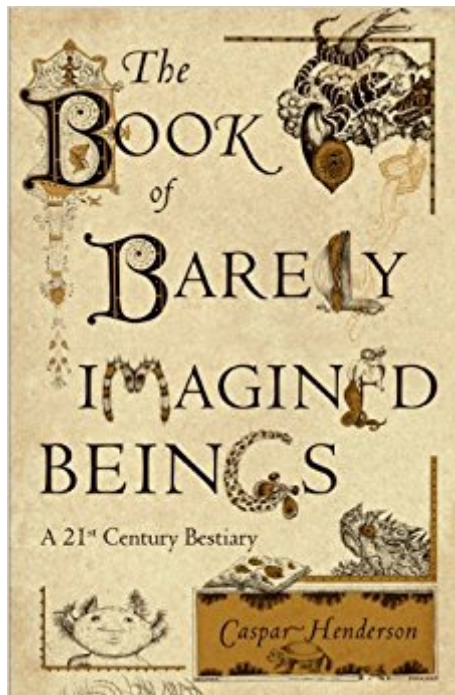


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# The Book Of Barely Imagined Beings: A 21st Century Bestiary



## 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

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## Customer Reviews

“The Book of Barely Imagined Beings is one that Pliny would have envied, Darwin applauded, and Borges relished. It celebrates the playful imagination of the universe, capable of dreaming up the zebrafish and the yeti crab; it also celebrates our delight in reading in claws and feathers lessons about our own miraculous self. In these days of doom and gloom, I can think of nothing more rejoicing than Caspar Henderson’s magical book.” • (Alberto Manguel, author of *The Library at Night*) “Wondrous, capacious and strange.” • (Simon Critchley, author of *The Book of Dead Philosophers*) “If you’re interested, as I am, in weird details about weird animals, this is the book for you. Caspar Henderson takes us on an eye-opening tour of real animals that no sane human could ever have invented.” • (Frans de Waal, author of *The Age of Empathy*) “A sublime rumination on existence. In twenty-seven exquisitely crafted cameos, Caspar Henderson reveals the hidden wonders of life in all its exuberant strangeness, at the same time illuminating our own place in the world. Simply stunning.” • (Callum Roberts, author of *Ocean of Life*) “Caspar Henderson is a zoological Borges, taking us on a fascinating and exhilarating journey through the labyrinth of natural history. This book is a brilliant and original meditation on what the animal world can teach us about who we are and who we want to be. It weaves an unforgettable spell.” • (Roman Krznaric, author of *The Wonderbox*) “A wonderful book! With the precision of a scientist, the elegance of an artist, and the minatory power of an Old Testament prophet, Caspar Henderson exhorts us to pay attention to the other species on our endangered planet and learn from them before it is too late.” • (Richard Holloway) “An utterly extraordinary book: a glorious and genre-bending grimoire; a spell-book of species that entranced me from its first page. Wonderful in the richest senses of the word, as well as witty, moving, urgent, and beautiful.” • (Robert Macfarlane, author of *The Wild Places* and *The Old Ways*) “A rich mixture of science, mythology, and literature, whose plethora of entertaining digressions left me impressed.” • (Richard Fortey, author of *Horseshoe Crabs* and *Velvet Worms*) “Tangentially inspired by Jorge Luis Borges’s *Book of Imaginary Beings*, and assembled like a cabinet of curiosities, journalist Caspar Henderson’s first book highlights what nonhuman species reveal about being human. The disarmingly human face of the Axolotl salamander introduces a reflection on evolution, which wanders into the history of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, before landing on the question of what the Axolotl’s ability to regenerate limbs can reveal about stem cells. It’s an oddly anthropomorphic argument to abandon anthropomorphism, but as exotic salamanders and

transparent octopi give way to miniscule water bears, whiskered owlets, and the honey badger, Henderson's contagious awe of life effortlessly advances his argument. The captivating habits of these beings are given significant scientific backbone, before digressing into a free-flowing discourse." (Publishers Weekly) "Present knowledge, together with environmental trouble, make it a natural time to update the bestiary in writing, and to tour nature's brilliance in light of honest science. That's exactly what the English author Caspar Henderson has done with his *The Book of Barely Imagined Beings: A 21st Century Bestiary*." (New Yorker 2013-05-16) "This readable volume will appeal to the serious reader with broad interests in science, mythology, folklore, and speculation on questions of the human condition." (Library Journal 2013-05-15) "Book of the year." (Blackwell's Bookshop) "Magnificent, bravura, beautiful and astoundingly interesting." (Sunday Times) "Spell-binding, brilliantly executed, extraordinary." (Guardian) "When it comes to nature, the truth is often stranger and more wondrous than fiction, especially in Caspar Henderson's *Book of Barely Imagined Beings*. The book illustrates the weird and wild histories of unusual—but real—species, including human beings, offering the reader elaborate illustrations, annotations, and much lore. And lurking in the margins is Henderson's suggestion that just as a medieval bestiary's mythical monsters reveal the values of a bygone era, the creatures that fascinate us today reveal much about us." (Nature Conservancy 2013-06-01) "As humanity begins to grapple with the likelihood of extraterrestrial life, we're also reaching a fuller understanding of just how alien organisms can be right here on Earth. It is against this backdrop that Caspar Henderson offers *The Book of Barely Imagined Beings*, an illustrated, alphabetical compendium of some of the weirdest, wildest forms of life on Earth. . . . Henderson approaches his material with a deep respect for evolutionary science and a sophisticated understanding of the ways humans have tried to make sense of the natural world and our place in it." (Bookforum 2013-07-15) "A beautiful work that celebrates Earth's extraordinary species, with the look and feel of a Victorian treatise." (Nature 2013-07-15) "With illumination-style flourishes, hand-drawn illustrations, and in-margin notes, from a purely aesthetic and bibliophilic point of view, *The Book of Barely Imagined Beings* is as magical as its name suggests. . . . Both aesthetically pleasing and scientifically intriguing, it would make an inspiring addition to any natural history collection." (Evolve Magazine, Natural History Museum 2013-08-01)

Caspar Henderson is a writer and journalist whose work has appeared in the *Financial Times*, the *Independent*, and *New Scientist*. He lives in Oxford, UK.

I like the idea of this book -- writing about the weird facts about real animals in the style of a medieval bestiary. But I found in practice that it was boring facts about relatively well known animals in a fairly modern style.

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. It is lucky that they can thrive in glass pools, because the Mexican lakes from which they come are increasingly being drained or polluted. (A distressing number of the animals on these pages are listed as "critically endangered." Almost always, the problem is global warming or some sort of encroachment by humans. Henderson reminds us that in 2008, geologists agreed to call the current age the Anthropocene, to acknowledge that humans are the biggest influence on Earth's systems.) There is a digression (Henderson's prose is clear and it agreeably wanders off into instructive and entertaining byways) about how salamanders were long thought to be impervious to fire. A medieval bestiary says, "The salamander lives in the midst of flames without pain and without being consumed; not only does it not burn, but it puts out flames." Few would question such an assertion at the time, especially since it had a second from St. Augustine, who said that a salamander not being consumed by flame was a good example to show how a soul

could be burned in hell forever without being consumed. That's all baloney, but Henderson reports that axolotls do have a surprising ability, if not to regenerate themselves from flames, then to regenerate an arm or leg after an amputation, and even an eye or parts of the brain. If we learn better how the axolotl does it, human amputees might benefit. I don't do e-books, partly because I am simply stodgy, but partly because I like a well-produced book as a physical object. This one is simply gorgeous; I don't know how an e-version would look and I don't want to know, but I will tell you in all prejudice to get the print version. Its text and its many pictures are supplemented with red ink. There are no footnotes as such, but marginal notes printed in red, with the text so annotated in red as well. The ample margins are also a playground for little illustrations or decorations. The book harks back to bestiaries of old, with lots of whimsical illustrations, frontispieces for every chapter, and illuminated capitals. It is a fine vessel for bringing a message of celebration of biological diversity and weirdness.

I loved this book from the moment I first plunged into it. It is a beautifully-written set of essays on life & living things, and a sad reflection on the accelerating effects of human activities on the biosphere. As a biology teacher, I was hooked by the quirky snippets of information scattered throughout the book (although I'll never look at a mantis shrimp in quite the same way again!) Thoroughly recommended for both students and the general reader.

I have been reading a library copy and bought this one as a gift to one of my sons whose research in cellular memory I thought could benefit from at least the first chapters. I have yet to finish reading the book as I have to use a magnifying glass for the side-notes and some of the text but I have noted the page I am on and will return to it again (and again).

A modern take on 'natural philosophy' that uses the framework of specimens from the animal kingdom (and not the standard mammals either) and from there, digresses into meditations on climate change, the origin and future of life, geology, astronomy, history... all written with wit and style. The hard cover was worth it for the illustrations alone.

Beautifully written and very interesting. Uses each animal as a stepping off point for talking about science, philosophy, literature, etc.

This totally intriguing book is, indeed, filled with unimagined facts tied together by a wide, deep

range of scientific, and cultural references along with Henderson's gentle poetry and humor ever-so slightly reminiscent of Kipling in his own 'barely imagined' "Just So Stories". This gripping, expansive book opens minds to a sense of our place in the continuum with the rest of Nature and behooves us to take care. Read it!

I've only read through to F for flatworm and the witty writing clearly driving us to our true origins is AMAZING!!!! love this book. It should be a mandatory read in schools.

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