

The Santa Fe New Mexican

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Casey Sanchez | The New Mexican

Oy vey! Galloping golems!

At the end of the world, according to Hebrew legend, the righteous will dine on a sublime three-course feast of beasts the world has never seen: Leviathan, a mammoth fish that rules the sea; Behemoth, a titanic beast with dominion over land; and Ziz, a gargantuan bird that lords it over the air.

"But is it kosher?" husband-and-wife science-fiction writers Ann and Jeff VanderMeer asked themselves during a hike in the woods one day. Their talk of Jewish dietary laws veered over to imaginary animals of all sorts, from the chupacabra to the manticore, a Persian cousin of the sphinx that confounds its captured human prey with existential riddles. (Jeff VanderMeer, by the way, is a pioneer of the New Weird, a type of postmodern urban fantasy writing that is heavily influenced by Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino.) Just before Passover in 2008, the pair blogged their conversation, and the post went viral, picking up tens of thousands of readers through *Boing-Boing*, a tech-culture blog, and *Jewcy*, an online Jewish hipster magazine. They decided to expand their research and publish their efforts as a compact, brilliantly illustrated book called *The Kosher Guide to Imaginary Animals: The Evil Monkey Dialogues* (Tachyon Publications). Graphic designer John Coulthart gets part of the credit for the book's charm. He also provided the deft imagery that accompanies the cult classic *The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases*.

The book is a field guide to 34 beasts, most of them imaginary, and it surveys the folk origins of the fantastic animals in acerbic one-page descriptions. These are followed by good-cop, bad-cop dialogues about the creatures' purported kosherness. In the back-and-forth conversation, Jeff goes by his alter-ego,

"Evil Monkey." After hashing out the origins of the *aigi kampos*, a muscular fish-tailed ram that the authors say is the basis for the astrological sign Capricorn, Jeff surmises, "Can you get cheese from this thing?"

Beyond its humor, the slim volume is a refreshing break from a media landscape awash with sexually charismatic vampires and telegenic werewolves. Instead, the book bypasses the usual suspects of bloodsuckers and zombies for a far more eccentric universe of Japanese *tsukumogami*, spiritually possessed inanimate objects; Lithuanian *aitvaras*, malicious shape-shifting roosters; and South African *tokoloshes*, zombie-poltergeist hybrids created from dead bodies.

"The bizarre animals in this book are descendants of phantasmagorical creatures that crawled out of the ocean of oral-story millennia ago," Joseph Nigg writes in the foreword. Nigg is a scholar of the imaginary animals in world folklore. While nature has endowed us with millions of species of insects, animals, and plants, he believes humans create their own mythological creatures out of a need to make something wholly theirs. "But our hybrids are our own, shaped by our imagination out of fears, hopes, wonder, and sheer joy of creation."

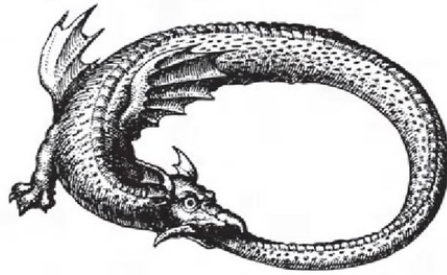
Consider the *ouroboros*, a mythical creature that Plato treats as fact in his dialogues. "Best known as an ancient alchemical symbol of the integration of the infinite and the opposite, the *ouroboros* is a tail-devouring serpent or dragon," the VanderMeers write. To some ancients, it symbolized the circle of life; to others, it was "a vastly efficient organism that became immortal by eating its own waste." Here the Jewish dietary laws — or *kashrut* — provide comic relief.

Ann: Not only is it not kosher, what it's eating is not kosher!

Evil Monkey: Do two negatives make a positive? Does eating something not kosher when you are not kosher make it all kosher?

Ann: No.

For such a small book, the roster of its bestiary is quite deep. The authors consider the *encantado*, a Brazilian “dolphin-like creature that can take human form at night to eat, drink, and have sex.” It gets no kosher seal of approval, however; it lacks scales but has fins. From Colombia comes the *pollo maligno*, an evil cannibalistic chicken that stakes out hunters in the jungle. “Once the hunters are lost, the huge chicken challenges them to a boxing match but cheekily devours them while they’re still preparing for the fisticuffs,” write the authors, who note that a flesh-eating chicken is less than kosher.



The book also touches on animals from cryptozoology — the study of disputed animals, whose subjects range from the improbable (the Loch Ness monster) to the myth-busting (the African okapi, whose existence European scientists considered a local myth until the 20th century). In this vein, the VanderMeers researched the Mongolian death worm. Mentioned in guidebooks and the subject of a speculative Discovery Channel documentary, the Mongolian death worm is a corpulent bright-red worm reported to live in the Gobi Desert. “It can spit sulfuric acid that kills you on contact. It can murder you at a distance by shooting out electrical charges,” the authors write. “It can use the spikes at head and hind to slice through you like a chainsaw.” It also goes without saying that it’s not kosher and should clearly have been the subject of a Japanese horror movie by now.

The strangest creature of this very strange book comes from Brazilian folklore. It’s called the headless mule, and in lieu of a nose, mouth, and brain, it simply spits a plume of smoke and fire from its neck. “This form hides a most sorrowful ghost: the specter of a woman cursed by G-d for her sins to gallop, from dusk to dawn, through the countryside in mule form for all eternity,” the VanderMeers write. Like many of the beasts in this book, the headless mule provokes some great rejoinders from this mixed-faith sci-fi geek couple.

Ann: No! And don’t even start. Because the mule itself, even if it weren’t fire breathing, isn’t kosher. The fire doesn’t cleanse it.

Evil Monkey: But it’s self-cooking! ◀





Pollo maligno
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Top, ouroboros

Opposite page,
aigi kampos

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