



The Bestiary

Nicholas Christopher

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From "a writer of remarkable gifts," "Borges with emotional weight, comes a tale that is at once a fantastical historical mystery, a haunting love story, and a glimpse into the uncanny--the quest for a long-lost book detailing the animals left off Noah's Ark.

Xeno Atlas grows up in the Bronx, his Sicilian grandmother's strange stories of animal spirits his only escape from the legacy of his mother's early death and his stern father's long absences as a common seaman.

Shunted off to an isolated boarding school, with his father's activities abroad and the source of his newfound wealth grown increasingly mysterious, Xeno turns his early fascination with animals into a personal obsession: his search for the Caravan Bestiary. This medieval text, lost for eight hundred years, supposedly details the animals not granted passage on the Ark--griffins, hippogriffs, manticores, and basilisks--the vanished remnants of a lost world sometimes glimpsed in the shadowy recesses of our own.

Xeno's quest takes him from the tenements of New York to the jungles of Vietnam to the ancient libraries of Europe--but it is only by riddling out his own family secrets that he can hope to find what he is looking for.

A story of panoramic scope and intellectual suspense, *The Bestiary* is ultimately a tale of heartbreak and redemption.

The Bestiary Details

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From Reader Review The Bestiary for online ebook

Melissa McCauley says

I kept reading all the way to the last word to find out what happened to Xeno and his quest for the Caravan Bestiary. Nicholas Christopher is a wonderful writer. I have been to some of the places in the book and his words made me feel like I was transported back there. I could smell the rain in the forest in Italy, feel the dust blowing against my ankles walking up the cobblestones...

That being said, this book made me furious. I threw it across the room after I finished and screamed some things my mom would still wash my mouth out if she heard. Why? Because it could have been a great book. The seeds are there.

The kindest way I can summarize all the things wrong with the book is to say I felt like the author was holding back.

TAKE THE LEAP MAN!

Tim Lepczyk says

I guess I wanted more from this book. The idea intrigued me. It follows the trail of a bestiary that has been lost, which detailed the animals that were not on board the ark when the flood came. There are some elements of fantasy here, but not really. Personally, I wanted this to go into the realm of fantasy, see what really happened to these mythological animals, but that never happens. Instead, it is one man's pursuit of an idea and how that sustains him through his life. The novel can be summarized as a simple quest story.

Richard Derus says

Rating: 4.875* of five

The Publisher Says: From "a writer of remarkable gifts," "Borges with emotional weight, comes a tale that is at once a fantastical historical mystery, a haunting love story, and a glimpse into the uncanny--the quest for a long-lost book detailing the animals left off Noah's Ark.

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Europe--but it is only by riddling out his own family secrets that he can hope to find what he is looking for. A story of panoramic scope and intellectual suspense, *The Bestiary* is ultimately a tale of heartbreak and redemption.

My Review: Sometimes a book just comes at you from nowhere. Unannounced, something about a particular work will summon something unexpected from its reader, something that feels important and shifts an atom or a molecule from left to right, from up to down.

“*The Bestiary*” did something like that for me. I began it with some small sense of its potential. I read Nicholas Christopher's novel “*Veronica*” earlier this decade, and was left with the feeling that I was about two-thirds of the way to a real experience, and left stranded by that last piece of unexplored territory between me and glory. What good writing, what good storytelling, what a letdown. I hoped for equally good writing and storytelling, plus a completeness I wasn't experiencing in “*Veronica*.”

Xeno Atlas begins the story of his life with the memorable observation, “The first beast I laid eyes on was my father.” Urgh, I thought, another “my-father-failed-me” story. Still, there is so much in that sentence. There is menace and foreboding, and the foreshadowed sighting of more beasts. Continue, I told my cynical inner reader.

Lucky me, he did. Xeno tells us of his life as the left-behind son of a widowed Cretan sailor father, raised by his Sicilian maternal grandmother and Albanian nurse. The grandmother, we learn, is the granddaughter of a shape-shifting dryad; the old lady appears to become a red fox. The nurse is the closest thing to a normal person in the house, and her lovingkindness becomes a rock for Xeno's growing-up years. When, as is inevitable, the grandmother dies, Xeno is sent to boarding school in the wilds of Maine. It is here he will begin to come to terms with his father's indifference to him, and will discover the first traces of the Caravan Bestiary, the lost half of the universal bestiary that God used in creating the world. During the Flood, it appears that Noah got only one bestiary to guide his selection of animals, and the other animals were, it would seem, not pleasing to God and therefore to be abandoned. The Caravan Bestiary is the book recording their existence: Manticores, rukhs, griffins, gargoyles, sphinxes...all to be wiped out. Somehow that did not happen, and the Caravan Bestiary was proof of the survival of these terrifying other creatures.

Xeno begins a life-long quest for the Caravan Bestiary that takes him to every corner of the world. It is during his tour of duty in Vietnam that he re-connects with his boarding-school teacher who first mentioned the Bestiary to him. The vital clues that set Xeno traveling purposefully on the trail of this ancient book are discovered in a Hawaiian library, of all places. Xeno spends several more years chasing down clues and traveling across the Mediterranean several times, coping along the way with the loves and losses of any man in his twenties. His father dies; he learns the truth about his mother's family when he visits Sicily for the first time, and encounters for the last time his beloved red fox; he reignites and relishes his childhood love for Lena, a woman closer than a sister could ever be; finally, finally Xeno grows into the man we're rooting for him to become in his practical and urgent help for the real, living animals of Africa as he uses his inheritance to save endangered animals from certain death.

As if in reward, God (or whoever) brings Xeno to a church where he discovers so much more than he expected to find, and yet never actually beholds his longed-for prize of the Caravan Bestiary. What he finds is, without giving anything away, even better, even more surprising, and far more than he has any right to hope he will ever see.

I recommend this book to anyone who felt “*The Da Vinci Code*” was too facile and longs for a quest novel that will actually satisfy the real basis of the quest myth: “Know thyself.” I read this book, and at the end, I

think I did know myself just a little bit better. I too am Xeno Atlas.

Sherry Howland says

I loved, loved, loved this book! Even if I didn't thoroughly enjoy the story itself, I would give it 5 stars for Nicholas Christopher's evocative prose alone. In addition to his 5 excellent novels, Christopher has penned 8 books of poetry as well as editing 2 highly regarded anthologies of poetry. That talent shines on every page of *The Bestiary*.

Xeno Atlas is a lonely boy whose mother died giving him birth, leaving him in the "care" of an emotionally vacant father who spends most of his life at sea aboard freighters. Xeno's only real joy comes from the stories of fantastical creatures told by his maternal grandmother, herself a mysteriously shape-shifting descendant of mountain people who once inhabited the remote forests of Sicily. These nightly tales inspire a driving passion in Xeno to seek a legendary book, the *Caravan Bestiary*, which chronicled the bizarre and ultimately damned creatures who were denied passage on Noah's ark when the flood waters rose. It was said those possessing this book were heretics, madmen, renegades...if, indeed, the book ever existed at all.

Along the way, Xeno travels to points near and far, has nerve-wracking adventures, encounters intriguing people who aid him in his quest, falls in and out of love, comes face-to-face with his own past and that of his lost family. It's the best kind of "coming of age" story!

If you enjoy magic realism, mythology, evocative travel writing, and simply such achingly beautiful prose it makes you want to live within the page, then you will love *The Bestiary*.

Kim says

This book was excellent. I wish it had been a thicker book with more about the mythological creatures. I think Nicholas Christopher could have developed this story even more. Having said that, I really enjoyed it!

karen says

nicholas christopher has written one of my favorite books (trip to the stars) and one of my least favorite books (veronica) and this one is right in the middle. it starts out very strong; i thought it was going to be a sweeping family drama in the vein of middlesex or piano mans daughter, but then there was a turn and there were too many little quirks and weaknesses in the writing that bothered me. there were tons of cameo characters who entered, were overdescribed, and then wandered away from the narrative never to return. too many loose ends where formerly important characters just faded out. too many instances where declarations were made like "but he never would see her again", or "little did he know then what an influence this would have"... (this is known as katherine neville syndrome)its good but it makes me wonder why of all his books, its trip to the stars that is out of print. come on!

Jeremiah Genest says

Nicholas Christopher is on the list of authors that I don't understand why he's not more popular amongst fantasy fans. Probably because he is firmly in the literary camp and thus ignored by most genre people. It's a pity because he writes good fantasy of history. A literary omnivore (which I always appreciate), he is versed in classical lore and pulp fiction, and his books are a thrilling amalgam of the two: erudite, lyrical and breathlessly paced. Unlike Christopher's previous novels, *The Bestiary* merely teeters on the edge of fantasy. But it teeters in such a delightful way.

The Bestiary concerns a medieval manuscript with a whiff of heresy, suppressed and possibly destroyed by order of the pope. And the story is primarily that of a fable. The main character's – Xeno – hunt for this bestiary is quixotic — it is, he soon realizes, a thinly veiled quest for his own identity — and the novel is less a detective story than a kind of theme and variations on the failure of man's dominion over nature.

I recommend folks read this book, I also really recommend going out and finding *Veronica* and *A Trip to the Stars*, which are on my must list of book recommendations.

Kevin Fanning says

10 stars, a hundred. I was so disappointed when I turned the page and saw that it was over. Darth Vader style, all NoooooOOoooOOOoo.....

The back jacket says this is a book about a quest to find the Caravan Bestiary, a legendary, lost illuminated manuscript detailing all the mythical creatures who were not granted passage on Noah's Arc. (Griffins, manticores, dragons, hydras, etc.) And it's totally about that, and on one level it's a really fun summer blockbuster-style ride.

Except not really, because that doesn't capture the pace and style with which the book unfolds, and that's not really what it's about. It's about the human animal, and how we each evolve over a lifetime, and the ways that we disappear from each other's lives, and return, or don't. How we come together and come apart.

If I had to bullet-point the reasons every page of this book sang to my soul they would be, in no particular order:

- * National Treasure/Dan Brown-style secret historical intrigue;
- * acceptance of the exertion and influence of the supernatural on our everyday lives;
- * exploration of the relationship between humans and animals (real, imaginary, future, extinct) on this planet;
- * dark stuff about children's relationships with their parents, plus light stuff about the family you get vs the family you choose.

Anyways, loved it.

A couple of page breaks now because I want to talk about some other stuff. Not spoiler, more notes to future readers if they want them.

The author sets up a lot of things in motion early on, and if you are a person who likes to figure out the ending of a movie 30 minutes in, or always find that type of set-up very obvious, then there might be a point towards the end of the book where you're like "Well, duh." But I am not a person like that, so when I finally realized what was about to happen, and I saw how things that had been set up chapters ago were suddenly about to click into place, my love for the book shot through the roof. I was reading it on the subway and couldn't stop smiling.

There are a couple of set pieces in the book (funeral, Vietnam) that I thought were incredibly well-written.

Also this is a book about animals, so there are a lot of casual references to animals. There's a phoenix on just about every page, or someone is from Hydra, or something is zebra-striped, etc. The references are piled on top of one another. I can see that being annoying to some people, but I really enjoyed it. It was to the point where I almost stopped seeing them, which is kind of how it is, in real life. Humans have this whole weird relationship with animals and what we think that means isn't really what it means, we just don't think about it on a daily basis. Really interesting stuff.

John says

nicholas christopher's books are not-so guilty pleasures of mine. not-so guilty because they're just so much fun to read -- effortlessly beautiful page-turning prose following an intellectual (usually arcane) quest. he's quietly building a unique body of work. if you're the kind of person who wanted less action and more book-browsing in far-flung libraries in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (which isn't to say ROTLA isn't one of the most perfect movies ever), his books might appeal to you, especially this one, featuring conspicuously named characters like Xeno Atlas, the protagonist, and his lifelong search (1950s - 80s) from the Bronx to Paris to Venice to Crete for an obscure illuminated book called the *Caravan Bestiary*. legend holds this book contains descriptions of all the animals that failed to make it on to noah's ark. it may not be powerfully deep in the end, but reading this is mostly about sumptuous intellectual escapism in the hands of a wonderful imagination. i'd also recommend *A Trip to the Stars* by christopher. his poetry books are good too.

Meri says

Nicholas Christopher's tragic flaw is his ineptness with plot structure. He has these intriguing concepts, unique characters, and intricately rendered settings, but he blows it all when it comes to tying everything together into a well developed story. Some pieces of the novel don't tie in at all, and he skips over central plot developments in a couple of lines. I give it three stars because, barring this one mistake, his works are imaginative and profound. I'll probably pick up another one in the hopes that eventually, he'll get it right.

Megan Reichelt says

Xeno Atlas was a neglected child, raised by his grandmother who told him about the animal spirits who haunt the world. So many animals die every day that the air is thick with them. Some people have animal spirits inside them, or were animals in another life.

Xeno has had glimpses of mysterious animals since he was a child, from the gargoyle from a city building

that appeared at his window one night, to the fox present when his grandmother died. When he learns of an ancient book called the *Caravan Bestiary*, a book about the strange animals who were denied entrance to Noah's ark, he makes it his life's mission to find this book. His quest spans several decades, and several countries, and along the way he is confronted with the ubiquitous symbolic world of animals and animal imagery. In his search for the book, he finds himself and his place in the world.

This is exactly how I wish all actual memoirs were written. Each event mentioned is highly, if quietly, significant and echoes of it reverberate back and forth throughout the book. The child is abandoned when he is young, but there is less of a sense of sickly despair or resignation as an ownership and adaption. I understand that this is fiction, and the memoirs were real, so it is difficult to write about what you do not feel, but my GOD this book was refreshing.

Christopher treads the fine line between realism and fantasy. He has mystical, beautiful events that may or may not have happened, but he lets the reader judge. Xeno lives in the real world, but a world filled with wonder and mystery.

His quest for the *Caravan Bestiary* becomes incredibly academic, but still gripping, as your heart soars with each clue he discovers. I became quite jealous as he was able to devote his life to medieval academia in little flats he rented in Paris, Venice, and Greece. Seems perfect to me!

His life surrounding the quest for the *Caravan Bestiary* is also beautifully constructed. As his father never sees him, he creates his own family, a boy named Bruno who is a sickly biology genius hell-bent on keeping animals from extinction, and Bruno's sister, Lena, a gentle, reserved veterinarian. Occasionally, his life is shattered and he has to pick up the pieces.

The story weaves back and forth from light to dark, from heaven to hell, and the sharp contrast makes each more acutely felt. The one small thing that irked me about the book was that Christopher seemed to be foreshadowing a sinister event that never came. I wonder if anyone else had the same experience?

Cathy says

I picked this up at random in the library because I liked the synopsis and the cover, and it turned out to be outstanding. A lonely young man becomes obsessed with mythical or spiritual animals, and begins a quest for a lost, legendary bestiary.

Christopher's writing is a little choppy, and it bothered me at first -- the sentences were like this. And sometimes I wondered why he wrote so many fragments. The book is for grown-ups. Not a Magic Tree House book. Grown-ups can read longer sentences. But eventually I got used to it. And went with the flow. Because it started setting the rhythm for the story and in spite of the choppiness, Christopher actually writes quites well.

It's packed with animal imagery in a way that you'd think would be contrived, but it actually works. Christopher's hero covers a lot of ground, from Brooklyn to Vietnam, Hawaii, Venice, Sicily, Greece, and beyond, and the book is layered with bibliophilia, philosophical concerns about what animals mean to us, compelling characters, and picaresque "maybe supernatural but maybe not" moments. Some readers have complained that it contains too much boring book-hunting detective work, but I actually found it lighter on that than I expected. And the ending was entirely satisfying. I'm still digesting all the ideas that were packed

into this, but it's not a polemic novel -- it tells a compelling and entertaining story.

I will definitely pick up more by Christopher.

Maria Headley says

I happened upon *The Bestiary* a few weeks ago, and was blown away. This book is underknown. Nicholas Christopher is underknown! This should not be the case. He's an amazing writer on a cellular level - each sentence is a work of art - and on a conceptual level. This book is a bibliophile's wet dream. A guy hunts a long lost Bestiary, the Caravan Bestiary, to be precise, which purportedly depicts all the animals who did not make it onto Noah's ark. For a relatively slender book, the story is wide ranging. Hawaii, Vietnam, Brooklyn, Greece. It absolutely kills. If you have interest in anything lit-history, or lit-mystery, you're going to adore this. Think Geraldine Brooks' amazing bibliophile mystery *People of the Book* meets Herodotus.

Michelle says

What an interesting book. I picked it up thinking it would be another book along the lines of *The Shadow of the Wind*, where people are in search of a lost codex and run into a shadowy underground ... you know, a "literary" thriller.

What this is, instead, is a more realistic depiction of what it must be like to actually do the research to find a lost tome. And although that might sound boring, it was actually a really good read.

In the end, it's the story of a man's search for meaning in his own life, and while it wasn't what I was expecting, it was a pleasant surprise.

Whitaker says

When I was a wee tyke, I had several stuffed toys. My favourite was a simple stuffed cut-out of Tweety-Bird. I carried him around until the stuffing fell out, and truly Tweety was never the same after he went into the wash. I recall longing wistfully for him for many years thereafter. I think in many respects that hankering went into SF and fantasy novels in my teens: that evocation of another world so terribly terribly tantalising to a boy out of place in the real world, and searching for his identity.

Why am I telling you this? Well, in this book, the protagonist, Xeno, goes searching for an ancient manuscript known as "The Caravan Bestiary", a book of lost beasts that were left to their fate in the Flood. He has another link with the tale of the Flood though. Like Noah, his father is also a seaman, and is largely absent from his life, both due to his work and to his blaming Xeno for the death of his wife (Xeno's mother) in childbirth. There is a ship later and indeed an animal rescue of sorts.

Xeno makes strides in his quest for the lost bestiary, but more than anything, he is searching for his parents. It is no accident that Nicholas has the quest take him to his mother's village in Italy and his father's in Greece. Nor that his quest should be started by a father-figure, and aided at one point by a maternal one.

The publisher's blurb of this novel suggests that it might be of the same ilk as *The Da Vinci Code*. Thankfully it is not. Yes, there is indeed that search for a lost manuscript, but the novel is more *bildungsroman* than it is mystery thriller. There are no car chases, no albino monks, and research is done the old fashioned way: leafing through hundreds and thousands of archived books in public libraries.

The blurb suggests that it is a fantasy. It certainly flirts with this, but any fantasy in it is closer to magic realism than to genre fantasy. We get hints of a magical world:

On countless nights after tucking me in, my grandmother retired to her bed and told me animal stories, punctuated by sound effects, out of the darkness ...Late one night, after she finished one of her stories, the stray headlight of a passing car shone through the window and I was stunned to see, not my grandmother, but a red fox, with a ring of white fur around its neck, stretched out on her bed.

But only hints:

I cried out...A moment later, the lamp came on and there was my grandmother, sitting up in bed. She was wearing a red nightdress, with a white shawl around her shoulders. "It's all right, child," she murmured, coming over and laying her palm against my cheek. "You were dreaming."

Throughout the novel, Xeno has more almost-encounters with fabulous creatures: the Peryton, birds with the head and hindlegs of a deer, and which are souls of soldiers destroyed by war, glimpsed after his stint in the Vietnam War; the red fox once again, when he returns to the Sicilian village of his grandmother's family.

The tale is limned with this faint glow of the faeric, and the best passages meld a melancholy wistfulness with a child's hankering for a twilight world of magic. Sort of like my quest for Tweety long after he underwent his own Flood and did not quite survive.

Also reviewed by The Washington Post
