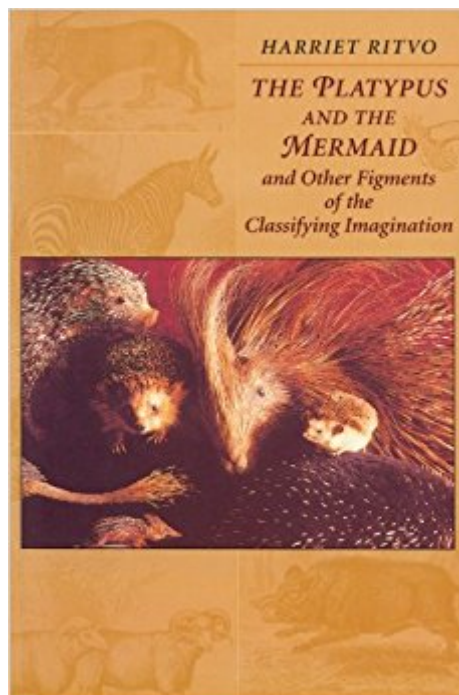




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The Platypus And The Mermaid: And Other Figments Of The Classifying Imagination



Synopsis

"Cats is 'dogs,' and rabbits is 'dogs,' and so's parrots; but this 'ere 'tortis' is a insect," a porter explains to an astonished traveler in a nineteenth-century Punch cartoon. Railways were not the only British institution to schematize the world. This enormously entertaining book captures the fervor of the Victorian age for classifying and categorizing every new specimen, plant or animal, that British explorers and soldiers and sailors brought home. As she depicts a whole complex of competing groups deploying rival schemes and nomenclatures, Harriet Ritvo shows us a society drawing and redrawing its own boundaries and ultimately identifying itself. The experts (whether calling themselves naturalists, zoologists, or comparative anatomists) agreed on their superior authority if nothing else, but the laymen had their say--and Ritvo shows us a world in which butchers and artists, farmers and showmen vied to impose order on the wild profusion of nature. Sometimes assumptions or preoccupations overlapped; sometimes open disagreement or hostility emerged, exposing fissures in the social fabric or contested cultural territory. Of the greatest interest were creatures that confounded or crossed established categories; in the discussions provoked by these mishaps, monstrosities, and hybrids we can see ideas about human society--about the sexual proclivities of women, for instance, or the imagined hierarchy of nations and races. A thoroughly absorbing account of taxonomy--as zoological classification and as anthropological study--The Platypus and the Mermaid offers a new perspective on the constantly shifting, ever suggestive interactions of scientific lore, cultural ideas, and the popular imagination.

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Customer Reviews

[An] engaging, offbeat book...The Platypus and the Mermaid is a study of a wide range of classificatory practices in Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries, and Ritvo is particularly interested in the interplay between learned and popular writing...I have thoroughly enjoyed Ritvo's entertaining and informative tour of both the highroads and the hedgerows of natural history. (Stefan Collini New York Times Book Review)[Ritvo's] learning is wide and unusual, her book a bran tub stuffed with obscure authors and diverse beliefs, where science mingles with prejudice, and sense with silliness...The huge range of out-of-the-way evidence that Ritvo brings to bear on her theme is impressive and absorbing...[The book] explores the fascinating question of how far we shape language to fit our behavior and how far language shapes us. (Richard Jenkyns New York Review of Books)[An] entertaining and often hilarious story of how 19th-century scientists and philosophers tried to come to terms with the complex problem of classifying living things...The subject is of enduring interest and the book is the first I have encountered that deals with it so thoroughly and accurately. (Harry Miller Times Higher Education Supplement)This racy, erudite study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century taxonomy reminds us that classification reveals at least as much about the classifiers as the classified. Moving deftly from the practice and language of science towards popular attitudes, The Platypus and the Mermaid takes on hybrids, monsters, freaks and culinary choice...[It] offers a highly entertaining account of the interactions of science and culture [and] is a compelling reminder of the politics and prejudice that fired the classifying imagination. (Angelique Richardson Times Literary Supplement)In The Platypus and the Mermaid, Harriet Ritvo explores some of the motives, reasonable and otherside, underlying British classifications of animals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries...Anybody who reads it will be fascinated by all the curiosities Ritvo has assembled...[Her] book is worth reading for its erudition and charm and for her perceptive observations on the social and political motives embedded in the scientific doctrines she surveys. (Matt Cartmill Natural History)Harriet Ritvo's theme is classification, but in the vernacular tradition rather than the classically biological. Her knowledge is prodigious, and she is not afraid to speak out on arcane topics...Ritvo has written an authoritative and compelling book filled with often bizarre and sometimes macabre accounts of how humans divide up their world. Every statement and quotation has full references in the end notes to the pages and her erudition should make this an essential classic for all those interested in the wider issues of taxonomy. (Juliet Clutton-Brock New Scientist)Ritvo's study of 18th- and 19th- century British taxonomic practices is premised on the belief--repeatedly espoused by anthropologists--that classification of important objects such as animals can reveal as much about the classifiers as about the classified. The way we order the

world reflects how we think about it...This book provides an extremely rich and detailed collection of vignettes illustrating the many ways that Victorian thought of animals, making for thought-provoking and entertaining reading. (Sherrie Lyons Science)Like a dimsum restaurant, *The Platypus and the Mermaid* offers an enormous variety of tidbits...The reviews in the world's two leading weeklies of science both agreed...that [Ritvo's] is an entertaining and enormously informative book. I can only join the chorus. (Herman Reichenbach International Zoo News [UK])Ritvo's is an insightful look at the development of English zoology and its strong ties to cultural context. (Library Journal)

This book captures the fervor of the Victorian age for classifying and categorizing every new specimen, plant or animal, that British explorers and soldiers and sailors brought home. As she depicts a whole complex of competing groups deploying rival schemes and nomenclatures, Harriet Ritvo shows us a society drawing and redrawing its own boundaries and ultimately identifying itself. A thoroughly absorbing account of taxonomy - as zoological classification and as anthropological study - *The Platypus and the Mermaid* offers a new perspective on the constantly shifting, ever suggestive interactions of scientific lore, cultural ideas, and the popular imagination.

Harriet Ritvo's *The Platypus and the Mermaid* (and other figments of the classifying imagination) is an interesting look at the Victorian passion for classifying things. The book ranges and prowls over many communities from the scientific to the farmer to the sideshow. This is more about the lack of firm boundaries in Victorian society as science tried to define itself than the author's whim. But the author does handle the twists and turns adroitly. This is a good read and a wonderful look at the Victorian period and what the scientist and the lay person considered important in their need to classify their world, particularly as it grew with the growth of the British Empire.

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