

The book builds a good case as to why science should make us feel special, but sometimes the language, which wallows in mysticism, is irritating. We encounter the Pyramid of All Visible Matter, topped by the all-seeing eye, and parallels are drawn between cosmology and the Kabbalistic Order of Creation. There are also strange links made between physics and politics, such as the section that uses the laws of gravity and circular motion to explore the question of wealth distribution.

Abrams and Primack work hard to craft a

view of science that might allow us to connect with the Universe, but it is risky to mix science with New Age jargon, particularly when there is a risk of confusing non-scientists. Films such as *What the Bleep Do We Know!?* and dozens of pseudoscience books twist the bizarre laws of quantum physics to support all sorts of unscientific nonsense, and readers intrigued by such wacky notions will only have their ideas consolidated if they read about the Sovereign Eye, Abrams and Primack's mystical label for the conditions that give rise to intelligent life.

Although I have doubts about some of the language that the authors use to try and reconcile science and mysticism, I respect their efforts and some of their ideas. It is admirable that they have considered this problem worthy of discussion, even if they do not yet have all the answers. As Abrams and Primack point out, Einstein supposedly said: "Problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them."

Simon Singh is a science writer and the author of *Fermat's Last Theorem* and *Big Bang*.

## Sympathy for the devil

### Tasmanian Devil: A Unique and Threatened Animal

by David Owen & David Pemberton  
Natural History Museum/Allen & Unwin:  
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#### Matthew J. Phillips

Two representations have dominated public perceptions of the largest living marsupial carnivore, the Tasmanian devil. One is the voracious, hurricane-like innocent savage Taz of *Looney Tunes* cartoon fame. The other, familiar in nineteenth- and twentieth-century rural Tasmania, is the ferocious predator and scavenger that wantonly kills livestock — and perhaps even people, should they become immobilized in the wilderness at night. Devils can take prey nearly three times their size and eat more than a third of their body weight in a sitting. Even so, it is hard to imagine how this species, being only slightly larger than a fox terrier, could be so maligned in name and image.

In *Tasmanian Devil*, David Owen and David Pemberton delve into devil biology to convey the true nature of the beast once known to science as *Sarcophilus harrisii* (now *S. harrisii*). Fact and fiction are teased apart with sound science and tempered speculation. The devil's behaviour and physical appearance are explained in terms of its unique ecological position as a solitary nocturnal predator that relies heavily on communal scavenging. Its larger cousin, the thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*), is now extinct, so the devil's present ecological interactions and selection pressures may differ somewhat from those under which it evolved. This makes the authors' comparisons with placental analogues — the ratel (honey badger), wolverine and hyena — particularly instructive. Although a useful starting point for those with an academic interest in the Tasmanian devil, this book, with its well chosen photographs and historical illustrations, has far wider appeal.

The humour and tragedy associated with early European settlers' misunderstanding of the devil are neatly woven together, and the authors' arguments that the devil is not a rural



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Just misunderstood? Science has shown that the Tasmanian devil isn't so satanic after all.

menace are appealing. But I wonder whether the use of anecdotal evidence to lay the blame for poultry and trap raiding on the even rarer spotted-tailed quoll (*Dasyurus maculatus*) only extends the tyranny of prejudice.

Peripheral connections to the devil story provide light relief. Particularly well fleshed out is the link between Theodore Flynn, who studied devil reproductive anatomy, his actor son Errol, who dubbed himself 'the Tasmanian devil', and Errol's employer, Warner Brothers, who have profited immensely from Taz cartoons and merchandising.

The inclusion of a wide array of reports and newspaper articles provides the reader with access to a mostly bygone mood of malevolence towards the devil, as well as to the voices that began to change this attitude. It is particularly sad that having survived being shot, poisoned and trapped for bounties, and finally winning considerable public affection, devils are now succumbing to devil facial tumour disease. The authors relate the few clear facts

about this hideous affliction, which seems to spread through biting and is devastating devil populations across much of Tasmania. It is unknown whether the disease is an old foe or whether its origins lie elsewhere, for example in the accumulation of anthropogenic carcinogens. At this and other points of uncertainty I was left wondering what the Tasmanian aboriginals could have told us about the devil, had misunderstanding, persecution and disease not led to their own demise.

The authors have succeeded in demystifying the Tasmanian devil and reveal a fascinating creature; we would be much poorer without it. Nevertheless, if you were to follow some raucous screams through the dark Tasmanian night and came upon half a dozen of these stout, black marsupials gorging on the carcass of a cow with their bone-crunching teeth, you might still think they were devils indeed.

Matthew J. Phillips is at the Allan Wilson Centre for Molecular Ecology and Evolution, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.