

Hello Kitty

Britain's Alien Big Cats are still large and felid, but they're not quite so alien



Big Cats

Facing Britain's Wild Predator

Rick Minter

Whitties Publishing 2011

Pb, 214pp, illus. £18.99, ISBN 9781849950428

FORTEAN TIMES BOOKSHOP PRICE £17.09

They used to be Alien Big Cats (ABCs), although author Rick Minter's point is that they're not so alien any more, and our acceptance of them as part of Britain's established natural fauna may be imminent. Britain's failure to accept there are big cats among us is a bigger mystery than the mystery big cats themselves.

Minter explains how hard it is even to photograph big cats in the wild. Most leopards you'll see in photos live in sanctuaries and are used to people. And it was only on its second Himalayan expedition, part of an effort costing as much as "a small house", that a crew recently managed to shoot the first ever footage of snow leopards in a genuinely wild environment.

Never mind the photos, there's plenty of other evidence. Big cat poo apparently isn't that hard to find in the British wilderness, and there are numerous signs of cat kills and traces of their meticulous dismemberment and fussy eating of deer and sheep carcasses.

But *Facing Big Cats* isn't just about cats, it's about how we would deal with an official admission that big cats are out there. Minter examines the implications of British big cats for conservation (his day job), agriculture and other policy areas.

Particularly striking among the numerous colour photos is

the one showing Fairfax, a black domestic cat 'from feral stock', sitting on an antique writing desk, his tail and paws protruding over both ends. Fairfax measured four feet (1.2m) from head to tail.

While feral moggies could somehow be reaching gigantic proportions, Minter suggests any next generation black leopards in Britain could be getting smaller. He explains that the "open savannah" leopards 'popular in zoos' tend to be the bigger ones, while "wild tropical leopards from Asia are often small animals... under selective pressure to be small", some only 70cm [28 in] long, about right for the "large Labrador-sized" big cat witnesses usually describe.

Minter doesn't just quote Britain's big cat experts, some – such as Chris Moiser, the CFZ's Jonathan McGowan, *Big Cats in Britain's* Mark Fraser – familiar to *FT* readers; he takes the brave step of giving them two or three pages each to have their say, which works well.

Facing Big Cats is beautifully written with much love for the subject and lots of 'Wow! I never knew that' surprises. Minter notes how Britain's otter population crashed almost to extinction in the early 1980s. After that, people reporting otter sightings to the wildlife authorities tended to be ignored, until they gave up reporting otter sightings altogether. Years later, surprised conservation managers announced otter numbers had 'suddenly' recovered. A similar phenomenon may be at work with big cats.

There's no index, but the layout and organisation of the coloured-ink sub-headings, checklists and bullet points means you hardly need one, and make this book ideal for 'dipping' into.

Matt Salusbury

Fortean Times Verdict

ALL BOOKS ON MYSTERY ANIMALS SHOULD BE LIKE THIS **10**

Legend-Tripping Online

Supernatural Folklore and the Search for Ong's Hat

Michael Kinsella

University Press of Mississippi-Jackson 2011

Hb, 211pp, illus, notes, bib, ind, \$55.00,

ISBN 9781604739831

FORTEAN TIMES BOOKSHOP PRICE £34.00



At last! So much lip-service is paid to unexplained phenomena being a kind of modern day folklore, and yet academic studies of folk tales have seldom taken up the challenge. Professional folklorist Michael Kinsella finally does so, albeit with mixed results.

First, the bad news. This book reads like a master's thesis, which according to the introduction it almost certainly is. It's often pedantic and obscure, requiring frequent trips to Wikipedia to understand the suppositions that place belief systems in the context of Dadaism, of all things. And yet this book is a case of half the parts being greater than the whole.

Readers would be well advised to set aside the provocative, titular 'Ong's Hat', dealt with in the final chapters. It was sort of a minor movement, sort of a game, and also what's come to be trendily-named "collaborative fiction". It was also a hoax. ("Or was it?" cry the true followers.) It popped up in the 1980s on early Internet bulletin boards. Multiple documents, images, and real and false footnotes all hinted at the conspiratorial existence of at least one colony on a parallel Earth, launched by a super-secret cabal of scientist-spiritualists who had created a trailer-park community in the American ghost town of Ong's Hat – in our humble prime-reality, positioned in New Jersey.

Posts by the alleged four creators of the mystery of Ong's Hat explained the "quantum/chaos" science of their time-space portal in terms that make contactee George Adamski's explanation of 1950s Venusian spirituality straightforward by comparison. We've seen this style before, from the horrific, hoaxed *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to the rumoured secrets of Rosicrucians and

Freemasonry. Nor is it fascinating that, once the Ong founders revealed the ruse as post-post-modern art, many continue to believe. That was old news as soon as *When Prophecy Fails*, the university study of a Chicago-area contactee cult, was published in 1956.

No, what makes this book worth reading is all the material Kinsella provides as background. He argues extremely persuasively that modern ufology, spiritualism, modern tech-heavy ghost hunts and such, are examples of "legend trips" to which humanity has subscribed for millennia. Whether a séance, walk-about, dream walk, "Oz state" or high strangeness, "The performance of belief allows people to apply communally constructed interpretive frameworks that [sic] encourage them to experience 'reality' according to the logic provided by the game," Kinsella writes. In other words, belief is merely a game that we have always really liked playing, preferably with others. We get excited by each other and feed each others' beliefs, constantly adding to the whole, creating our own waking reality – which wider-awake nuts-and-bolts theorists are then left to thanklessly deal with.

Kinsella points out that folklorists do not try to prove or disprove fairytales. As far as they're concerned, Cinderella's glass slipper is as real as alien abduction. They merely study narrative and belief. Despite this rather obvious point, one is forcibly reminded, for example, of the dictum of the late astronomer and pioneer UFO researcher J Allen Hynek: that we have no UFOs to study, merely reports of UFOs. We need social scientists, not more astronomers, metallurgists or biologists, to gain headway. Jacques Vallée would certainly approve.

Setting aside the superfluous Ong's Hat material, this book is a good start at studying the modern folklore passing as science that Charles Fort called "the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Jay Rath

Fortean Times Verdict

A FOLKLORIST LOOKS AT UNEXPLAINED PHENOMENA **9**