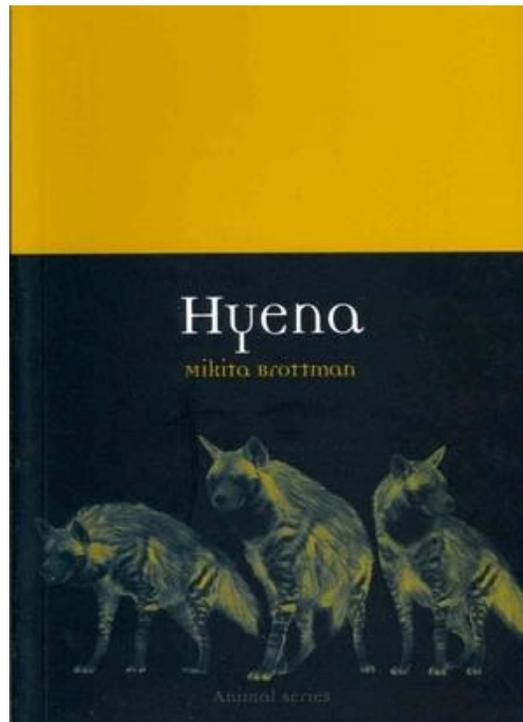


Ann Marie Thornburg

Who's Laughing Now?

Mikita Brottman. *Hyena*. Reaktion Books—Animal, 2012. 167 pp. \$19.95 pb.



The human imagination conjures an ambiguous notion of the hyena, both unsettling and unsettled. The hyenas of fact and fantasy are “difficult to categorize for all kinds of reasons” according Mikita Brottman in the final chapter of *Hyena*, published in 2012 as part of Reaktion’s ever-expanding Animal series. “They are neither dog nor cat, neither predator nor scavenger, neither friend nor enemy, but always already a touch of both, making our neat human categories look ridiculous” (128).

To help readers understand the gray space between these binaries, Brottman begins the book with scientific information about hyenas. In chapter one we learn about the four different species of hyena (spotted, striped, brown, and the aardwolf). Brottman notes that although hyenas look “like a cross between a cat and a dog” they “actually belong to the Herpestidae family — the family of mongooses and meerkats” (12). Hyenas

possess a number of compelling, strange, and ultimately adaptive characteristics, including powerful jaws and steely stomachs that can digest bone. The spotted hyena's fabled laugh, which has contributed to the hyena's image as a creepy, unhinged lurker, is addressed too. Not surprisingly, it is not a laugh at all, but one part of a varied vocal communication repertoire.

Spotted hyenas seem to be the species most identified as "the" hyena, and therefore the species onto which numerous negative traits have been projected. It is sobering to learn that they are "among the most abundant and successful carnivores in sub-Saharan Africa, with a better kill rate than lions." The female spotted hyena is also famous for her "20-cm-long (8-in) clitoris that is the same size and shape as a male's penis, accompanied by a pair of pseudo-testes," which is likely the result of "elevated androgen production in the womb." This makes copulation a delicate balancing act for males, who are smaller than females, and birthing "painful and dangerous" for hyena mothers (18). Brottman speculates that these anatomical realities cause some to "feel uncomfortable with the idea of female genitals that are larger than the male's, especially when they grow visibly erect and engorged" (20). Although books in the Animal series are meant to be general reviews of species' natural and cultural histories, Brottman's interpretative observations provide welcome invitations to think through the details presented.

After introducing the four species of hyena in chapter one, Brottman moves on to human conceptions of, and relations to, hyenas. "The Hyena and Human History" begins with a history of human attempts at classification, tracing descriptions of the hyena from the Greeks to nineteenth century naturalists. Rumors of hyenas' hermaphroditism circulated, as did unsettling tales of grave robber hyenas. Brottman describes "an obscure, hyena-like beast who terrorized the region of Gévaudan in southeastern France" in the late eighteenth century (42). Her assertion that "the hyena has always been a mystery to us," seems especially true in light of the numerous and varied descriptions of the Beast of Gévaudan (33). Natural histories produced during the Victorian age were compendiums of negative stereotypes: "All in all, the hyena 'is an ill, gloomy-looking animal; and its manners and habits correspond with its appearance'" (54). The twentieth century receives a brief treatment, but not

surprisingly, “otherwise sedate, objective sources of information are unable to refrain from a sneering tone when called upon to describe the hyena” (57).

Chapter 3 (“Hyena Magic”) is an appropriate extension of the context Brottman provides in the first two chapters. Here we are introduced to the hyena of myth and magic. “The hyena’s body, shrouded in taboo” has been used to make various amulets (63). In ancient times, a hyena’s anus worn on the arm was believed to make men irresistible to women. Today hyena body parts have many effects the world over: hyena noses ensure a good harvest (Sudan) and hyena meat is a potent medicine (Bedouin of Arabia). Hyenas have long been associated with necromancy, and Brottman speculates that “the hyena’s tendency to scavenge for food means that it often lives in the proximity of death” (67). Brottman, who is trained as a psychoanalyst, usefully brings Freud’s notion of the uncanny into the chapter. She writes that “in the final section of his essay [on the Uncanny], Freud reveals that the uncanny is, in fact, something secretly familiar, something that has undergone repression and returned from it.... [I]f premature burial is a supremely uncanny phenomenon, then so too is premature unburial, bringing to light the dead body, which is normally hidden from consciousness and, like death in general, is rightfully repressed” (71-72).

For me, one of the most interesting stories in the book is that of the South African photographer Pieter Hugo’s interactions with, and photographs of, so-called “hyena men” in Nigeria. Intrigued by newspaper photos of handlers walking hyenas on heavy, chain-link leashes, Hugo set out to meet the men, who made a living by “entertaining crowds with their three hyenas” and other animals (86). Brottman describes multiple narratives of the men’s and hyena’s lives. Again, she offers minimal but effective commentary on Hugo’s own photographs of the men and hyenas: “Interestingly,” she writes, “the photographer chose not to picture the men in the streets where they plied their trade; instead he shows them posing with their animals in bleak, wasteland settings.” Drawing on critic Will Smith, Brottman reveals the troubling implications of the photographs, which suggest that the “men and beasts ... are unwanted creatures reduced to lives of scavenging on the margins of society, living every day with the simmering threat of repressed violence” (90-91). Color reproductions of hyena images and artwork thread through the entire volume, adding visual interest. Here, though, the inclusion of Hugo’s photographs is especially useful, and I would have liked to see a few more of them in order to more fully consider their effects.

The fourth chapter surveys hyenas' roles, mostly as symbols, in literature and the arts. This chapter feels the most list-like of the five, perhaps because whole books and films are paraphrased one after the other. Still, Brottman presents a useful overview of written and visual texts. A discussion of the role of animals-as-metaphors is especially appropriate in a book about hyenas, since they are almost always used to represent unsavory or downright unspeakable human impulses. Brottman closes this chapter by warning that "the more we speak about symbolic hyenas, the less it matters to us that real hyenas are becoming increasingly scarce" (114-115).

In chapter five, Brottman appropriately turns to a discussion of how living hyenas fare in relation to their mythical and symbolic counterparts. She concludes that "the hyena has been blighted by the laws of sympathetic magic and contagion, which have been used to account for a wide variety of beliefs and practices in traditional cultures, and can equally well be applied to our own" (128). Most of us, she muses, have never seen a living hyena. Already endangered, they are rare even in the limited and limiting environments of zoos, probably because hyenas are not "crowd-pleasers" (136). (I was surprised to learn that until recently, a colony of captive research hyenas lived in the hills of Berkley, California.) Brottman ends the book by describing her own encounter with a spotted hyena in the wild. Though she describes the hyena's eyes as "glow[ing] an eerie red," the encounter itself is marked by no drama, but still engendered a kind of wonder (144). The same could be said of *Hyena*. It is a readable book that is thorough without becoming overly focused on any one set of details or area of inquiry. Brottman carefully and compellingly presents numerous accounts of these long-maligned animals. This book, in turn, should prompt readers to carefully consider and reconsider the assumptions that lurk at the margins of their own responses to hyenas.