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Ice Bear: The Cultural History of an Arctic Icon by Michael Engelhard

Geneviève Pigeon

Université du Québec à Montréal

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***Ice Bear: The Cultural History of an Arctic Icon* by MICHAEL ENGELHARD**

University of Washington Press, 2017

\$29.95

Reviewed by **GENEVIÈVE PIGEON**

Cultural anthropologist and wilderness guide in Gates of the Arctic National Park and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Michael Engelhard, is no stranger to natural history. The author of two essay collections (*Where the Rain Children Sleep* and *American Wild*) and editor of four anthologies has been a regular contributor to publications dedicated to wildlife and nature. In *Ice Bear: The Cultural History of an Arctic Icon*, he puts his knowledge in both academic and wildlife areas to good use and provides the reader with a comprehensive historical narrative about polar bears.

Engelhard's book is undoubtedly a must read for anyone interested in the history of animals. By looking at his subject through historical and contextual lenses, he gives himself room to talk about issues which would be otherwise difficult to reconcile. While the author announces his intention of working within the theoretical frame of anthrozoology, or animal studies, which "charts our place in the world of living things [...] by investigating ideas, not biological relationships, drawing on disciplines as varied as history, anthropology, psychology, art history, ethology, comparative literature, and zoology" (8), his writing remains clear of

any heavy concepts, and could be easily understood and appreciated by non-specialist readers.

Polar bears' resemblance to humans (their upright posture, for example) explains, according to Engelhard, man's fascination with the animal. This fascination has led, among other factors, to the bear's transformation into a cultural icon, whether as a symbol of hope (14), an icon of vigor and purity (15) or a gift fit for a king (37). It is this fascination, and the association of white bears with the idea of wild nature, that eventually led to their demise; as Engelhard explains, "the White Bear personifies nature and a universe ultimately beyond our control" (91). Seeking control over nature and hoping to tame it, humans have turned polar bears into a symbol of men's ability to dominate one of the world's greatest predator. German polar bear cub, Knut, a worldwide sensation now on exhibit at the Berlin Museum of Natural History (as a taxidermy exhibit) is cited in the opening chapter as a perfect example of this attitude.

From early texts and materials (Icelandic sagas, folklore, Inuit legends, maps, etc.) to 20th century advertizing, polar bears' cultural functions are well defined, with a large amount of pictures, illustrations and examples to support Engelhard's arguments. Readers interested in ancient history will appreciate his input on older materials, while those looking for information and analysis regarding Modern appreciation and understanding of the Ice Bear will be satisfied with the author's

feature of more “difficult” subjects such as zoophilia, sexuality, purity, and violence, to name a few.

Cultural anthropologists may regret Engelhard’s lack of theoretical references. The selected bibliography does not provide the reader with a clear understanding of the frame chosen by the author. References are to be found in endnotes, which is less practical for anyone who would wish to work within the same theoretical boundaries. It is a strange choice, considering the fact that the title suggests a strong association with cultural history and

anthropology. These remarks should not, however, distract potential readers from a fascinating subject, dealt with and analysed with all the nuance and caution required. Engelhard is a wonderful storyteller; his writing is engaging and the knowledge he displays is remarkable.

GENEVIÈVE PIGEON teaches Religious Studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal, where she focuses on medieval ecocriticism, cultural history, literature and myth theories.