

Müller, Axel, Christopher Halls, and Ben Williamson. *Mermaids: Art, Symbolism and Mythology*. Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2022. References. Acknowledgements. Index. 168 pp. \$61.00 (hardback and e-book). ISBN 978-1-804-130032.

Examining the genesis and cultural assimilation of symbolic images, particularly that of the mermaid, presents a complex and multifaceted challenge. This compelling figure is frequently associated with bodies of water in Slavic folklore and mythology. The precise origins and terminology of this feminine entity still needs to be discovered and has prompted extensive academic inquiry.

The book, *Mermaids: Art, Symbolism, and Mythology* by Axel Müller, Christopher Halls and Ben Williamson, offers a meticulous and comprehensive exploration of the representation of the art, symbolism, and mythology of mermaids. This examination traces the origins and evolution of mermaids, especially within Western cultures. According to the authors, the mermaid exists in many cultures worldwide. She is often depicted as a woman with the tail of a fish, playing a significant role in folklore across diverse global regions. The authors clarify the mermaid's characteristics at the beginning of their explanation: "a mermaid is a half-human, half sea-fish creature with the upper body (from the head to the hip) of a pretty young woman with one or two fish tails instead of legs" (3). Aquatic environments are home to various types of mythological creatures, such as nymphs and sirens; these are distinguished and described in the book, accompanied by corresponding illustrations. A distinct contrast is observed between Western and Slavic mythology, in which mermaids are portrayed without fish tails, possessing legs, and inhabiting the forest rather than the water. In this book, the focus is placed on specific art objects and their accompanying narratives, serving as representative examples of ancient and modern civilizations in the Middle East and Europe.

The authors highlight the impact of Christianity, which fundamentally altered the appearance, understanding, and role of mythical creatures like mermaids. Before the influence of Christianity, mermaids were often linked with the sea and its perils. However, Christianity transformed them into symbols of temptation, depicting them as beings who entice men and lead them to ruin. The book further examines the utilization and propagation of mermaid imagery in European cultures and art movements. The historical presence of Christian depictions of fish-tailed mermaids in eighth-century manuscripts in Central and Western Europe underscores the significance of mermaids in human culture. The term "mermaid" appears globally in the folklore and legends of diverse cultures. This comprehensive book presents an engaging and accessible examination of mermaid folklore, challenging traditional interpretations and exploring mermaids within the framework of evolutionary theory. The book invites readers to adopt an open-minded approach, fostering a sense of intrigue and intellectual curiosity.

A significant portion of existing research on mermaids focuses on the creature and its role in mythology, folklore, literature, and linguistics. This book provides a comprehensive analysis of this topic, while also providing extremely

detailed and enriched research, and a separate chapter has been added that examines the role of mythical creatures in modern mass culture, including in children's books, games, and films. In this way, this book can be used in courses in cultural studies, intercultural communication, language learning and translation, as well as interdisciplinary courses like "Mythology and Modernity." Furthermore, the additional aspect of mermaid nature in modern times can be used by researchers as they conduct comparative studies of the creatures. In a separate chapter, the authors discuss the evolving symbolism of mermaids: while in ancient and medieval times they represented seduction and fear of the unknown, later they became cherished characters in children's fairytales and modern entertainment media. The chapter expounds on the evolving portrayal of these entities within modern mass culture that encompasses children's literature, games, and films alongside conventional domains such as mythology, folklore, literature, and linguistics. The book can be viewed as an outline for the origin and development of other myths that involve hybrid animal and human mythical creatures.

The book presents a comprehensive and thought-provoking analysis of mermaids. It covers their historical origins, scientific significance, and cultural impact as viewed through various perspectives, even including evolutionary theory. The book caters to a diverse audience of scholars, students, and mythology enthusiasts and provides a wealth of insights to deepen their understanding of this captivating subject.

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