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Bears: A Brief History



Synopsis

This engaging book examines the shared history of people and bears. Hopscotching through history, literature, and science, Bernd Brunner presents a rich compendium of the interactions between the two species and explores how bears have become central figures in our inventory of myths and dreams. He reveals the remarkable extent to which human feelings about bears have been—and still are—mixed. People have venerated, killed, caressed, tortured, nurtured, eaten, worshipped, and despised bears. Interestingly, the varied dealings of humans with bears raise the same question over and over again: do our images of bears have much in common with the animal as it really is? The book uncovers new and little-known stories and facts about bears in European, North American, Japanese, Russian, and South and Southeast Asian cultures. Taken together, these perspectives show us new things about the animals we thought we knew so well. Quirky and bizarre anecdotes, scientific information on bears threatened with extinction in some areas, a discussion of the phenomenon of ‘bearanoia,’ and more than one hundred historical illustrations contribute to this unique account of the shared history between bears and humans and the continuing presence of bears in our personal and collective dreams.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As the owner of a vast bear library, I always welcome the rare bear book that documents the historical relationship between people and bears. Along with very interesting text, this book is full of photos and illustrations that help paint the picture of our past relationship with this fascinating and wonderful animal. Mr. Brunner did his homework with this book and therefore warrants a spot on the

"top shelf" of my bear library. Well done Mr. Brunner, well done!!

This concise cultural history of bears in human culture is in an excellent translation which I could not stop reading. Packed full of historical illustrations, this is required reading for anyone who wants to better understand his/her own relationship with bears and the place of bears in the human imagination. The potentially dry confusing classification of bears is handled deftly and made fascinating. This is the rare non-fiction book which you will not be able to put down until you feel the satisfaction of consuming its contents.

The way we look at nature is a complicated thing -- we love it, but we also fear it and despoil it. It might be fun to read another book describing our conflicted relationship with "the world around us," but it would not be as fun as reading a book about our relationship with bears. Bears turn out to be, in all ways that are important, a more than adequate proxy for the abstraction that is "nature," so this wonderful book by Bernd Bruner about bears tells us a lot about our conflicted relationship to the rest of the nonhuman world. Bruner's book is a collection of observations about bears made by different kinds of people in different times and places. It's really more about people than about bears. We learn, for example, what prehistoric people may have thought about bears, according to cave paintings and archeological finds. We read what some eighteenth century explorers wrote about the strange and exotic bears they encountered in their travels. We hear how bears were abused by the Romans, worshipped by the pagans, feared by the Europeans, and loved by Timothy Treadwell (before a bear decided to kill and eat him). Again and again, Bruner shows us that humans have loved, feared, and despised bears, and that the end result of almost all of these attitudes have been bad for bears (and occasionally bad for people). He argues instead for a live-and-let-live approach. We should recognize that bears don't want very much to do with us, and that we should do our best to leave them alone. Don't tap their bile and keep them in a cage; but don't raise them in your own home and feed them from baby bottles, either. Admire them from afar and give them plenty of their own space. After reading about all the goofy behavior that bears have inspired among people, this argument seems very, very persuasive.

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