



The Lore of the Unicorn

Odell Shepard

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Unicorns and their magical powers are studied as they appear in legend and literature, including the Bibles of both East and West.

The Lore of the Unicorn Details

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From Reader Review The Lore of the Unicorn for online ebook

Unimora says

Me costó muchísimo leerlo, muy denso

Sandra Visser says

This is an exhaustively researched look at the origins of the myth of the unicorn and not a light read at all. Keep in mind that it was also published in 1930 so at times it's a bit dry and academic and large chunks of chapters are made up of citing every example the author could find where the unicorn is mentioned in historical scientific studies.

There are lighter moments and a few humorous asides, but mostly it's a chronicle of where the various aspects of the myth could have come from. The first few chapters exploring the various attributes of and famous stories about the unicorn are entertaining and interesting, but at a certain point it feels as if the author is just going back over the same material and listing endless examples.

The last chapter on the narwhal is again quite interesting, but even though the book is only 278 pages, it does get a bit tedious and you get the sense that it could have been a lot shorter, especially the chapters that discuss the to-ing and fro-ing of naturalists about the unicorn's physical appearance and the ability of its horn to cure poison. But if you're interested in mythology this is still a worthwhile book to plow through.

Samuel Wells says

An interesting history of the unicorn from the time of Ctesias's *Indica* - written over 2,000 years ago - to the establishment of the narwhal as the purveyor of myth. The reader learns of the unicorn in several ways: as a symbol of virtues, an actual quadruped, a healing animal, an item of trade, a dream and an article of antiquarian research. The author does an excellent job of not biasing the narrative; and although he clearly accepts the narwhal as the primary source of unicorn lore, he is honest about many traditions that make this particular association difficult. One gains a much broader perspective of various old ideas and leaves the book with an open mind about a beguiling and mythical creature. I am particularly curious about the nature of the unicorn as an universal archetype (not mentioned by the author). One word of warning, this is not a page-turner, nor a fast read (although the book itself is only 278 pages long). It is a history, well told, and worth the effort to anyone interested in the history of a fascinating creature.

Margaret says

A VERY detailed history of the unicorn. I've definitely learned some things, but the author does have a way of belaboring a point. Still, worth reading if you want to know more about unicorns.

Lissa Notreallywolf says

I started on this book which has long been on my shelf because the unicorn has Christological overtones. While a horse person, I have never had any daft attachment to unicorns. Odell Shepard, who wrote this book in 1930, or at least the first edition was published in 1930, shared my discomfort with the Western motif of the unicorn hunt, which goes something like this: a maid or virgin was set out in a garden. The unicorn attracted by the smell of this person came and fell asleep in her lap, whereupon the hunters either captured the unicorn for the king, or killed the unicorn for the horn, which was thought to have medicinal virtues. In some mythology any pretty lass will do, and in some mythology "false virgins" will be killed by the fierce unicorn. Personally, like Shepard, I find myself sympathetic to the unicorn, with its vulnerability to a smell or a theoretically safe place--an innocent lap. The unicorn apparently entered the Western Christian dialogue via Alexandria and then was reintroduced in the Crusades, and the Italian renaissance which translated Arabic texts into Latin or the vernacular. It appears in the Old Testament seven times and is often equated with leadership with the backing of God. In the German tradition it was moved into the symbol of both Christ and the upright of the cross. The virgin in the hunt is equated with Mary and the hunter with Gabriel, making the Passion into some sort of spectacle for the heavenly host. The whole deal with the betrayal of a pure creature is a little much to seat on Mary for my theology. It was bad enough to carry an out-of-wedlock child in her time, and while I don't want to diminish her foresight about what was to come, there is something coy about the cozening of the unicorn that rings false.

My reason for reading the book was christological inquiry. I was looking for a christological symbol that was not emburdered as the Philosophers Stone is with scientific overtones. Most of the attributes of the Philosophers Stone are congruent with Christ. So it was important to read about a symbol that wasn't encumbered by physics or chemistry.

Chris says

A little dry in places, but a very interesting book on the sources of the unicorn legend. The most depressing thing, perhaps, is the realization of how long the ivory craze has been with us.

Nichole Davis says

Loved it.

Leah says

Great book if you want to quickly gloss over the whole history of unicorns. Shepard gives some good insight into the origin stories of the unicorn from various parts of the world.

This book has lots of footnotes in each chapter. I'd recommend looking into those for a more in-depth story! I've always been interested in how unicorns popped up in folklore, and this book is a good start for anyone like me who has a childhood interest in fairy tales and legends.

Mary Catelli says

An exhaustive look at the historical record.

Those of you who expect fairy tales -- or even chivalric romance -- will be surprised. The documents are actually pretty much all "natural history" -- of the era, which obviously was dominated by hearsay and travelers tales. Also comparisions to the ki-rin and other one-horned beasts and what connections there might be. The sales of alicorn (unicorn horn appears to be a bit much). Some elements recognizable even in modern fantasy.

Moved around a lot. From India to the Mountains of the Moon in Ethiopia, to the Americas, to South Africa.

Gotta admire a writer who admires the unicorn's graceful ankle bone.

A bit academic.

Maddly Peculiar says

Maybe I'm just too incompetent or maybe I'm just not as into unicorns as I thought. This book is way too dense and hardcore for a casual unicorn enthusiast. This book is more for someone who is much more passionate about unicorns than I. Also for someone who can understand what Shepard is saying.

Mike says

A monumental effort to identify pretty much every reference to unicorns in the writings of naturalists, theologians, and philosophers through the 19th century, "The lore of the unicorn" is more concerned with how unicorns functioned as allegory and how the scholars of the past explained the nature and significance of the beast, than it is with identifying the origins of the legends, though the author does a good job of that as well. I found myself more interested in the early chapters, which present the legends and beliefs about the magical properties of unicorn horns, than the later chapters, which explore the literature of unicorns and the scholarly disputes about them. Shepard is sympathetic to his credulous sources, and while there was hardly a need to explain the origins of the various reports of unicorns we find in travelers' tales and so on, he does a good job of exploring all the possible influences on the legend -- the rhinoceros and the powers imputed to its horn in the East; antelope, cattle and goats in foreign lands, some of which have their horns cultivated into unnatural positions and even merged into a single horn by their keepers; and the narwhal, which supplied the "alicorn" (unicorn horn) that European kings and princes valued at a price many times its weight in gold.

The writing is mostly clear, but overburdened with footnotes and allusions that would tax anyone's attention and make this book seem a bit more antiquated than even its original year of publication would suggest. (Originally published in 1930, it reads more like the late 19th century treatises of Sabine Baring-Gould and his ilk.)

Quinn says

This is more of a historical fact finder book. One that really sticks closely to talking about evidence and leaves little breathing room about lore and the lighter history of legend. Its great if you're needing to know EXACTLY what evidence there is that a unicorn ever existed.

Laura says

I have had this book on my shelf forever but had never quite gotten to reading it. I'd read every book on unicorns available at our city library when I was little, so I had a fairly good overall sense of the variations in the mythology at a basic level, but it was great fun to read a "grown-up" study of the legend now. Much of it I had come across before (the old naturalists' descriptions over time and place), but there was a lot of new insights here as well, such as tracing the origins of the unicorn's powers back through older myths (I particularly liked linking the virgin capture-story to a much older legend about capturing rhinos with a dancing, tickling female monkey). I would occasionally get lost in all the names Shepard would throw around, and there were times when I couldn't stay oriented as to what timeframe he was discussing, but for the most part, this seemed a comprehensive overview of unicorn legend. A winning aspect for me was also Shepard's dedication to studying the unicorn and its importance without ever making a point of whether or not the beast itself is "real", something the "factual" children's books I used to read could have learned from.

Melanti says

I give up!

It's really, really dense and a bit too dry for my tastes at the moment.

After a month, I'm 35% done, in the middle of Chapter 5.

Adam Stevenson says

Because I had greatly enjoyed 'The Natural History of the Unicorn' a couple of years ago, I was both excited and nervous about 'The Lore of the Unicorn'. Where I wanted to know more - I was worried this book might contain more of the same. It wasn't, the titles gave it away, where the first book was about the animals that inspired the unicorn legend, the second was more about how the legend was transmitted through texts.

There was wonderful snark in this book. As an academic, he is wonderfully dismissive of dissertation writing and student writing in general. He is no less forgiving of the unquestioning nature of mediaeval scholarship. Certainly compared to TH White in his bestiary, and Chris Lavery - Shepard pulls those writers to task for believing everything they read. However, when he finds a thinker who is brave enough to think for himself, he is full of praise.

The first chunk of the book is the closest to ‘The Natural History of the Unicorn’, it details the emergence of the unicorn myth and the difference between it’s forms. At the beginning there seems to be an African, Asian and European stories which are adapted to the different religions and cultures. The book paid most particular attention to the European unicorn; especially the story of the holy hunt, where a virgin is used to catch the unicorn - and the water conning skill, where a unicorn purifies water with it’s horn. It was interesting how the physical appearance of the unicorn changed over time.

The next chunk is about the ‘alicorn’, the unicorn horn that was a rare and vital part of European pharmacopeia. It was believed (or in the very least it was useful to believe) that unicorn horn could detect and cure poison. What I found really interesting was how this belief existed untested for five-hundred years, possibly because a belief in an antidote to all poison would be a useful deterrent for poisoners. The slight detour about the prevalence of poison, the fear that people in power had of it and the other anti-poison superstitions (snake tongues anyone?) was particularly fascinating.

The following chunk is about the war of words that slowly lessened the belief in the unicorn.. and the way the belief resisted the call of the sceptics. This was the core of the book to me. I will never have the time in life to scour ancient tomes for references to unicorns so I am infinitely grateful for people like Shepard to do it for me.

The final chunk looks at different possible origins for the unicorn myth and variations of it. First it takes each one seriously, then it argues against each one and the last chapter synthesised them. I do love the unicorn myth because it is a microcosm of the intricate web of information spread throughout the world over the middle ages. Similar to the birth of the unicorn myth are the other beliefs and myths we still hold dear today.

This is an academically inclined book from the thirties, it does have a slightly dusty, library-haunted atmosphere but the sly humour and occasionally aggressive wit of Odell Shepard, together with the comprehensive nature of it made it fascinating to me. Not as accessible as ‘The Natural History of the Unicorn’ but more in-depth.
