



When They Severed Earth from Sky: How the Human Mind Shapes Myth

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Why were Prometheus and Loki envisioned as chained to rocks? What was the Golden Calf? Why are mirrors believed to carry bad luck? How could anyone think that mortals like Perseus, Beowulf, and St. George actually fought dragons, since dragons don't exist? Strange though they sound, however, these "myths" did not begin as fiction.

This absorbing book shows that myths originally transmitted real information about real events and observations, preserving the information sometimes for millennia within nonliterate societies. Geologists' interpretations of how a volcanic cataclysm long ago created Oregon's Crater Lake, for example, is echoed point for point in the local myth of its origin. The Klamath tribe saw it happen and passed down the story--for nearly 8,000 years.

We, however, have been literate so long that we've forgotten how myths encode reality. Recent studies of how our brains work, applied to a wide range of data from the Pacific Northwest to ancient Egypt to modern stories reported in newspapers, have helped the Barbers deduce the characteristic principles by which such tales both develop and degrade through time. Myth is in fact a quite reasonable way to convey important messages orally over many generations--although reasoning back to the original events is possible only under rather specific conditions.

Our oldest written records date to 5,200 years ago, but we have been speaking and mythmaking for perhaps 100,000. This groundbreaking book points the way to restoring some of that lost history and teaching us about human storytelling.

When They Severed Earth from Sky: How the Human Mind Shapes Myth Details

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John Fredrickson says

The subtitle of the book, "How the Human Mind Shapes Myth", says it all. This book posits a framework for grounding the form and content of myths as explanations of natural phenomena, for example an active volcano, whether seen closeup or seen from far away. The framework consists of dynamics or strategies for ancient peoples to remember things, in mythical form, that could be vital to their survival, but also addresses changes that occur to these myths as volcanoes go quiescent, or as the culture moves away from the phenomena reflected in the myth.

Some of the chapters (e.g., "The Spirit World") felt somewhat unsupported to me, but many of chapters felt as though they offered credible explanations for mythological origins.

One particular chapter, "Of Sky and Time", is a tour de force. It explores the movements of the sun, planets, stars and constellations as seen by ancient eyes, and indicates that the ancients somehow perceived changes in the orientation and presentation of these objects (solstices, equinoxes, precession, etc.) even though some these changes would occur over many lifetimes. The book posits ideas as to how some of these changes get reflected in myths. This chapter will require more than one reading (eventually) to comprehend in full.

Jan Chlapowski Söderlund says

* * * * * - *five star amazing for an aspiring mythopoetist.*

The two Barbers have written a wonderful book about mythology - what myth is, what it was used for and how myths were (and are) influenced by our minds. While I found this book highly interesting, I have to warn you from the start it is *bone dry*. The few attempts at wit are dryer than the sands of Sahara on a particularly warm day. But that does not detract from the book's genius, or the wisdom of the Barbers on this subject.

According to the Barbers, myths were never intended as fiction in the sense we see it today. But as carriers of information about real events and observations. And the information contained in myths has been shown to be able to survive intact for thousands of years. Myths were the only way to make knowledge "travel" to distant generations in the absence of writing. In fact, the Barbers argue that the absence of written documentation is the main (only?) limiting factor in ancient people's perceptions, as compared to ours. The inability to reference written sources limits the amount of information a person (and a society) can keep alive, hence the importance that the chosen myths carry worthwhile messages to the following generations.

Nonetheless, the information in myths may become changed with retelling and changing cultural outlooks. So the book described various quirks of the human mind which influence myths and mythopoeia. Mental processes which subject myth to "mutations"; for instance the silence principle (what is obvious is not stated), compression (of time scale) or restructuring etc. Practical examples were then used and analysed to show each of these principles at work.

Another characteristic of myth/folklore is that it does not distinguish between observation and interpretation.

Interpretation in its turn, is influenced by rationalisation and the point-of-view of the story-teller (myth-telling always occurs in the setting of a particular tradition/culture). Another factor influencing the interpretation of events, is a misconception which may occur when empiric scientific tradition is not established: if something happens, it must be willed.

Highly recommendable book for anyone interested in dissecting myths. For me, I am in search of worthwhile children stories (myths) to tell my 1-year old twin children once they grow up. And therefore I am reading everything I can find about myths, in addition to the myths and stories themselves. A good companion book to this one is *A Short History of Myth* by Karen Armstrong, also a highly recommendable book which analyses the function of Myth in comparison to Logos and aptly argues our continued need for Myth in our modern society.

Matt says

Fascinating from beginning to end, though I agree with the other reviewer who mentions the astronomy chapter kind of going off the rails. Otherwise, I found all the speculation and connections to be a compelling argument of the authors' premise, that myths should not be equated with fictions but understood as documentations of actual events, often extended as oral "history" across time to us. Among the topics discussed are the Great Flood in the mythologies of cultures the world over, demystifying the origins of dragons and vampires, explaining bizarre elements of Greek mythology (why is there an eagle pecking at Prometheus' liver while he's chained to a mountain?), and others. Along the way various details you may have heard of in stories are explained in the context of the times (e.g. Why is it that when Moses comes down the mountain it's a golden calf and not some other animal that the people are worshipping?). Much is made of the fact that mythology can be better understood when first we put ourselves in the mindset of the knowledge accumulated up to the point when a mythology was created. If you had no knowledge of plate tectonics, how would you describe the event of an earthquake and warn people ever after you if you had no written communication? A lot of great food for thought here.

Sanjeev says

This book makes you understand that, how less we think of the Mythological stories, only because the story teller, neglected or forgot to tell the background/full story.

This book made a point that, not all mythological stories are made up stories. Some might be the way our ancestors tried to pass on history to next generation. Personally enjoyed the demystification of vampires and dragons.

Robert says

Enjoyed this book so much that I'm reading again, already, to remind myself of the many connections developed between myths and the terrestrial/celestial system we exist in. The author points out that mythologists such as Campbell often miss the hardcore scientific basis of many myths because they have insufficient backgrounds in the physical sciences. That doesn't preclude the many insights provided by those writers, but a solid science education improves the understanding of some physical "historical" events that

are reflected in the myths.

Shannon says

Did not finish. I listened to the audio book and while it wasn't entirely uninteresting I felt like the same point was being made over and over. Plus the narrator's voice was odd. The way she read made it sound like she wasn't a real person, like Siri was reading to me. Maybe I'd have enjoyed it more if I'd actually been reading it.

Shhhhhh Ahhhhhh says

Certainly a vindicating book but I'll try not to allow my egoistic pleasure in being proven right cloud my judgment of its objective merits. This book is a neurolinguistic and cross-disciplinary approach to the assessment of mythology and folklore, building up from first principles and simple rules to demonstrate how we arrive at complex outputs. Their work seems consistent with Kahneman's work regarding biases and heuristics pervasive throughout the species, though the book doesn't reference his work that I can recall. In particular, the idea that causes have causers seems to be consistent with the idea that what you see is all there is (WYSIATI) and touches on the availability bias. It also connects to the work I've read about memory enhancement techniques (such as the memory palace) in the sense that mythology are couched in colorful and compelling narratives which boost retention of information to a point where they have relatively stability over many hundreds or thousands of years. Further, this book touches on a theme that has been growing on me for several years now. One of the root assumptions here, which is less assumption than fact given that we know we have over 200k years of anatomical modernity and 100+k years of cognitive modernity, is that ancient humans weren't stupid, fearful, superstitious savages. Rather, they were people, roughly as smart as us, in different circumstances and with different tools available to them to ease life in the environments they existed in. Though this text explicitly deals with mythology, and more specifically greek mythology, the basic patterns, heuristics, biases or rules of human cognition that it exposes gives us cause to speculate about what other information our modern society had disregarded as native nonsense. A strong connection I see to that application is the work of Graham Hancock, similar to the discussions had in Carlos Castaneda's series on Don Juan's teachings. The idea that we have tons of information that is useful, if not essential, to human quality of life and the most basic variables which define our day to day experiences, but which modern society leaves unaddressed or inadequately so, such as mental illness, justice, purpose, and community. All in all, great work. I absolutely would love someone to chunk this into a much more accessible form for mass consumption.

Benedict says

I really enjoyed this book, although the basic thesis (people encode events into stories, and assuming that lets us get at the events a bit by trying to crack the code) wasn't too revolutionary.

What WAS great fun was watching the authors roll up their sleeves and dig at the "how" of it. They come up with a list of 50 or more principles by which the human mind encodes the information, and they go through relevant examples. My own poor Christian heart skipped a beat when they explained the cultural utility of

virgin narratives in astrology at the time of Jesus' allegedly-star-announced birth (I guess I have a bit more fondness for some of the literalism than I realized), but I was otherwise impressed at their fearless sifting of fact from fiction, and the rich and detailed explanations they offered for how subtle some of the mistakes we can make are if we miss this or that.

I'm sure this is a great resource for certain kinds of academic work or anthropology, but I had a blast just skimming it and thinking through different stories friends or I have told over the years too. 5 stars.

Guna says

The authors present a very persuasive argument for decoding myths, showing how they transmit information across time (even millenia) within nonliterate societies. Along the way, they show us ways in which our brains still work.

We tend to dismiss myths, but here we see one way to give them another look.

I could barely put this book down so I could sleep.

Ailith Twinning says

Oh my good god this is boring!

It begins with the entirety of the book in simple, and then proceeds to bore the hell out of you to exaggerate the importance of their particular focus on what myths are.

"Myths encode meaningful information" Yes, they kinda do.

"Myths exist to convey important information" Ehh. . .that's not wrong, but's misleading.

Bunch of stories with painfully extracted basic fable lessons to prove these statements.

I don't know if anyone ever doubted the various myths tell some kind of important information, but to pretend they are a deliberate technology to encode information in a cynical way, with the assumption that just saying "Dude, there's a volcano here" wouldn't have done the trick, even if they had the word. Maybe I'm taking their argument further than they intended, but repetition like this kinda forces you to, I don't necessarily think they intended that argument, but they wrote that argument. I say things I don't mean all the time, I get it, but this is a book man, you can do better.

But yeah, mostly it's just fucking booooring. You want to learn their point without reading their work? Just take those first two sentences as your guide and go read the Odyssey. Just, try not to get too focused on literalism, because thousands of historians have spent WAY too much time and money trying to find the 'real Trojan war'. I suspect something like Troy existed, I suspect there was a war because there were loads of wars -- but you can't treat Homer as a historian. You can get history from Shakespeare too -- but only by ignoring the actual plot, and being aware there will be anachronisms. And the Homer literalists are probably why I really have a problem with this book beyond it just being boring. I have spent hundreds, possibly thousands, of hours trying to convince colleagues they're just being damn ridiculous >.>

Oh and token nod to the obvious "You really think people don't just believe myths because they're credulous? Go interview an American Christian, and make a note to find out exactly how much of the Bible they have read, and what myths they believe." The greatest overstatement of myth as information carrier is the assumption that almost anyone will be aware of the information rather than credulous belief in the literal myth itself.

Mohsen says

DREAM BREAKER ...

Gints Dreimanis says

My childhood is in ruins now.

Antony says

Fascinating exploration into the neuro-linguistic origins of myth by using linguistic constructs and the way the human brain functions. The authors have been able to theorize that most myths are oral interpretations of geological and astrological events. Over time, the stories move further away from the observed event, pass on to other cultures become embellished to keep the "story" interesting and, as a result, lose context and often meaning.

This book offers some wonderful evidence into the ways to look at the origins of myth. It really changes how one sees contemporary religion and how we have wrongly interpreted many religious texts as historical fact. The section discussing the astrological understandings of myth was eye-opening. It really changes how one sees the role of the Virgin and The Child.

I do think the authors stay a little too focused on the intellectual aspects, ignoring psychological interpretations that likely have some validity into the nature of myth as well. I believe the truth is somewhere between this book and Campbell's overly simplified mono-myth theory.

Cheri says

I always thought that myths were great stories coming from deep within the human psyche to show us what it is to be human. What an exciting revelation to read about the linguistic and cognitive factors that the authors claim shaped the passing on (and distortion) of historical events in preliterate societies -- and in urban legends today. These tales became myth. I was blown away by much of this: the story of Prometheus makes so much more sense now! The chapter "Of Sky and Time" gave me a sense of just how long humans have been, well, "human," and how much they understood.

This is academic reading, not literature, so be prepared -- it's a bit of work to read, but I thought it was well

worth it.

Sara says

This is an enthralling exploration of mythmaking and how pre-literate human minds made sense of their world. As an avid history nerd, I have had innumerable occasions to lament the way present day lack of understanding consistently maligns past cultures and eras. We are so beguiled by our own cleverness, by the gadgets we've created, by our modern conveniences we now cannot imagine living without, that we consider humans of past times (when we even bother to consider them) as primitive, fairly stupid versions of ourselves. We impose some imagined progress, a general getting-better, on the march through time so that we don't have to cope with the disturbing and distinct possibility that we are not the end and goal of all creation and perhaps, just perhaps, we have lost knowledge (or at best rediscovered things) that peoples in past periods understood quite well. Because we no longer speak the same language as they - and I mean conceptual as well as literal language - we misunderstand them and attribute our misunderstandings to their ignorance, not our own. This prejudice against past times grows all the more pronounced when it comes to preliterate societies. Though humans (with our same mental and creative capabilities) have lived far longer as non-literate creatures than as literate ones, we commonly ignore those millennia of non-literate human history largely because it is difficult to study. Pre-literate people left behind material detritus, but obviously no writing, and in relying on the spoken word, developed epistemological frameworks that bore little or no resemblance to ours, we who rely so completely on the written word. How are we to make sense of the stories they told? Are they just stories or do they contain some truths? If they ever contained truths, would they not have been erased by time and innumerable retellings?

The Barbers go a long way in restoring the integrity to these "stories", the myths we so often dismiss as flat fictions. Through what must have been years and years of research, these two scholars have assembled an extensive set of "rules" or patterns of behavior to which myths from a multitude of cultures (Native American, Greek, Norse, Indic, etc.) conform and through which we can often guess at the original events that inspired them. The basic principle of this study is that oral cultures are not written ones and their myths cannot be treated as immediately legible to us moderns who privilege the written. When all you have is the spoken word to convey information down generations, you (a) choose only certain very important types of information to convey; (b) tend to imbue the entire world around you - rocks, trees, volcanoes, and so forth - with will; and (c) necessarily cannot spend too much time noting cause and effect in any sort of way we would deem "scientific" because you cannot accumulate detailed knowledge over generations and you assume the cause of any given event is that it was willed by a sentient entity (i.e., the volcano erupted because it was angry, that is, because it wanted to).

The Barbers spend a great deal of time dissecting volcano-related myths (volcanic eruptions comprise events worthy of being recorded in a people's myths and also leave evidence of their eruptions that we can still study today). The other body of information that gave most to oral mythmaking, and an area in which we moderns are profoundly ignorant, is astronomy and the Barbers devote an entire chapter exclusively to the complex movements in the heavens which ancient peoples noted and passed down for generations. In fact, ancient societies had such sophisticated knowledge of the movements of the cosmos, including precession, an cycle that takes 26,000 years to complete, that the Barbers conclude these cultures had been watching the skies and accumulating data which they successfully passed on for millennia. Not so primitive after all.

