



2016

Review of "Eye of Newt and Toe of Frog, Adder's Fork and Lizards' Leg, the Lore and Mythology of Amphibians and Reptiles"

Kay Etheridge
Gettysburg College

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Etheridge, Kay. Review of "Eye of Newt and Toe of Frog, Adder's Fork and Lizards' Leg, the Lore and Mythology of Amphibians and Reptiles," by Marty Crump. *Herpetological Review* 47, no. 3 (2017): 491-492.

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Review of "Eye of Newt and Toe of Frog, Adder's Fork and Lizards' Leg, the Lore and Mythology of Amphibians and Reptiles"

Abstract

A review of Marty Crump's book on the folklore surrounding reptiles and amphibians. Crump's book is a collection of tales and myths both ancient and contemporary, and a fascinating analysis of how humans perceive and sometimes revere snakes, frogs and other "loathsome" creatures.

Keywords

herpetology, folklore, reptiles, amphibians, Marty Crump

Disciplines

Animal Sciences | Animal Studies | Biology

The value of the individual species accounts is therefore mixed. It might be argued that by providing information on species' habitats and environment, the keeper might be spared having to do any of their own research should they happen to acquire any of the species included. The trouble is, that for many of the species, this does not seem likely to happen (legally, at any rate). Many countries, such as India and Vietnam, prohibit the collection, trade, and export of either all or specific species. In fact, many of the species share similar requirements, and it might have been more useful therefore to combine these into single chapters covering, for example, green arboreal species (such as the White-lipped Pitviper, the Large-eyed Pitviper, Medo's and Gumprecht's pitvipers, the Indian Bamboo Pitviper and Pope's Pitviper and its relatives), with others dealing with the terrestrial, moisture-loving species (such as the Malayan Pitviper and the mountain pitvipers), and the terrestrial/semi-arboreal *Protobothrops* species. It certainly seems unnecessary to deal with three doubtful (Guo et al. 2009) subspecies of *Protobothrops jerdonii* separately, claiming no knowledge of two of them, yet with copious information on the third. This condensation of pertinent information and a reduction in the huge number of photographs in the species accounts may have made the book more digestible and user-friendly in content, and a little more reasonable in price. This book seems unable to make up its mind about its intended audience, being half hobbyists' manual and half coffee-table book. Ultimately, it is a little too expensive for the first, and a little too idiosyncratic and unauthoritative for the latter.

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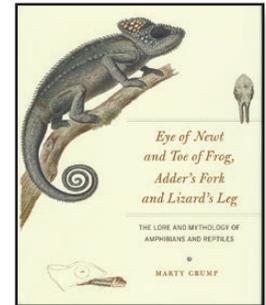
Herpetological Review, 2016, 47(3), 491–492.
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Eye of Newt and Toe of Frog, Adder's Fork and Lizard's Leg, the Lore and Mythology of Amphibians and Reptiles

Marty Crump. 2015. University of Chicago Press, Chicago (www.press.uchicago.edu). 304 pp., 155 color plates, 1 table. Hardcover. US \$35. ISBN 9780226116006.

KAY ETHERIDGE

Department of Biology
Gettysburg College
Gettysburg, Pennsylvania 17325, USA
e-mail: ketherid@gettysburg.edu



Marty Crump's latest book took me on a marvelous journey, stirring memories and imagination and reminding me of what kindled my own interest in herpetology as an undergraduate at Auburn decades ago. Marty is one of a handful of exceptional story-tellers from whom I learned about amphibians and reptiles. The first was Bob Mount, who made me realize that snakes and toads held more fascination than the fuzzy mammals that first attracted me to the study of biology. The second was Archie Carr, whose peerless writing and teaching style remain an inspiration. Marty was my warm and wonderful graduate mentor at the University of Florida, and she had her own unique story-telling style, imparting information about her amphibian subjects in a way that compelled us to want to learn more. The myths and folklore surrounding amphibians and reptiles have held a fascination for Marty from her undergraduate days at the University of Kansas, and fifty years later she still has handwritten notes gleaned from her early exploration of that material. In the interim, she maintained her interest in herpetological folklore, and continued to explore the subject even as she pursued her academic career and travelled the world in pursuit of knowledge about living amphibians. *Eye of Newt and Toe of Frog* is a compilation of stories, ancient and contemporary, resulting from decades of investigation into the story-telling tradition surrounding creatures often loathed and feared. Such stories, which as Marty writes (p. 17), “plant seeds that encourage reflection,” are organized into chapters that place them in cultural contexts. The folklore is fascinating on its own, but is examined as to its possible influence on human attitudes toward amphibians and reptiles and their resulting treatment in various cultures. Of course the predominant human responses to snakes and other herpetofauna have long been fear and revulsion, and the folklore and biology behind these reactions underlie many of the book's entries. Toads, for example, are said variously to be witches in disguise, have breath that can cause children to convulse, and to poison water. Yet the utility of the same animals in medical practice, sexual potions, and magic are touted around the world, as are their roles in a variety of creation myths. Many of these myths are thousands of years old and have even inspired the naming of constellations (Bell 2005). It is fascinating to find that reptiles and amphibians loom large even in more recently developed human beliefs, and the book incorporates contemporary accounts such as David Icke's conspiracy theory that politicians are (literally and not metaphorically) reptiles in human form.

Marty applies her broad knowledge of the science behind the

stories and her own experiences—her mother valiantly attempted to instill a fear of snakes in her—giving the book a multilayered appeal. She does an excellent job of examining the roots of some of the myths by revealing the biological background (spadefoot toad populations boom quickly after torrential rains) related to the folklore (frogs arise from mud, frogs symbolize rebirth). Thus, the chapter titled “A Second Chance: Frogs, Snakes and Rebirth,” delves into folk stories such as those regaling the regenerative and rejuvenating powers of snakes. This chapter, as is the case throughout the book, is enriched by images from both folklore, e.g., artwork depicting the Chinese legend of a frog bestowing the gift of immortality, and from nature, e.g., a photo of a shedding snake, long a symbol of renewal. In *Eye of Newt and Toe of Frog*, the layout intrigues the reader visually with integrated images of folk art, craft items, and even entrées created from reptiles and amphibians. Animal images in art and illustrations are useful indicators of human attitudes toward their subjects, and the changes in the types and use of images of reptiles and amphibians provide a crude barometer for understanding how they were perceived at various points in Western history (Etheridge 2007). In this book, there are numerous arresting photos of live reptiles and amphibians, such as that picturing a glistening Darwin's Frog, and illustrative artwork is used to enhance a point when a photo will not suffice. The change in font type and intensity chosen by the book designer for figure captions seems to me an aesthetic mistake; the caption font is difficult to read in all but bright light, but that is a small quibble.

Throughout the book Marty relates folklore tales to human attitudes by reference to a quadrant system developed by James Serpell. His model examines human feelings about animals using a scale of utility from detrimental to beneficial and an intersecting scale of affect. The latter scale ranges from love, sympathy, and close identification (think baby or puppy) to the opposing responses of fear, loathing, and lack of identification (Serpell 2004). As Marty points out in various places in the book, many cultural factors including traditional folklore must be considered in applying this model. She emphasizes that there are individual differences in perceptions as well, such as age or knowledge about the animals in question. But the perception of societies rather than individuals is what underlies much of her interest, and Marty closes the book with a chapter that reflects on the influence of folklore on attitudes and the implications for conservation efforts. Protecting a threatened species is certainly more challenging when the creature to be conserved does not evoke sympathy or kinship, but instead is seen as detrimental, dangerous, or as in the case of the Ball Python (*Python regius*), unholy. Marty writes (p. 277) that people of the Edo State of western Nigeria kill Ball Pythons but hold Rock Pythons (*Python sebae*) to be holy and therefore treat them differently.

Eye of Newt and Toe of Frog is an entertaining and informative read, and will provide food for thought, particularly for those working in the areas of conservation, behavior, and anthropology. The stories and the background science as written are accessible for a broad audience. The material on folklore would make for lively insertions into biology, art, or writing courses, but will also be of interest to herpetologists curious about human perceptions of their study animals. We each know our subjects from a unique perspective, but particularly when working in the field, could perhaps benefit from an understanding of their storied history and status in their own land. The example of the Tuatara and its cultural importance to the Maori is offered, and as Marty writes (p. 279), the Maori elders desired to protect the Tuatara,

which they viewed as divine guardians, but felt no need to understand them “from a scientific perspective.”

This book was clearly a personal project for Marty. She recounts fieldwork that led to parasitic infections and her response to being met with open incredulity that a woman would handle venomous snakes. The book ends with a wistful story about a gift of spadefoot tadpoles Archie Carr personally delivered to celebrate the birth of Marty's daughter with a hope for repopulation of the species, which had all but disappeared from the habitat around her Florida home. The interwoven personal narrative makes the book all the more absorbing, because her chronicle is yet another story—that of a herpetologist on a journey through a world simultaneously corporeal and imagined.

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Herpetological Review, 2016, 47(3), 492–493.

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The Reptiles and Amphibians of the Dutch Caribbean: Saba, St. Eustatius, and St. Maarten. Second edition, revised and expanded

Robert Powell, Robert W. Henderson, and John S. Parmerlee, Jr. 2015. Dutch Caribbean Nature Alliance (DCNA), Bonaire, Dutch Caribbean (<http://www.dcnanature.org/>). 343 pp. Softcover. US \$20.00 in the three Park Head Offices, Dutch Caribbean; US \$40.00 (inclusive of shipping) from Info@dcnanature.org. ISBN 978-99904-1-842-2.

ADRIAN HAILEY

Department of Life Sciences

The University of the West Indies

St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies

e-mail: adrian.hailey@sta.uwi.edu

The first edition of this book (Powell et al. 2005) was almost unusable, due to the shiny heavily-treated paper sticking together firmly, at least in the Caribbean climate. The second edition is a great improvement in production quality, and will be essential for all herpetological (and hopefully other naturalist) visitors to the Dutch Caribbean, where it is available at a very reasonable price. The authors are well known for their work on Caribbean herpetofaunas over decades, with hundreds of papers and articles and several large works, including Henderson and Powell's *Natural History of West Indian Reptiles and Amphibians* (2009). The present work on the Dutch Caribbean is a completely different type of book, a pocket-sized (18 x 12 cm) general introduction and field guide, now number 4 in the DCNA series on the biodiversity of these small islands.

