

BOOK REVIEWS

Rhinoceros, by Kelly Enright

London, Reaktion Books (reaktionbooks.co.uk); 224 pages, ISBN: 978 861 893741

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This compact pocket-sized paperback is the 23rd in a series on common animals and their associations with humans. It has 92 well-printed illustrations (43 in colour), dispersed attractively throughout the book. The purpose of the book is to portray the rhino as it has been perceived throughout history. Condensed into 172 pages, and divided into five main chapters (myths, early captivity, hunting, culture and a synopsis of the five rhino species), this book can increase everyone's general knowledge about rhinos.

The author, a cultural and environmental historian and museum anthropologist, admits that she has never seen a rhino in the wild, and like the vast majority of people has learned about rhinos from exhibits, libraries, zoos and media. She can thus relate to the preconceived views people have about rhinos. Is it a savage prehistoric beast that is doomed? Or, the author asks, can we grant the rhino a new image making it worthy of saving?

The author relates how early European sightings of rhinos were scant; reports suggested that the rhino was a mythical species, either a unicorn or resembling a dinosaur. The recordings of Marco Polo and others described the rhino as an elusive and mysterious animal. In Asia 4000 years ago, rhino horns were believed to have magical medicinal properties. The Ancient Greeks described horns fashioned into cups as poison detectors. Rhinos, then as often today, were more valuable dead for the horn than alive, the author remarks.

Several rhinos were caught long ago (with great difficulty) and brought into captivity, and the author recounts the story of some of these. In 275 BCE Philadelphos, ruler of Egypt, brought a white rhino

from Ethiopia to Egypt as an exotic symbol of his empire; it was paraded for the awe and wonder it created in audiences. The Ancient Greeks and Romans transported rhinos to Europe, and Pliny described the rhino he saw as a ferocious beast. This reputation stuck for a thousand years until 1515 when a Portuguese governor gave an Indian rhino to King Manuel in Lisbon. He wished to see the docile creature gore an elephant in combat, but the fight was 'the dullest of anti-climaxes'. This was the rhino described at the time to the artist Durer whose early rhino drawing we frequently see. In the mid-18th century, when the famous rhino called Clara toured Europe, one reporter wrote 'she was as gentle as a dove'. Rhino memorabilia flourished at that time: hairbrushes, clocks, engravings and porcelain depicted the rhino, as both an exotic and erotic creature. Also fashionable were pastoral pictures of rhinos echoing the animal's now serene image. Then, in 1855 a rhino came to America for the first time, to join a circus, but it was of limited ability and was said to have 'paroxysms of rage'. The rhino's reputation as a savage beast resumed.

By the 19th century, Europeans were hunting these dangerous animals in Africa—although they were as easy to kill as 'shooting a cow'. They were popular for their rarity and for their trophy horns. Hemingway later wrote that the horns represented the hunter's self worth. The rhino epitomized the power of nature in an era when, as Theodore Roosevelt would argue, men were being effeminized by modern work and social conditions. The rhino represented nostalgia for the dissipating power of nature in the modern age, a trait hunters admired even as they destroyed it—a tragic irony, as the author states. Roosevelt hunted

the rare white rhino in central Africa ‘before it disappeared’ for museums. The author describes how these rhinos are still on exhibit and have a fascinating story behind them. Along with zoo rhinos, they are all that most people will ever see of a rhino. The author thus argues that the personal stories of these rhinos should be written up on display boards beside them as it would bring the animals to life and give rhinos much needed sympathy and attention.

The book goes on to illustrate how rhinos have been portrayed in western culture. Early popular feature films chose the rhino, with its dramatic charge, as human enemy number one. Story-tellers described a grumpy, dim-witted, bad-tempered, vengeful and violent beast, and some continued to tell the elephant-rhino rivalry myth. Story-books liked to humanize the rhino for amusement ‘taking the rhino out of the wild and the wild out of the rhino’. Enright tells us the rhino’s highest accolade in art came from Salvador Dali who stated that ‘in nature there has never been a more perfect example of a logarithmic spiral than the curve of the rhinoceros horn’ that maintains the same curve as it grows in size. Rhinos have thus represented the beautiful, the ugly, the ridiculous, the violent and the admirable. In Eugène Ionesco’s 1959 play *Rhinocéros* (later made into a film), humans choose to become rhinos in order to give up their own sick civilization and selfhood. Nowadays, rhinos are used for logos to symbolize the endangered state of wild animals or in advertisements with slogans such

as ‘none tougher’ and ‘rhino tough’. But despite the rhino being a household name, there is still limited compassion or understanding about rhinos, which the author laments.

As the book states, the rhino horn trade is to blame for the demise of the rhino with the ‘wasteful death of 1300 kg of animal for a few kilos of keratin’! The last chapter contains a couple of mistakes, unfortunately, regarding the Indian rhino’s size and the rhinos distribution in East Africa. Nevertheless the chapter has an important message: we need to re-create the image of the rhino as an animal worth saving. The book ends with a description of Rapunzel, a Sumatran rhino brought to the Bronx Zoo ‘safely locked away—but not free’. Unlike in the fairy tale, she is not rescued; she died in 2005 without progeny.

It is a well designed book with a straightforward writing style that covers a wide array of interesting facts compiled from many sources. The author carried out only a little original research about rhinos. This was at the American Museum of Natural History and the Bronx Zoo. Although there is a slight American bias to the text, it is, however, a good overview of the rhino story for the general reader. After the main chapters there is a helpful time-line showing some of the events regarding man’s involvement with rhinos starting in 30,000 BC with the Chauvet cave paintings in France. References, a bibliography, an index and a list of web sites allow a reader to acquire more detail.