

Bigfoot! The True Story of Apes in America by Loren Coleman. Paraview Pocket Books, 2003. 288 pp. \$14.00 (paper). ISBN 0-743-469-755.

For over four decades, Loren Coleman has been pursuing his dream that, "One day Bigfoot will be officially recognized as a living creature." A self-styled cryptozoologist (one who studies hidden animals), Coleman's approach to the search for "cryptids" is more akin to that of a folklorist and historian than that of a zoologist. He notes the influence of folklorist John W. Allen, author of *Legends & Lore of Southern Illinois*, first published in 1963, on his decision to pursue his education at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. I was curious about his graduate education and training, which is not mentioned, and readily found the following from a brief biographical note on the Web: "He received a graduate degree in psychiatric social work from Simmons College in Boston. Coleman was admitted to the Ph.D. programs, and took doctoral coursework in social anthropology at Brandeis University, and in sociology at the University of New Hampshire's Family Research Laboratory. Coleman has been an instructor, assistant/associate professor, research associate, and documentary filmmaker, in various academic university settings, since 1980."

Coleman's lack of formal zoological training is apparent in his approach to the subject, as evident in his prolific writings, especially *The Field Guide to Bigfoot, Yeti, and other Mystery Primates Worldwide*, coauthored with Patrick Huyghe. Citing the precedent inaugurated by Ivan Sanderson, who recognized four distinct types of unknown hairy ape-like or human-like bipedal primates, set within a reasonable biogeographical context, Coleman and Huyghe developed a "new classification system" that recognizes not four, but *nine* distinct creatures ranging from "neo-giants" to "merbeings," each with world-wide distribution and each with notable regional variants. Hence, Coleman would have us seriously acknowledge not one elusive unknown hominoid in North America, but *eight*. I am not here to review that other title, but this underlying tendency to validate every ethereal entity or anecdote pervades *Biafoot! The True Story of Apes in America*. In *Biafoot!*, Coleman explicitly distinguishes between a shorter more aggressive eastern Bigfoot and a much more ape-like southern Bigfoot. The reality of local beliefs and varied interpretations of individual experiences with such presumed creatures cannot be contested, and Coleman has made a commendable historical contribution to the documentation of the record of such. However, the rather blatant lack of discrimination and evaluation of such historical accounts, and even contemporary reports, was never the intended ultimate objective of cryptozoology. The role of folklore, indigenous or otherwise, plays a significant, but limited initial role in the search for hidden animals. At some point the science turns to objective evidence in determining the reality of any such presumed animal. Coleman's theory of an ape-like relict dryopithecine inhabiting the southern U.S., originated with his discovery of supposed tracks in Illinois in 1962, reported to exhibit a distinctly divergent great toe. A previously published photo of that footprint is not at all persuasive

of its status as a footprint, let alone the footprint of a dryopithecine ape. Yet this and equally ambiguous material provide the foundation for the assertion of a decidedly ape-like species inhabiting the southern and midwestern U.S.

This criticism of Coleman's frequent lack of critical evaluation and dearth of zoological acumen need not detract from his skills as a historian and chronicler of the varied aspects of the phenomenon. His *Cryptozoology A to Z* is a useful and constructive topical reference, and many aspects of *Bigfoot!* reflect Coleman's efforts in that vein. In this facet of cryptozoology, he finds his niche and makes a worthwhile and significant contribution. The book has an inherent chronology that Coleman deftly links to historical events in American culture, which prop the sociological stage upon which Bigfoot repeatedly appears. This theme culminates in the chapter on the changing image of Bigfoot. While a fascinating portrayal, the reader may come away with the impression that Bigfoot is simply a volatile cultural icon, successively remodeled by the expediency of immediate social issues. However, the very same evolution of perceptions can be seen in regard to the image of the gorilla, from unfortunate human-caricature, to loathsome embodiment of humans' baser lusts, to noble gentle giant, and finally to victimized relic of the shrinking rainforest. This shifting image obviously does not lessen the reality of the existence and true nature of the gorilla.

There are useful contributions to be found within the book for the discriminating reader. The Webster interview with Patterson and Gimlin is reproduced. Coleman makes an effort to span the gulf between the East and the West of the Bigfoot phenomenon, even where there is little if any solid evidence to do so. His discovery and historical discussion of the produce-crate label art depicting a Californian hairy giant is quite intriguing, as are the connections he draws to the Green Man traditions and its descendent Jolly Green Giant. A brief sampling of Native American traditional beliefs provides useful scholarly citations, a legacy of his anthropology background. There are also a number of errors sprinkled throughout that should have been recognized, or not assumed. For example: a split ball does not characterize Sasquatch footprints; evidence suggests omnivory rather than strict herbivory; there is no evidence of a heightened sense of smell, no credible evidence of the extraordinary rate of 10 encounters per week, and no evidence to suggest particular concentrations of Bigfoot at Bluff Creek or Skookum Meadows; and Patterson made only two footprint casts, while Bob Titmus, one of the few who actually investigated the scene of the filming, made 10 additional casts some days later.

Coleman correctly points out that what speaks against lumping Sasquatch with other "monsters" and the paranormal is the substantive evidence. However, he does not appear to be prone to resist such temptation, because he seems less inclined to consistently discriminate anecdote, tradition, innuendo, and rumor from "substantive evidence." As a result, *Bigfoot!* is an interesting narrative of Coleman's interpretation and pursuit of cryptozoology, filled with accumulated names, dates, and stories, but frequently shy on the assessment of

substantive evidence. There *are* discussions of the Skookum cast, the Minnesota Iceman, the Patterson-Gimlin film, and the Bossburg incident. Coleman does render an opinion of the merits of the allegation that Chambers crafted a suit used in the Patterson-Gimlin film, but does little to winnow the chaff from the Ray Wallace debacle. Instead he acknowledges spurious evidence and baseless testimony as historical without expertly evaluating the *prima facie* evidence. This makes more understandable that it was Coleman who instigated the journalistic telegraph game over the Wallace obituary, by personally informing the *Seattle Times* reporter of the tenuous hypothesis of Ray Wallace's possible involvement in footprint hoaxing at Bluff Creek. This set in motion the snowball of disinformation that may continue its expansive roll, as a feature movie of Wallace's life is apparently in the works. One can only wonder what tenet of cryptozoological research prompted that particular phone call.

Another apparent pet project is the sensation over a photograph—lacking any significant provenience—of the so-called Myakka ape. Coleman has perpetuated the discussion and analysis of this photo even after quite explicit evidence has shown it to be a hoax—namely, a photograph of a figure remarkably similar to one in a Ripley's Museum display in Dells, Wisconsin. Equally unsubstantiated allusions to a UFO connection round out a chapter titled, "High Strangeness." To his credit, Coleman acknowledges that "Many Bigfoot-UFO cases can be attributed to coincidence, mistakes, and outright hoaxing."

An appendix of the 20 best spots to see a "Bigfoot" is a curious hodgepodge of historical points of interest, museums, and curio shops, where you are most likely to see a statue of Bigfoot or its image on a T-shirt. The list has nothing to do with an assessment of likely Bigfoot habitat. By the way, Coleman's statement that "*serious* researchers only are allowed access to Jeff Meldrum's collection of over one hundred Bigfoot casts..." is inaccurate, since my lab is quite accessible and I make an effort to accommodate every reasonable request to examine the material.

Upon reading *Bigfoot!*, one is left with the impression of an aim to perpetuate uncertainty, rather than to discriminate the evidence with the objective of moving toward some resolution of the question. Still, it is an informative digression, worthy of a measured consideration, even if the destination remains elusive.

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