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Beautifully Grotesque Fish *of the* American West

Mark Spitzer

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
Lincoln and London

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Chapter 1 was originally published in serial installments as "The American Eel: An Aquatic Phantom in Arkansas," in *Sporting Life Arkansas* in 2014. The website *Only in Arkansas* republished this version in 2014 (onlyinark.com/sports/American-eel-arkansas-aquatic-phantom). Chapter 2 was originally published as "Making Environmental Lemonade with the Creature that Put the 'Ish' in 'Fish,'" in *Saltfront*, no. 1 (Summer 2014), and as "Burbot Bash: Chasing the Creature that Put the 'Ish' in 'Fish,'" in *Frontiers* (Spring 2014). An abbreviated version of chapter 7 was broadcast on NPR's *Tales from the South* in September 2014.

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Introduction

In Wildness Is the Preservation of the Grotesque and Vice Versa

If I didn't write this book, I'd have two questions about the title. First, what's the definition of "Beautifully Grotesque"? And second, where exactly is the American West? But since I did write this book, and since others may have the same questions, that's where I'll begin, starting with the geographical question.

The Mississippi River, of course, runs right down the middle of the country and, for centuries, has been historically regarded as the eastern border of the West. Even before the pioneers, this metaphorical dividing line between what used to be seen as *the known* and *the unknown* has essentially served as a symbolic gateway to "the Frontier." And since the fish I know best are to the west of this river, and since this river's role as the edge of the West is a firmly established theme in American literature (as in Huck Finn lighting out "for the Territory"), I chose this boundary, like many others have in the past, to define the western states.

The idea, however, that the West represents vast expanses of wilderness that are rich in possibility is a bit antiquated now that the teeming cities and industry of the East have migrated west, homogenizing the entire country. Thus it may be too simple to continue to think of the East and West as representing *the old* and *the new*—or, as Henry David Thoreau once pictured this contrast, as *civilization* vs. *the Wild*. These

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extremes are considered in his essay "Walking," in which he writes, "We go eastward to realize history and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race; we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure." Thoreau also writes, "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild . . . in Wildness is the preservation of the world"—with which I agree in principle. But as just noted, I'm not convinced that our romantic ideas about the West are as definitive as they used to be.

I've been using these Thoreau quotes for the last fourteen years in the environmental courses I regularly teach, and they work well for introducing college students to the question of America's western identity. I follow the Thoreau discussion by asking students to brainstorm what represents the West for them, and I write their answers on the board: mountains, cacti, cowboys, Indians, wagon trains, prairie dogs, the Grand Canyon, Wall Drug, the Gold Rush, oil wells, mind-numbing drives across Nevada, etc. These are some of the typical responses, but there's still a defining characteristic that's part of the modern discussion but usually escapes being mentioned. So I give them a hint: that it's more of a lack of something than a presence—and somebody usually gets it.

Water is a natural resource that everybody everywhere needs to survive. As I point out in my eco-classes, we couldn't have established this country from coast to coast if we hadn't found ways to harness this resource and exploit it for our national expansion. I bring this up in order to move on to the *Cadillac Desert* documentaries that examine how we founded major cities in hostile environments, created water wars between competing states, constructed a highly complex system of levees and dams and channels for irrigation, and commenced a history of both sanctioned approaches and guerilla tactics to preserve our natural heritage.

But in that classroom moment focused on defining the West, and especially in Missouri, where I began teaching this perspective, the eyes would start to roll. Basically, the students were skeptical of water being so important. That is, until I'd ask them to name one natural lake in the state. I'd receive a bunch of responses, but then I'd explain that

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natural lakes are formed by glaciations, which lakes in Missouri never had. "Sure," I'd go on, "there are oxbows and sinkhole ponds." But according to the Missouri Department of Conservation, those don't count as natural lakes. As for the rest of the lakes in Missouri, those are all reservoirs. Because these days, part of what defines the American West is our consciousness of water, which is something we take for granted, as if it's always been here and will always be here. As if all we have to do to get some is turn on the faucet. Then I'd drop the bombshell by telling them that because of our water use, Missouri is the American West.

The students would look around at one another, clearly out of their comfort zone. Seeing themselves as lifelong midwesterners, they were always reluctant to accept this hypothesis just because some professor had a crackpot theory. And when I moved to Arkansas and gave college students a similar spiel, the reaction was the same. Having identified themselves as southerners all their lives, it didn't compute for some northern professor to tell them they were westerners.

But the thing is, under this definition of the American West, we're all becoming westerners. Water is scarcer, toxic spills are on the rise, the aquifers are compromised, and there are water shortages right now in states like Wisconsin, where rivers and lakes abound and there's even a Great Lake.

My point being this: freshwater fish live in fresh water, and the freshwater fish of the American West, which have been dealing with water issues since the 1800s, are now dealing with accelerating problems. And just as we are all becoming westerners in terms of our relationship with water, so are our fish. And by "our fish," I don't just mean American fish. I'm talking about all our fish, from the Mississippi to the Mekong. Because the fish of the American West (our paddlefish and sturgeon, for example) are metonymic for other fish that will soon be facing what our western fish are currently facing, if they aren't dealing with those issues already (like overfishing, acidification, habitat loss, invasive species, petro-chemical contamination, synthetic hormones affecting gender, etc.).

The environmental aspect of this book, however, is only part of the

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equation. On one hand, my intention is to suggest solutions, but on the other, I made it my mission to have a blast catching at least one of each species profiled in this book, no matter the size. And I'm glad to say I accomplished that goal—even if I did fudge a bit in catching a burbot by dumpster-diving in Utah.

Although this book was written for a general audience, and for a specialized readership of biologists, educators, fishery managers, and other conservationists, it was envisioned primarily for people like me, who love to fish, and think about fish, and who ultimately tend to end up stuck in the mud waiting for a tow truck because of fish. Because fish provide adventures for us. Because fish aren't just barometers of what is and isn't in the water; they also measure our quality of life.

But to get back to the question of what "Beautifully Grotesque" means—well, the answer is that I've long been attracted to the monsters and mutants in our waters. Give me your wretched, your maligned, your demonized—this has always been my motto. Ever since I saw my first alligator gar in a fish book at the age of six, I've been fascinated by the weirdest creatures in our midst, the ones we often label grotesque.

Catching a beat-up bowfin as a kid or a bulging one-eyed carp always gave me an adrenaline rush, one that surpassed the awe of landing a crappie or bass. I grew up netting inner-city bottom feeders in the creek across the street, drawing aliens with barbels and fins, and storing moments in my head, like when Huck and Jim landed a possible world record river cat but had to forgo bragging rights because they were on the lam.

Then when I got to college I immersed myself in a more formal study of the grotesque, the subject being the Medieval and Renaissance wild man, a half-human character running shaggy through the woods, swinging a club and fighting knights. As a research assistant for an actual Dr. Savage, whose scholarship focused on these mythical creatures, I scanned more than a million images in the Marburger Index (a microfiche archive of art throughout Germany) looking for wild men and wild women in illuminated manuscripts, on church pews, on tombstones—you name it. The result was a four-hundred-page senior thesis on the significance

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of wild people in art history and literature, for which I received a grant to travel through Europe with a photographer to find and document more images of this particular pagan grotesque.

But my heart, really, was with the fish. I kept after them, and the uglier and more disgusting they were, the better. I pursued them to the point that in graduate school, my master's thesis became a novel about a misunderstood, man-eating catfish. That thesis, later published as the novel *Bottom Feeder*, was highly influenced by the monkeywrenching philosophies of Edward Abbey, and it concerned a cast of whacky characters fighting to preserve a fictionally extinct grotesque.

Since then I've researched and published two books on the loathed and reviled gator-headed gar—a fish that is frequently considered a grotesque, like the gargoyle. But I've also written other novels full of grotesques (like apocalyptic hybrid freaks and crazy Alaskan leviathans) as well as collections of investigative verse that examine legendary grotesques in Arkansas, not to mention the bizarre and grotesque hellbender salamander.

But to label my interest in the grotesque a fetish would be misleading. I'm not interested in what our imaginations picture as gross or scary because I get off on celebrating a childlike wonder for the fantastic. I'm interested in fish with faces that only a mother could love for the same reason I chose to research the most obscure texts I could find by the French authors Jean Genet, Arthur Rimbaud, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Georges Bataille, and Blaise Cendrars (who, incidentally, were all obsessed by the grotesque). Basically I went looking for their most unsung and dismissed works, because I saw opportunities in translating texts with a bastard status (e.g., fragments of verse, lost letters, ignored plays, and other works not usually considered "legitimate"). My objective wasn't just to beat somebody else to publishing those books, but to take those works out of the shadows and cast them in another light, so that they could be appreciated for their unique and overlooked literary value.

Hence this book, in which I combine science, folklore, history, ecology, and imagery, then stitch those aspects together with first-hand experiences that come from pursuing underwater underdogs. And luckily

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for me, the action is set in the American West, a place I've known and loved all my life—from traveling cross-country as a kid, going to grad school in the Rockies, and living in a van and camping my way through the deserts and plains, researching translations in special collections up and down the West Coast, bonding with the waterways of Louisiana, Minnesota, and every western state where I fished and worked and visited family and friends, and cutting through Omaha and Kansas City and Denver and Reno and Salt Lake City to continue my lifelong study of the grotesque in Arkansas.

That's where I began this book by proposing to editor Matthew Bokovoy that his interest in noodling (or hand-fishing) and my passion for investigating fish commonly considered "ugly" could result in an action-packed portrait of eleven remarkable species. Matt had faith in this vision before I even knew the specifics, and he went out of his way to shepherd the project to completion. I'd like to thank him for that, as well as editor Heather Stauffer, the manuscript readers, the Board of Directors, and all the other staff members at the University of Nebraska Press involved in the production of this book. You did an amazing job!

I'd also like to thank Casey Cox of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for taking me electrofishing and sharing his research, as well as my trusty sidekick Scotty Lewis, who helped me catch Malvern the American eel. My acknowledgments as well to Wyoming Game and Fish Fisheries Supervisor Robert E. Keith for responding to questions on burbot, and Brian Raymond of the Chamber of Commerce in Manila, Utah, for connecting me with local experts and providing information on the 2014 Burbot Bash in Flaming Gorge Reservoir. Bartek Prusiewicz was an excellent and amusing guide, and I thank him and Lars Larsen for taking me sturgeoning in Oregon. Eric Tumminia, aka Hippy, and Steve Kahrs of L'Osage Caviar, aided in my examination of paddlefish and provided some key perspectives. In Kansas, Jessica Howell, Jessica Edmunds, and Chris Steffan of the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism were generous enough to take me cruising on the Kaw for erupting silver carp, and I'm deeply appreciative. Thanks also to Daryl Bauer of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission for giving me last-minute

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directions to his office in Lincoln and staying late for the arrival of the state record yellow bullhead. Also, thanks to Dr. Randy Jackson at Cornell University for clarifying the approximate age of the bowfin family and to professional photographer Rob Butler for braving vipers and impaling limbs when we took part in the Okie Noodling Tournament.

Regarding photographs: It turned out that I had way too many to incorporate into this book. For those who would like an extra fix of the grotesques, I plan to publish additional photos in my series *Where in the West Is Mark Spitzer* on the University of Nebraska Press blog. One can therefore go to the UNP blog to view full-color pictures that illustrate other parts of the overall story of what went into this project.

I'm grateful to have received support from the Estate of Ernest and Emma Spitzer, which made it possible to finance the brunt of research in this book during the worst semester of my life. It was a time when I absolutely had to get out of town, so I was fortunate also to receive a sabbatical from the University of Central Arkansas for fish research, which allowed me to rediscover my connections with the American West. UCA contributed travel research funds for northern pikeminnow and oversized sturgeon in the form of a summer stipend, which was imperative support for this book.

Thanks go to my Fishing Support Group: Rob "Turkey Buzzard" Mauldin, Ben "Minnow Bucket" Damgaard, and the aforementioned Scotty "Goggle Eye" Lewis, who saved the day in chapter 7. Still, Turkey Buzzard deserves the most credit, for continuously letting us make fun of him.

A number of professional fishing guides lent their expertise, including Dawson Heffner of Texas Megafish Adventures; Kevan Paul in Clear Lake, Iowa; Gabe Schubert in Stillwater, Minnesota; Josh Stevenson of Mighty Musky Fishing Guide Service in Oakdale, Minnesota; Mark Christianson and Jeff Woodruff up on Leech Lake in Minnesota; Skipper, JoAnn, and Christian Bivins of Big Fish Adventures, LLC, out of Temple, Oklahoma; Steve Brown of Catfish Safari in Warsaw, Missouri; James Nichols on Lake Norfolk, Arkansas; and Jason Schultz from Hell's Canyon Sport Fishing in Idaho.

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Paul Marsh, Brian Kesner, and Jamie Wissenal from Marsh's Native Fish Lab in Arizona contributed greatly to this book. Ben Head at Ana-Lab Corporation in Kilgore, Texas, and chemist Jacob White in Ohio were also important to its evolution, and so was author Scott Foster, who took me out for northern pikeminnow on the Columbia River. Eric Winther and Scott Mengis from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife were key in getting a handle on this fish. Dr. Solomon David at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago helped out whenever I had a question involving primitive fish. Dr. Leigh Graham (also known as the poet Lea Graham), proved the most important player in this odyssey for me, and I thank her for the optimism she inspired in this project and beyond.

Then there are the journal editors who published versions of various chapters in *Frontiers Magazine*, *Saltfront*, *Arkansas Sporting Life*, and *Only in Arkansas*. A version of the noodling chapter was broadcast as well on NPR's *Tales from the South*; thanks to Paula Martin Morell and her team for that, and to my colleagues in Creative Writing at UCA for recommending me to represent our faculty, since this platform allowed me to articulate publicly a controversial yet necessary observation on destructive fishing practices for genetically jumbo flathead cats.

I dedicate this book to fishing support groups and *pescadoras* everywhere, as well as to the spirit of Wildness that has always defined the American West. This fierce and resilient quality is still embodied in our most beautifully grotesque fish—which persevere in our nightmares and dreams, despite our constant abuse.

Mark Spitzer, Arkansas, 2016

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