bestiary book on a NPR show that interviewed Caspar Henderson and discussed the nature of Bestiaries historically as well as why Mr. Henderson had chosen these few as the principle "characters" of his new book. What captured my attention and interest in the book was that under "C" was the Crown of Thorns Starfish, a unique sea creature found in most of the oceans of the world and that was purportedly being singled out for the devastation of the Great Barrier and other reefs around the world. In fact, in 1976, I was a part of a research project sponsored by NAUI, Scripps Institute of Oceanography at UC San Diego, and led by Dr. Martin Chan of Cabrillo College whose purpose was to plot the northern intrusion of the Crown of Thorns Starfish into the Sea of Cortez from San Felipe, Baja, Mex to La Paz, Baja, Mex. Along the way, we photographically documented and recorded the Crown of Thorns Starfish, its populations along the southern route, marine conditions, and food sources that we found the starfish consuming. We found no evidence of the Crown of Thorns in the northern part of the research path where known corals flourish. We did see the starfish on the southern part of the research trek and most of them were feeding on octo-coral sea fans as opposed to true corals. At that time, it was thought that the Crown of Thorns only consumed true corals. It was a marvelous time spent diving 3 to 4 times daily over the course of the week, an eye opener to the first research diving expedition that I had ever been on, and a great source of underwater photography not only for the Crown of Thorns; but, other species that thrive in the Sea of Cortez and many different latitudes.

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