

Monster of God

The Man-Eating Predator in the Jungles of History and the Mind by David Quammen. Hutchinson 2004.

Judaism has always prided itself on its engagement with the natural world, its understanding of the human role within the world, and the relationship of all creatures with their Creator. Mighty beasts in particular are always seen as subservient to God.

That this latter assumption has not always played out logically in the human mind is eloquently born out by one of the best pieces of writing on matters natural and human history that I have read for a very long time.

Monster of God, in which David Quammen considers the fate of Indian lions, Salt water crocodiles, Romanian brown bears and Siberian tigers, may not be an obvious vehicle for considering the complex relationship between human beings predatory animals that can and do eat us, but the author achieves it with brilliance and humour.

This is a masterwork for those who view the natural world as being much more than part of the planet on which human beings currently reign supreme, and who are open to contemplate the inexorable damage that we are wreaking on the environment and the magnificent animals that live in it. The last chapter, Science Fiction Ending, ends with a stark warning of what will be lost if we force the Monsters of God out of existence, concluding an unforgettable book.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh