Deadly Powers: Animal Predators and the Mythic Imagination by Paul A. Trout

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Paul Trout’s book on animal predators and myth is well researched and presented in such a way that it is informative and entertaining. He illustrates his assertions with numerous examples of myths from ancient cultures. The content is also meant to make the reader “uncomfortable” with the idea that humans did not start out at the top of the food chain. When applicable, Trout likens myths to some modern tales of terror where humanity must face its fear of the predator in various forms, such as in modern horror and science fiction films.

The book is divided into nine chapters. The first chapter serves as a very brief introduction to what Trout wants to accomplish with his book. His thesis focuses on the idea that humans were not immediately the first on the food chain when we came into being, and that, as such, myths revolving round man-eating beasts served in multiple capacities. He believes the key to answering the question of where humans evolved into more of a predator than prey lies in the Pleistocene era.

The second chapter focuses on predators of the Pleistocene and is broken down by predator type. In Part 1, Trout covers felines, canines, and bears. Part 2 deals with water predators such as giant snakes, crocodiles, alligators, large lizards, and gigantic fish. The final section looks at aerial killers; teratorns, condors, and eagles. While these creatures may not be too much of a threat to humans currently, Trout reminds the reader that they were much larger in the Pleistocene era than their descendants. The author provides illustrations of scale. For example, there is an image in the section on aerial predators depicting a raptor with a wingspan of seventeen feet and what this would look like next to a human. Trout concludes this chapter by stating that the aforementioned creatures were predators that terrorized ancient humans, and that with the analysis he provides he proves that humans could not possibly have been the primary predator, or indeed predator at all, when it came to their environment.

Trout’s third chapter, titled “Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid: Fear and Survival in the Pleistocene,” discusses the concept of fear itself. This chapter is essential in understanding the creation of myth in regard to predators and how early man may have crafted them to provide cautionary tales and warnings for their fellow humans. Trout reminds the reader that fear plays a large part in myths despite the fact that fear is thought of as a sign of weakness or as a negative emotion. Trout contends that fear was actually essential to the survival of the Pleistocene humans. Trout splits this chapter into two parts. This first part, titled “Triggers of Fear,” breaks down aspects of the predator. A bulk of this section covers what Trout calls the predator face. Here, he analyses the eye of the
predator, as well as the mouth, teeth, and tongue. Trout also looked at the movements of predators; fear of blood, bones, sounds, signs, darkness, and night are other aspects analyzed. The second part of the chapter focuses on the defense and survival strategies of potential prey when faced with predators. The author argues that the strategies helped early humans communicate about animal predators.

Trout provides a wealth of valuable information on mimetic storytelling. Trout analyzes evidence of mimetic storytelling used as a survival tool. Another interesting idea in this chapter, one which could have been explored more, was the idea of the effect of dreams on myth creation and survival strategy in ancient humans. Mimesis and mimetic storytelling seem to be the crux of what Trout believes to be the evolution of the predator in myth creation. In Chapter 5, titled “The Emergence of the Myth-Making Mind,” Trout discusses several interesting concepts. He mentions what he calls the Agency Detection Device and Theory of Mind Mechanism and how these “primed” the human brain to “evolve a mythic imagination” (131). He also defines and discusses anthropomorphism, animism, and metamorphism and their role in early myths. Language and the rise of the mythical culture, creative thinking and survival, myth as a means of managing fear, and women as early storytellers are also important points Trout covers in this chapter.

The sixth chapter opens with a simple yet profoundly true statement: “Monsters fill the mythic landscape” (157). In this chapter, Trout attempts to answer several questions. First, what caused ancient humans to create monsters in myth that were far more fearsome and dangerous than the creatures that hunted them? Also, what drives that need to “add to our fears” (157)? Finally, what is the advantage of doing so? Trout successfully answers these questions by looking at the mythical monster as predator, animal predators transforming into greater monsters, and the natural sources or forms that help to create the mythical monsters. Taking a look at humans’ “inner monster” provides an interesting look at the evolution of the human mind to internalize the monster within. While Trout makes a good argument that he believes that humans were not originally murderous and bloodthirsty, they learned to become hunters through mimesis, that is, by taking to heart what they saw in regard to predators and what they communicated through myths.

The next chapter deals with the predator being represented as deity. The practice of deifying that which one fears is an ancient concept and this book would be lacking if Trout had not discussed this. Trout provides valuable information on the attributes necessary and present in predator made gods, which include their frightening willingness and ability to kill their worshippers. Trout likens their worship of such deadly predators in terms of Stockholm Syndrome. The author also covers the act and ritual of worship, predator cults in
the Paleolithic era, and the evolution of the gods from purely animal form to acquiring human traits, including in physical form. This leads to the next chapter where Trout focuses on the predator as benevolent entities, even kin. He explains the concepts of anthropomorphism and fear management by turning these deadly killers into forces that help humans. Trout’s conclusion is eye opening and truthful: “these deadly forces not only hunted and killed them but helped make them to become physically agile and mentally clever survivalists” (236).

In the ninth chapter of the book, Trout discusses how early humans evolved into becoming predator rather than prey. By way of imitating their predators, Trout contends, ancient humans were able to use hunting as a mimetic performance. To do so, according to Trout, they became their predators by donning the markings and skins to attain a closer relationship to the predator they represented. Trout’s observations on the use of rituals of transformation were very insightful. He discussed Aboriginal myth and Orokaiva rites, then transitioned into the more frightful case of Hitler and his desire to become the wolf, going as far as to call his SS a wolf pack, among other points.

The final chapter, titled “Scaring Ourselves to Life,” discusses how modern humans continue to hold onto the predator myth by way of modern stories of monsters and killers. Trout references modern film and stories and determines that they are not only cathartic, but they help modern humans work out in their own minds how they would act if they were put in the same predicament, being stalked by a predator hell bent on killing their target.

Throughout this book, Trout uses ample evidence to back up his position. At first, it would seem that his argument flies in the face of everything that we have been taught, that humans were the great hunters of their time, but his argument that we did not start as predator is completely valid and shown aptly in this book. The way Trout presents the material will benefit the general reader and scholar alike. He relies quite heavily on quotations, as well as keeping to a general formula as to how he disseminates his information, but this helps to solidify his argument and gives it more teeth.

—Lizzy Walker