

What has four arms ... : Mark Doty and Darren Waterston's shared menagerie



From the book *A Swarm, a Flock, a Host: A Compendium of Creatures* by poet Mark Doty and artist Darren Waterston; courtesy Prestel

The bestiary plays between these representations of something exquisitely beautiful and something very horrific. — Darren Waterston

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Bestiaries have been a source of fascination from at least as early as the time of Aristotle. Early naturalists gathered their bestiaries in compendiums presented with a holistic approach to the subject matter. The books contained not just information gathered from empirical observation but also the lore surrounding animals — the myths, legends, and beliefs about them. Italian naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi's 1640 publication *Serpentum et Draconum Historiae*, for example, was a natural history of snakes and dragons. "The bestiary was this long tradition of moralizing allegory where the animal kingdom provided a description of the human condition and human folly," said Darren Waterston, artist and collaborator with poet Mark Doty on the book *A Swarm, a Flock, a Host: A Compendium of Creatures*. "We wanted to stay with that but make it a little bit more mysterious, more subversive."

There are no dragons in *A Swarm, a Flock, a Host*, although Waterston's shadowy representations do at times take on the appearance of chimeras. What

you find, instead, is an observant, introspective reflection on animals in their natural state through a simple, reductive use of language and art. “Animals have always been a major presence in my work as companion spirits that offer us something different than the company of other people,” Doty told *Pasatiempo*. “Our bonds with them are very mysterious, very compelling. I think that’s true with lots of poets, because poetry is very drawn to silence. Animals are not silent, but they don’t use words. So where there is no language, poetry wants to move in and supply or create language. That silence that animals bring to us is something that seems to invite the poet.”

The book project began when the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco invited Waterston to participate in an exhibition involving printed art portfolios. “I had been interested in doing a bestiary for a long time,” he said. “A bestiary has a literary and graphic form. I’ve always been interested in encyclopedic books that categorize natural phenomena. The bestiary plays between these representations of something exquisitely beautiful and something very horrific. I’m interested in this juxtaposition of beauty and deformity. It’s an ongoing paradox in my work. So the next step was determining who to collaborate with. For at least 15 years I have been a huge fan of Mark’s writing.”

When artist met poet, they quickly established a rapport that fueled the development of the project. “I’ve never had the genuine back and forth,” Doty said. “I did not know Darren’s work before I met him and was immediately drawn to it. He gave me a sheaf of drawings, and I began to scribble out some lines, very rough material, which I showed him. He was excited and showed me more visuals, and back and forth we went. The process seemed to lead us deeper and deeper into the material. I had no idea where this was going except that we were making a bestiary. But I couldn’t quite imagine the outcome. There was a remarkable moment when I wrote a poem about finding a deer’s body in the garden. I showed it to Darren, and he came back with a drawing that was so much an emblem of how I felt about that experience. At that point it’s as if our project just gelled. It moved to a new level and just completed itself in a way.”

The project culminated in an exhibition, *Darren Waterston: A Compendium of Creatures*, on view through December in the Reva and David Logan Gallery of Illustrated Books at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco’s Legion of Honor. “It was such an incredible project for me,” Waterston said. “So often, artists and poets are working in such isolation. Our disciplines require this almost monastic, solitary, creative process. When you have opportunities to truly collaborate with another artist from a whole other discipline, you’re coming at it from such different structures. It’s very intimate when someone else is right in there with your own process. We had an amazing time doing it. Our friendship was born out of it.”

Doty's poetry is not a description of the animal forms rendered by Waterston. Nor do Waterston's silhouettes serve as illustrations for the poems. The words, which are sometimes autobiographical, capture moments that are human, seeming to express a man's thoughtful reflections on the natural world around him. Lines such as "The woodpecker wears on his forehead a bit of the original flame so that he might not forget the conflagration in which the world began" encompass empirical observation and imaginative fancy. The imagery called up by the poem impresses itself on the reader to the extent that we may never again see the plume of a woodpecker without thinking of that infernal moment of creation.

With a few exceptions, Waterston renders animals in action: hunting, jumping, flying, playing. Occasionally he shows them perched one on top of the other in a tableau. The monochromatic imagery is stark and goes with the brevity of Doty's poems, but there are details. They are painted realistically, if only in silhouette. As much as the material in the book expresses wonder at the animal world, it also stresses that animals are guided by instinct and the drive for survival, and that animals can be dangerous. "In a certain way, I kept bringing a darker underbelly of imagery that was animals and creatures in some sort of state of flux or transition, somewhat menacing at times," Waterston said. "There's this kind of surrendering of the limits of their bodies in a way. Sometimes there's this feeling they're dissolving or fusing with another animal. I was bringing all this in visually, and Mark brought this darkness and lightness. I had the shadowy stuff going on, and he would intervene with these sublime moments in prose. Very poignant observations, very charged observations of seemingly mundane things that become miraculous in some way. We were conscious of trying to create this tension between these two approaches."

Doty and Waterston have no immediate plans for a future collaboration, but they remain open to the idea after working together on *A Swarm, a Flock, a Host*. "I think we both feel that the final products don't belong to either one of us," Doty said. "They belong to a sort of third party, as if we created another artist between the two of us." ◀

"A Swarm, a Flock, a Host: A Compendium of Creatures" by Mark Doty and Darren Waterston is published by Prestel/Random House.