

## *De Monstris: An Exhibition of Monsters and the Wonders of Human Imagination*

Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto,  
September 17–December 21, 2018

TORONTO IS *TERRA INCOGNITA* to me. My visits are family-targeted, and my former skills as a *flâneuse* are limited by everyone's schedules and my own diminishing stamina. Until recently, I had yet to find a place in the city which I recognised as natural habitat. But then, on a windy November day, I left two of my family at their laptops in a snug lair in Massey College and ventured a couple of blocks to the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, lured by the promise of "an exhibition of monsters and the wonders of human imagination."

Readers familiar with the Fisher library will pardon my pause to take in the setting—the towers of books, the wood and glass, the library-ness of it all—before proceeding to my goal, the exhibition and accompanying catalogue.

And there were monsters, lured from their safe lairs within the Fisher collections by rare book librarian David Fernandez and his editorial colleagues, Pearce Carefoote and Liz Rodolpho of the Fisher, and Marie Korey, formerly of Massey College Library. Once lured, the monsters were organised into the exhibition by Linda Joy of the Fisher and digitally photographed for the catalogue by Paul Armstrong. Each of the 64 books or fragments in the display is provided with a description, context and at least one illustration.

The elegant catalogue was designed by Stan Bevington, recipient in 2012 of the Alcuin Society's Robert R. Reid Award and Medal for lifetime achievement in the book arts, and printed by his Coach House Press. The wondrous creature gracing the cover emerged from the imagination of artist/engraver Wesley Bates. Its name "Lectito" can be translated from Latin as "I read a lot."

In his preface, Josiah Blackmore, chair of the Department of Romance Languages and

Literatures at Harvard, asserts that historically speaking, monsters are "a serious business" appearing at moments when knowledge takes new turns. With this thought, he points to the essential revelation at the heart of this exhibition. Contradicting the subtitle, these books address not the fantastic but the real as it was known. Imagination kicked in when knowledge failed, and came up with hypotheses which natural historians, anthropologists and research physicians are still working on. We are looking at the evolution of the encyclopaedia and the textbook from Pliny the Elder (circa A.D. 23–79) to 19th and 20th century manuals of obstetrics.

The pages displayed acknowledge the usual beasts, chimera, mantichore, sharks, unicorns and others, but the most engaging, and at the same time the most disturbing, are those closest to ourselves, the human form divine gone horribly wrong. An engraving reproduced in Sebastian Munster's *Cosmographia* and many times elsewhere, shows a group hanging out on a beach in Patagonia and apparently wearing Speedo briefs. A sciapod exercises his single foot, while a Cyclops makes a point to a two-faced Pygmy and a Blemmy, whose facial features are incorporated into his torso, engages in serious discussion with a dog-headed Cynocephalus. Each also appears in solo interpretations.

Four parts of the exhibition and the catalogue—On Monstrous Peoples, On Monstrous Encounters, On Monstrous Nature, and On Monstrous Bodies—at first see monsters as exotic, bestial or primitive, but gradually the exhibit brings the creatures closer to ourselves. They become us or the fruit of our wombs. Especially in "Monstrous Encounters," Fernandez speculates that European explorers used the concept of "monsters" as a way of dealing with

people different from themselves, the monster as the “Other.” The fourth section, “On Monstrous Bodies,” enters living memory, the age of photography and documented surgical and obstetrical case histories, and teratology (the study of developmental and congenital deformities). Fernandez sees the books intersecting “with contemporary revisions of ideas of race, gender, sexuality, and class by feminist scholars and academics in disability studies and medical humanities.”

To access the fifth section, “On Monstrous Stories,” one must divest oneself of coat and bags and descend by elevator to what seems to be another exhibition entirely, starring *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. Unlike the authors of the books in the other parts, Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker deliberately created fictional monsters. It is a lovely exhibition, even if it does not fit the wider theme. A sexy image of Frankenstein’s monster from 1882 is reproduced in the catalogue. Philip Ball in the *London Review of Books* (November 25, 2018) suggests that one of the ways in which *Dracula* can be read is “as a parable of empire and its decline,” a suggestion which would fit the Otherness theme—except that no such hint appears in the catalogue. Blackmore thinks fear of monsters is a recent development. And that may be the point—if science explains away our

traditional monsters, our imaginations have to create new ones. We like to make our flesh creep.

Yet truth remains stranger, creepier, and more chilling than fiction. A later chapter in my travels put me in New York at David Zwirner’s gallery, staring at a series of photographs by Diane Arbus—66 images “made at residences for people with developmental disabilities,” according to the gallery’s statement. More empathetic than her famous “freak shows” photographs, the subjects here are not any more monstrous than my neighbour with Down’s syndrome. Yet they seem to be making themselves monstrous for the photographer, as they don masks, turn somersaults (like the sciapod), dance and prance and generally act up. They are in New Jersey, not Patagonia, but that earlier-imagined medieval group might also inhabit a world described in the gallery as “possessed of its own rituals and codes of conduct that remain somehow mesmerisingly familiar.”

There remain more questions than answers, no acceptable euphemisms, and the nagging suspicion that we the questioners may turn out to be the monsters, what E.E. Cummings called “this busy monster, manunkind.”

~ REVIEWED BY PHYLLIS REEVE

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The Alcuin Society wishes to welcome the following new members:

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*Erin Clupp, Vancouver, BC*

*Erica Commons, Vancouver, BC*

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*Carol Newall, Aurora, ON*

*Elaine Prodor, Black Creek, BC*

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Society members within Canada pay in Canadian dollars; foreign memberships must be paid in U.S. dollars. Payment may be made online using PayPal or via cheque or money order made payable to The Alcuin Society, P.O. Box 3216, Vancouver, British Columbia V6B 3X8.

