

Daniel Horowitz

Bear with Me



*A Cultural History
of Famous Bears
in America*



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Famous Bears in America*

DANIEL HOROWITZ

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on Alfred Leete's and J. M. Flagg's war-era "Lord Kitchener/Uncle Sam
Wants YOU/" posters.

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TO PEOPLE WHO LOVE
AND PROTECT BEARS,

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REAL AND
MAKE-BELIEVE ONES

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Preface

Polar Bears, Franz Boas, and Me

The COVID-19 pandemic; three previous books I authored; my long history with imaginary bears; playful pillow talk about one polar bear in particular; and learning how Franz Boas encountered polar bears on Baffin Island in the 1880s. All this somehow led me to research and write about how over centuries bears—mostly representational but some real ones—became celebrities in the United States. Initially, I naively hoped that immersing myself in stories of how American bears became so famous would provide me with some measure of relief from the threats of a global pandemic, the rise of authoritarian threats to democracy, increasing evidence of the threat of climate change, and wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East. Well, it turned out that though I might pleasurablely revel in stories of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Garfield's Pooky, and victories of UCLA's Bruins, evidence about some celebrity bears underscored how precarious the world was.

Each of us has in mind the date when we realized how dangerous COVID-19 might turn out to be. For me, it is March 16, 2020. I was on a Metro light rail going from downtown Los Angeles to Pasadena, where my wife, the historian Helen L. Horowitz, and I spend winters in the company of other retirees who gather around the Huntington Library. Having just had lunch in LA's Grand Central Market, where I worried not at all about contagion, I suddenly realized that a dangerous virus might be lurking all around me, including on the

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metal pole I held on to as the train lurched forward. Helen and I rushed to our condo, cancelled plans to go to Charlotte, North Carolina, for a Business History Association conference, packed up, and made arrangements to return to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where we spend most of the year. At the time, I was finishing up a third scholarly book—this one on residential real estate, and the two previous ones on the problematic promises of happiness and entrepreneurship—in which inequalities of wealth and income, as well as racism, were dominant themes.¹

To wander off into what I thought would be reassuring worlds, I could have turned my attention in any number of directions. But somehow, I alighted on bears as I tried to figure out how, when, and why some of them emerged as such famous animals in America over centuries. I gradually realized that bears had long been part of my imaginative life. Like many children, I had a teddy bear and my parents read books to me about bears before I could read them myself. As a child I saw bears perform in circuses and zoos. Not long after we married in the summer of 1963, Helen and I began what turned out to be well over half a century of travels in the American Southwest. Sometimes we brought back reminders of what we had seen, including two Zuni fetishes. To Zuni people, bears, guardians of the West, represent the power to heal and protect. One tiny fetish, which we still possess, pays homage to a medicine man with abundant powers, with the arrowhead on top signifying an offering of gifts anticipated or received. The arrow on the other one, which sits on a shelf in my study, is a lifeline that begins at the mouth and then heads to the soul, the location of inner strength and faith.²

Only when I was far along in researching and writing this book did I realize that these fetishes stood on a shelf near where I wrote. I also recalled buying an Inuit carving in Montreal over forty years ago, one that did not reference a bear but offered a representation of women's work. Only recently did I realize that it is from Cape Dorset, now called Kinngait, a hamlet on the southwestern tip of Baffin Island that is the center of Inuit art.³ I remembered that Helen and I read books about Paddington and Winnie-the-Pooh to our children, and that bears were among the many stuffed animals that seemed to fill their bedrooms. More immediately, I know that the smaller collection pictured here resides in the bedroom Helen and I share.⁴ We began to collect them, almost thirty years ago, after our nest became empty. They provide sentimental examples of how we seek comfort from stuffed animals. Besides two small Smith College mice, the basket holds the large "Winter Bear," who hibernates in the appropriate season and has a snood over his head; "Travel Bear," who is small enough to

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Basket of bears in the home of Daniel and Helen L. Horowitz.
Photo by author.

accompany us on trips; and the most recent acquisition—“T Bear,” with the routes of the Boston-area MBTA crisscrossing its body.

If you, dear reader, promise not to report me to mental health authorities, I will also describe the pillow talk involving imaginary animals that Helen and I engaged in as we drifted off to sleep. This practice may have begun in the spring of 2005, while I was teaching at the University of Hamburg, when Helen encountered, or so she claims, two mice—Gemein and her husband Gesell—who made her feel at home in our apartment. So, as she often does, Helen engaged in writing behavior, in the end producing a still unpublished book on how Mr. and Mrs. Schaft accompanied us back to Northampton’s Smith College, where they began careers as cheese entrepreneurs. Much later, as COVID-19 drove us into lockdown mode, a polar bear named Polar entered our sleep-approaching nights. Along lines that are now difficult to recover fully, we spun elaborate stories about how Polar migrated from Baffin Island to Massachusetts, where he enrolled in medical school and then became a psychiatrist who saw patients in

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the freezer section of a local supermarket, giving him easy access to fish as payments for his service. The stories became elaborately fanciful, principally about his prior life on Baffin Island. Baffin is the world's fifth-largest island, part of Canada located west of Greenland, with only thirteen thousand people, half of whom are Inuit.

Early in 2020 I had learned about Baffin Island when I read Charles King's recently published *Gods of the Upper Air: How a Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the Twentieth Century*. This wonderful book opened my eyes to how over time the experiences of Boas on Baffin Island in 1883–84 profoundly shaped how we understand culture. As King notes, through his encounters with the Inuit, Boas was coming to realize that “being smart was relative to one's circumstances and surroundings.”⁵ In 1888, at age thirty and more than a quarter of a century before he would emerge as America's most influential anthropologist, Boas published *The Central Eskimo: Sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1884–1885*. Here he highlighted the lives of polar bears in two ways. On the one hand, he offered moving evidence of a reciprocal cross-species relationship when he related a story of a woman who adopted a cub a few days after its birth. On the other hand, as if to underscore the connection between affection and violence, he described how Inuit hunt polar bears, something that had become much easier and less dangerous to the hunters, Boas reported, with “the introduction of firearms in Arctic America.”⁶ So it turns out that if sometimes the Inuit killed polar bears, at other moments they told loving, gender-inflected tales that endowed humans with empathy and bears with ample intelligence and emotional powers.

As I carried out research for this book, at idle moments I let my curiosity run wild about the comfortably distant Baffin Island. I spent hours online trying to imagine what it was like for people to live there. I used Google Earth to travel to Iqaluit, with just under seven thousand inhabitants the island's most populous location. Although I am not sure I was serious, I unsuccessfully tried to persuade Helen to join me on a vacation on and around Baffin. We'd spend an unaffordable tens of thousands of dollars per person for a three-week trip to “a land where the sun never sets and polar bears roam.” We'd be lowered to small inflatable Zodiacs that would enable us to approach and “get a glimpse of one of the Arctic's most iconic animals: the polar bear.”⁷

As I read about polar bears, I learned that some observers consider Baffin Island “Polar Bear Central,” possessing as it does five of the world's nineteen subpopulations of the species. With as many as 2,800 polar bears, by some

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estimates they comprise more than 10 percent of the world's population of the species.⁸ I carefully read Andrew E. Derocher's *Polar Bears: A Complete Guide to Their Biology and Behavior* (2012). A text by an eminent biologist, the book is lavishly illustrated, mostly with pictures that present the bears as beautiful and cute, rather than threatening or threatened. Yet Derocher asserted that "most people find something mystical about a huge, potentially dangerous, pure white predator." The bears were so popular, he continued, because of the contrasts between adorable cubs and their "mysterious lifestyle" that contributed to a "frisson of fear." I found out that polar bears, one of eight extant species, live only in the Arctic, typically on sea ice. They have a powerful sense of smell, eat seals as their principal source of food, and can be as tall as ten feet and weigh as much as 1,700 pounds. Inuit on Baffin and elsewhere hunt and kill them because they rely on them for food and materials. Threatened by humans but rarely threatening them, they are overharvested, especially on Baffin Island. Endangered by climate change, their futures are uncertain.⁹

What Boas revealed about polar bears from his year on Baffin Island is part of a story, cons in the making, of relationships between bears and people. At one end we see merciless and often wholesale endangerment or slaughter, the result of humans causing environmental degradation as they hunt for sport, profit, and sustenance. One step over are bears held in captivity at zoos and in circuses. At the other end, in imaginative renderings that emphasize caring and reciprocal relationships, are all sorts of bears in folklore, children's literature, and toys, as well as most recently fresh and sympathetic understandings of the lives of actual bears.

And so I wondered why and how we tell so many stories about bears, some of them affectionate. People relish such narratives even though they act in many ways that threaten bears' existence. Having learned about Boas, Baffin, and polar bears, I turned to find out about how all varieties of North American bears in all manners of settings have compelled people to represent them in media from oral traditions to video games. People did so in ways that turned bears into celebrities that we perceive as both cuddly and dangerous, actual animals and ones we know principally through fabricated stories. Having started out to take comfort in the lives of bears at a time when dangers loomed large near and afar in my life, I discovered that precarity also prevailed.

Once I embarked on this project, I found bears here, there, and everywhere. After family members, friends, and Google's algorithm became aware of my interest in them, I received a seemingly unending stream of stories of bears invading human spaces. For my birthday in 2022, one friend sent me an e-card

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Jar of Teddie Peanut Butter. Photo by author.

that pictured many teddy bears wishing me well by singing and playing musical instruments. Two other friends gave me a cap with a grizzly embossed on the front. At one point, Helen emailed me an ad for the commercial possibilities that Build-A-Bear offered, including gifts for every occasion, as well as its workshop near me. On my iPhone, Google, relying on my search history, alerted me to how a camera captured a live bear cub bathing in a swimming pool with a toy bear he had found. Common were stories of bears finding their way into residential neighborhoods, such as one that circulated about Hank the Tank, a 500-pound grizzly who invaded dozens of homes in search of food in the South Lake Tahoe, California, area.¹⁰

And bear with me for offering examples of bears' commercially oriented, representational presence. Think of the logo for Behr paints. Or how Teddie peanut butter deploys a not very natural, recumbent, and smiling bear on its label. At the supermarket in Cambridge where I usually shop, I encountered a large display featuring stacks of Polar Seltzer sodas, produced in nearby Worcester, with a friendly toy polar bear sitting on top. In a Robitussin ad, a bear appears at a window and offers a woman honey to relieve her cough. Ads for Charmin toilet paper feature smiling, cartoon bears who encourage users to "enjoy the go"

Polar bear on top of bottles and cans of Polar Seltzer, Star Market, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Photo by author.



as a bear wiggles its bottom and sings, “I’m grinning cheek to cheek.” Finally, in the world of sports, to name only a few, there are the Chicago Bears and Chicago Cubs, UC Berkeley’s Golden Bears, Brown University’s Bears, Baylor’s Bears, the Kutztown Golden Bears, and Touchdown—the Big Red Bear of Cornell University.

The rest is history.

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Introduction

Bear With Me: A Cultural History of Famous Bears in America focuses on the ways media have made bears omnipresent in the everyday lives of Americans for over two centuries. Although the book stretches back to bears in the heavens and in the Bible and acknowledges the importance of stories imported from abroad, this is nonetheless an American story of how high and popular culture have transformed bears into celebrities that have permeated our imaginative lives.¹ Although some real bears make appearances, I concentrate mainly on representational ones, principally those presented by Euro-Americans from the colonial period to the present. *Bear With Me* explores how depictions have evolved from a focus on human domination to cross-species reciprocity and emotional engagement, even intimacies.

Indeed, portrayals have often ricocheted from deadly anthropocentrism to loving empathy. As bears came to appear more like us, they became less threatening and instead sources of emotional and spiritual strength. Yet it remains an intriguing question of whether the proliferation of bear stories, even ones in which affection plays a central role, shoulders some responsibility for the threat humans pose to bears. Much of popular culture promotes sympathetic identification with bears, yet demographic and economic forces drive us to threaten them. Some stories, such as those about the dangers of global warming, should

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impel us to protect them. Others, like news of bear attacks, drive us to fascinated fear and even murder of bears.²

I present chapters in the order in which bears appeared on the scene. In the United States, widely circulated stories began in Native American, African American, and Euro-American oral and folk traditions, transitioned into print, and then intensified in the 1850s when Grizzly Adams displayed grizzlies he had captured in California before he moved to New York in 1860 and teamed up with P. T. Barnum. This was a key moment, in part because the middle of the nineteenth century was when news of the American West spread more widely, driven by new engines of popular culture. Early in the next century the connection between Teddy Roosevelt and teddy bears provided the first major example of the extensive commercialization in many genres and across the nation. Now, an observer noticed in 1906, teddy bears had “become a fad. Automobilists carry bears as mascots. Children cry for ‘em, and even ‘society’ is taking up the toy as a novelty.”³ However, it was in the years following World War II that bears and popular culture came together in full force into the lives of so many Americans through multiple media—including songs, films, television shows, stuffed animals, tchotchkes, video games, and newfangled options such as Facebook. With the Disney empire playing an outsize role for baby boomers, the culture industries in postwar America helped spread the word and images about bears as celebrities.

The standard historical explanation of what happened is that when, with urbanization, wild animals disappeared from most people’s lives, bears appeared not as dangerous but as innocent and lovable.⁴ Yet many dramatic stories of famous bears underscore the necessity to question the widely accepted story of linear progression from threatening to cuddly. There is no one-to-one relationship between proximity to wild nature, actual threats, and a sense of danger that stories convey. How imagined bears enter our lives depends on genre, the power of traditions, cultural and historical contexts, and audience.

Moreover, even though cross-species empathy can be powerful, our separation from and commodification of nature may well have intensified threats to the lives of bears. Affectionate representations are more prevalent even as some species struggle to survive in the wilderness. It is perhaps too optimistic to say that these very forces have opened up the possibility that sufficient numbers of Americans will defend and protect bears. Indeed, driven by the increasingly powerful forces of culture and capitalism, stories of bears do two conflicting things that accentuate the moral dilemmas that suffuse our reactions. By offering such wondrous varieties of bears with which we identify, they present the possibility of empathetic cross-species relationships. At the same time, by

distancing us from actual bears and instead offering us cuddly ones, multiplying narratives may limit the effectiveness of environmental policies that might help bears thrive in the Anthropocene.

Recently, rewilding had led to encounters between bears and people, including in American suburbs and cities. This process upends the long-held belief that modern Americans have less direct experience with wild animals. The environmental studies scholar Peter S. Alagona adds a hopeful note about rewilding in his 2022 book, *The Accidental Ecosystem: People and Wildlife in American Cities*. The more people came to live with such animals, he insists, “the more they viewed these creatures not as threats but as natural and beneficial members of multispecies urban communities.” Alagona notes that “beginning in the 1980s, surveys showed that Americans—having grown up with Teddy, Smokey, Winnie, and Yogi—thought of bears as intelligent, attractive, similar to people, and worthy of protection.”⁵

For bears to become well known and omnipresent requires figures whose fame can be enhanced; an ample and engaged audience; and powerful media that provide the grist for what Susan J. Douglas and Andrea McDonnell call, in their study of famous human beings, “the celebrity production industry.” Bears have potential notoriety because of the importance of the sensational and exotic, their complicated emotional resonances, and what many see as their resemblance to humans. Sufficient audiences developed beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, when increasing numbers of people with more ample leisure time resided in and around large towns and cities. Economical postage, the telegraph, and railroads helped create a national market facilitating popular culture’s spread. Other media platforms took hold—initially local urban institutions such as performance spaces and widely circulating stories in inexpensive newspapers. Over time a full range of national media developed, from magazines to radio, film, and television, and eventually contemporary social media. “Our ability to relate to and identify with celebrities,” Douglas and McDonnell note in ways that apply to bears, “also allows us to use stars as a way of considering our own identities, values, and beliefs. In our media-saturated world, being a fan is often integral to our own self-formation,” something children have experienced when reading books about bears and adults when encountering them in the wild and in captivity.⁶

Why bears? Putting aside household pets such as cats and dogs, perhaps more so than any other animals they capture the imagination of the widest possible range of Americans. Elephants and horses do not do that so extensively. Even monkeys and chimps, which in important ways are more humanlike than bears, are not consistently presented and do not present themselves in such a

manner. The most common explanation for bears' prominent presence is that they are unusual because they stand erect on their hind legs, face us, and in myriad ways act like us.⁷ "For many of us today," the nature writer Jon Mooallem insists, "who spend our days slumped over spreadsheets or quarreling with our banks over hidden fees, bears look like the composed and competent survivors we wish we still were."⁸

In many ways bears are not at all like us, although we do our best to pretend they are by projecting human traits onto them. We do so in ways that amplify often contradictory characteristics. In the wild, real bears are majestic and threatening—and at times playful and seemingly friendly. As represented, they evoke a wide range of feelings: cuddly or dangerous; family members or lone avengers; lordly or timid; smart or stupid. More than domesticated animals and most wild ones, bears evoke strikingly opposite responses from humans, including domination, cross-species reciprocity, and emotional engagement. All this provides rich fodder that the engines of popular culture mobilize to turn them into celebrities.⁹ Bears rampant in popular culture are more like us than are the wild ones who live in nature. If bears inhabit our imaginative worlds because of their posture and facial expressions, powerful commercial interests play upon, amplify, and exaggerate the many characteristics that make them so prevalent in many modern media.¹⁰

Of course, real bears vary in the ways they look, where they live, and how they behave. Of the eight types, the four that live in North America provide this book the most abundant material for cultural representations. Pandas exist in North America exclusively in captivity. North American black bears (*Ursus americanus*) live in places ranging from Florida to Alaska; brown bears (*Ursus arctos*, a category that includes grizzlies and Kodiaks) live not only in Russia and Western Europe but also in the Canadian and the American West; and polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) inhabit the Arctic region.

Adults range from 400 to 1,700 pounds, with brown and polar bears the largest. Bears have an unusually strong ability to hear and even more so to smell. They tend to travel alone or in small groups rather than in large packs. Stories of bears, especially fictional ones, pay remarkably little attention to their diets; they are omnivores, with many of them more likely to consume plants than animals.¹¹ Despite how often they are depicted as slow and dumb, they are intelligent and capable of learning. They are aware of how our lives affect theirs. Species such as grizzlies and polar bears, notes a PBS special, are "considered by many wildlife biologists" to be among "the most intelligent land animals of North America," having as they do "the largest and most convoluted brains relative to their size of any land mammal." Their intelligence compares

favorably with “that of higher primates.” They keep track of other members of their group, perform complex tasks, can learn and apply information, are able to deploy self-awareness, and possess powerful memories.¹²

Compared with large cats such as cheetahs, bears are not especially fast. However, capable of reaching a speed as high as thirty miles per hour, they can outrun humans. North American bears typically hibernate, even though many bear stories pay relatively little attention to that practice. Unless they feel hungry or threatened, especially if a mother faces the prospect of losing her cubs, they are much more likely to avoid rather than confront people, but they are fully capable of dismembering and killing human prey when necessary. “Sensational reports of bear attacks,” notes Bernd Brunner, “may make for exciting reading, but they can easily create a false impression. For the most part, bears are far less interested in us than we are in them.”¹³ News of bear attacks circulate widely, but it is important to balance such stories with statistical evidence. Over a long period of time in Yellowstone National Park, there was only one injury for every 1.5 million visitors. In the United States far more deaths occur due to bites from venomous animals or to lightning than from attacks from grizzly bears. Up until 1980 at Glacier National Park, 150 people died but only 6 of them from the paws of grizzlies, with drowning, auto accidents, and falls more likely to be fatal. In almost all cases, bears attack people because they are protecting cubs, food, or territory. However, such incidents may be increasing as people travel more frequently into areas where bears live and vice versa.¹⁴

In Western cultures serious interest in the relations between humans and animals dates back at least to the writings of Thomas Moore and Jeremy Bentham. In the 1960s writers began to develop fresh understandings. Animal studies scholars, animal rights activists, postmodernists, posthumanists, scientists, conservationists, and environmentalists have come to insist on the importance of reciprocity between humans and animals. They have removed humans from our long-held position at the center of the world. Profoundly shaping how to think about our relationships to animals, they have blurred the boundaries between humans and animals as they oppose dualisms of mind/body, human/animal, culture/biology. They deemphasize notions of separation, exclusivity, and difference. Instead, they stress the importance of respect, mutuality, a sense of shared destiny, and cross-species similarities. They understand that animals can represent the instinctive, unconscious, and more natural aspects of human existence. They insist that, with complicated emotional lives, animals are more similar to us than we have often realized—albeit not in the ways popular culture represents. They underscore how animals such as bears have complex and intricate systems of organizing themselves and communicating with each other,

use tools in problem-solving, possess some abilities than humans lack, and interact with one another in complex, emotionally laden lives.¹⁵ These anti-hierarchical perspectives have risen to prominence among influential writers in ways that raise fundamental questions about power, citizenship, and the historical tendency to separate culture and nature. We can hope that such transformative visions will lead to policies and practices that protect rather than destroy wildlife.

Influenced by these intellectual and experiential changes, scholars, especially those in the field of animal studies, have explored the issue of how to write the history of the relationships between humans and animals.¹⁶ I have drawn on the insights they and others offer, for example by exploring how in some cases representational bears are understood as having emotions and intelligence. I do this even if, as a cultural historian, in important ways I offer different perspectives but not necessarily better ones.

I wish I could claim that from the outset I had in mind a detailed research plan. Instead, the conditions under which I worked profoundly shaped how I proceeded. On February 3, 2021, I received my first COVID-19 vaccination. Six and a half weeks later, I began the process of submitting my previous book manuscript, on the crises in American residential real estate, for review at a university press. This meant I could begin to work on another project. Initially, with library collections inaccessible, to a considerable extent I had to rely on the internet—Google and Wikipedia especially—as research tools. Being hunkered down in front of a computer opened up worlds in ways that meant bears quickly appeared everywhere, immediately, and in every corner of newly discovered worlds. Although I eventually gained access to the holdings in libraries, the worlds I entered through my computer screen had lasting impact. Several things happened simultaneously and often in contradictory ways. Bears—actual and representational ones, in the wilderness and in captivity—proliferated in digitized historical documents, book reviews, YouTube videos, and Facebook sites. An unending number of bears floated on my screen as if they were everywhere and nowhere at the same time, torn out of historical, cultural, and physical contexts. As a reader for Duke University Press suggestively asked, “Does this story begin with the industrial cooption of fairy tales (a la the Grimms)—move through the print revolution, mass pop culture and subcultural responses (gay bears) to mass culture—and end with everything-everywhere-at-once internet hyper-proliferation and fragmentation?”¹⁷ If in this book I had included references to and stories about every bear that friends and the World Wide Web brought to my attention, there would be no end to my work or to the length of *Bear With Me*. Instead, I have done my best to tame

representational bears and place them in historical and cultural contexts—and to give such hyper-proliferation some sense of order.

Throughout the book, I grapple with several issues. One involves the relationship between anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism. Humans have increasingly deployed anthropomorphism to give animals agency, intelligence, and rich emotional lives, including in children's literature and folklore. Anthropocentrism is also prominent, especially given that bear narratives are more about humans than about bears, which is to say that if under so many conditions images of anthropocentrism lead to assertion of our dominance, anthropomorphism can challenge domination in ways that give animals agency and acknowledge their capacity for intelligence and emotion.¹⁸

Then there are the complicated, often reciprocal relationships between real and representational bears. Actual bears abound throughout this book, albeit often quickly moving to representations on pages and screens. I recognize how important it is to understand actual bears even as I know that most of us encounter only representational bears, on which I lavish so much attention. Yet when I do so and when the evidence makes it possible, I acknowledge the genuineness of the powers that bears have. In the end I find problematic any sharp distinction between real and representational bears, as is clear, for example, in the stories of Smokey Bear.¹⁹

Conservation and environmentalism also command our attention. Public policy and economic forces significantly affect bears, often adversely. Again and again in *Bear With Me*, we encounter moments when what humans do, or fail to do, as citizens with political or corporate power significantly impacts the lives of bears. This comes under discussion at several key points but especially with struggles over public policies and the meaning of Smokey Bear beginning in the late 1960s.²⁰

White men dominate so many bear tales. Yet members of diverse groups make appearances. By and large, class remains implicit or unexplored. Female bears are frequent, including mothers protecting their cubs. Yet rarely do we find feminist perspectives or women authors. Among humans, we encounter assertive manly men, including gay bears. African Americans appear early as historical figures and more often as folkloric ones. Then in the late twentieth century, African American writers take center stage as they recast traditional, frequently racist stories. Especially with narratives that originate with encounters between humans and bears in western America in the nineteenth century, Indigenous peoples have prominent roles. In multiple stories they often appear as undifferentiated and essentialized people. Even though I pay relatively little attention to Indigenous Americans' experience of bears, we catch glimpses of distinctive and enduring traditions. As original tales transform into more modern versions, it is possible to track shifts from racist depictions of Indigenous peoples to more

sympathetic ones. Yet even in many modern instances, responses are problematic, with stereotypes often prevalent and identities up for grabs.²¹



The preface focuses on how I came to write this book, the presence of bears in my imaginative life, and the polar bears Franz Boas encountered on Baffin Island in the 1880s.

“Folkloric Bears and Actual Ones: Sacred and Profane from the Bible to Contemporary Celebrities” follows the introduction. It ranges from the bears in the Bibles carried by early settlers, to the tales many Native Americans passed down in rich oral traditions, and eventually to contemporary video games. It ends with stories of famous real bears, such as Wyoming’s Grizzly 399, that scores of wildlife photographers and millions of tourists follow.

“The Stories of Hugh Glass: The Case of a Disappearing and Reappearing Dangerous Bear” is the first of three legendary narratives of violent bears. Told and retold since 1823, the tale originates with a record in a local newspaper and then quickly became part of regional folklore, later reinterpreted by writers from vernacular storytellers to skilled literary practitioners. Eventually it expanded into other media, most famously in the award-winning 2015 film *The Revenant*.

“Out of Hibernation and Into Children’s Literature” begins with *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* and continues to contemporary tales in almost every conceivable medium. Ever changing along the way, the trajectory moves resolutely toward reassuring relationships between youngsters and bears. In contrast, the demands of the genre of video games meant that in the early twenty-first century some bears were often more ferocious than friendly.

Then comes “Grizzly Adams: Bears He Tamed, Those He Displayed, and Those Responsible for His Death,” which involves how a bear attacked John “Grizzly” Adams, a mid-nineteenth-century mountain man who left Massachusetts to travel throughout the West and eventually joined P. T. Barnum in Manhattan. This is another dramatic and violent story told and retold first in print and later in other, more modern media, most notably in the simply made but wildly popular 1974 film *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams*.

“Captive Bears and Their Captors as Workers” begins on April 10, 1871, the date of the founding of what would eventually become Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Company. From then on captive bears appeared in natural history museums, zoos, homes, films, theme parks, and video games, where their presence expands our notion of representation beyond the usual books and films. With these presentations, contrived to varying extents, the agency of humans rather than of bears powerfully persists.

Attention turns to “Teddy Bear: Another One Quickly Disappears and Frequently Reappears.” The story begins in 1902 when President Theodore Roosevelt encountered a bear whose life he refused to end. The ensuing narratives mark a major turning point as bear stories exploded out of print and into an enormous range of expressions in popular culture, with a second wave beginning soon after World War II.

Then there is the story of Smokey Bear, told in “Off the Poster and Out of the Zoo: Smokey Bear Goes Everywhere.” Much more so than what is true with teddy bears, Smokey’s history was persistently and deeply implicated with conservation politics and public policy. With Smokey, in addition to the one that appeared on posters announcing, “Only YOU Can Prevent Forest Fires,” there is at least one actual bear, discovered hovering up a tree in New Mexico, residing in the National Zoo, and then buried near where he was originally found. Beginning in the last decades of the twentieth century, critiques of the uses of both teddy and Smokey developed and then intensified.

If in all other cases mass media spread stories of bears throughout much of America, “Out of the Closet: Bears in the Gay World” provides an interesting case of how a bear-referenced world remained contained within a largely separate media world. In almost all other cases, people impute human characteristics onto bears. But in the gay male subculture that emerged in the 1980s, the reverse is true. In this context, hairy and hefty gay men were characterized as bears but showed little interest in actual ones. My status as an outsider among people who study and encounter real bears is more vexed when it comes to my writing about gay bears. Neither a member of the LGBTQ+ community nor an expert when it comes to queer history, I nonetheless focus on this subculture because of its distinctive relationship to media and its reversal of the usual projections when it imputes ursine characteristics to humans.

“Timothy Treadwell and Marian Engel: Bears, Humans, and Dangerous Eroticism” offers two stories that, like many others, mix danger and attraction. Treadwell sought salvation among Alaskan grizzlies, yet in the end the result was death not rebirth. Engel’s highly regarded *Bear: A Novel* (1976), like Treadwell’s story, involves emotionally charged, erotic, and violent encounters between a human and a bear. This novel is unusual because while manliness has dominated so many bear stories and men have authored most of the best-known narratives, a woman wrote this one from a feminist perspective.

I end the book with a coda that focuses on Arctic polar bears as symbols of the danger of climate change.

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Notes

PREFACE. POLAR BEARS, FRANZ BOAS, AND ME

1. I am hardly the only person who because of COVID-19 was drawn to bears, as Moses, “Bears Are Having a Moment,” reveals. Throughout the book, I offer only a sampling of the rich writing that has informed what I have written.

2. For commercially oriented discussions of these fetishes, see “Zuni Fetish Meanings,” *Pueblo Direct*, accessed November 5, 2024, <https://www.pueblodirect.com/pages/zuni-fetish-meanings>; and “Zuni Fetish Animal Meanings,” *Sunshine Studios*, accessed November 5, 2024, <https://sunshinestudio.com/pages/zuni-fetishes-animal-meanings>.

3. For an assessment of the impact of the trade in Inuit art on this community, see Porter, “Drawn from Poverty.”

4. For a celebration of the role of beloved stuffed animals in the lives of adults, see Genecov, “Letter of Recommendation.”

5. King, *Gods of the Upper Air*, 29.

6. Boas, *Central Eskimo*, 510, 639. On the relationships between polar bears and the Inuit, see Brunner, *Bears*, 161–69. To learn more about the species, see Fee, *Polar Bear*.

7. “Best of the Western Arctic: Canada and Greenland,” *Adventure Life*, accessed November 5, 2024, <https://www.adventure-life.com/arctic/cruises/13543/best-of-the-western-arctic-canada-and-greenland#overview>.

8. “Why Baffin Island Is Polar Bear Central,” Arctic Kingdom, July 15, 2021, <https://resources.arctickingdom.com/why-baffin-island-is-polar-bear-central/>.

9. Derocher, *Polar Bears*, 1 and 5.

10. McCarthy, “Hank the Tank.”

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1. Among the books that explore the world of bears generally are Brunner, *Bears*; Bieder, *Bear*; Pastoureau, *Bear*; Grimm, *Bear and Human*; Storl, *Bear*; and Dickie, *8 Bears*.

2. Throughout this book, I contrast humans and animals rather than using the terms common in the field of animal studies—human/nonhuman; for a probing discussion of what is involved in such choices, see Fudge, *Animal*, 158–76. Unfortunately, there are not sufficient studies of what audiences—those who read children’s books, watch television and films, go to zoos and theme parks—take away from their engagement with bears. I explore this issue of the relationships between production and consumption of culture in Horowitz, *Consuming Pleasures*.

3. “Lots of Roosevelt Bears.”

4. On a different trajectory, see Ritvo, *Animal Estate*, 2–3; Berger, “Why Look”; Robichaud, *Animal City*, 8; Varga, “Babes.” Wasik and Murphy, *Our Kindred Creatures*, offers a narrative on a different topic and one in which bears are minor characters.

5. Alagona, *Accidental Ecosystem*, 80 and 96. For a less optimistic assessment, see Dax, *Grizzly West*. For the study of the impact of popular media representations, see Kellert, “Public Attitudes.”

6. Douglas and McDonnell, *Celebrity*, 2 and 53; see also especially 1–64, 88–89, and 259–67. See also Marcus, *Drama*.

7. Among discussions of bears’ prominence and resemblance to humans are Shepard and Sanders, *Sacred Paw*, xi and 56; Jans, *Grizzly Maze*, 192 and 204; Shepard, *Others*, 167; Brunner, *Bears*, 1 and 235; and Lepore, “Bear Season.”

8. Mooallem, *Wild Ones*, 67.

9. Simpson, *Dominion*, explores the contrasting ways we understand bears. In *Wild New World*, Flores considers the history of bears, grizzlies especially, on 191–96, 306–7, and 364–65. Rothfels, *Elephant Trail*, focuses on the history of another species, suggesting how they can evoke contradictory emotions, in this case as both monstrous and miraculous beings. Flores, *Coyote America*, offers some discussion of popular expressions after 1950 but focuses principally on the writings of scientists, conservationists, and those interested in public policy. For one of many examples of an author capturing a series of opposing responses to animals, see Joy, *Why*.

10. On this point more generally, see Ritvo, “Calling the Wild,” 105–6.

11. It turns out that even grizzlies are vegetarians: Garcia, “California’s Grizzlies.”

12. “Bear Intelligence,” *Nature*, June 10, 2008, PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/arctic-bears-bear-intelligence/779/>. For discussion of issues involved in understanding the intelligence of animals, see Smith and Mitchell, *Experiencing Animal Minds*. On animals as ethical beings, albeit with only one brief reference to bears, see Crane, *Beastly Morality*. In *Not So Different*, Lents explores similarities between humans and animals on issues such as morality, sex and love, grief, fear, and communication.

13. Brunner, *Bears*, 139; see also 131, 132, and 135. PBS has aired a number of shows that explore the abilities and skills of animals: *The Animal Mind* generally and *Bears* specifically emphasize their curiosity, cunning, adaptability, and ability to learn.

14. Herrero, *Bear Attacks*, 8 and 30. See also Jessica Cockroft, “Bear Attack Statistics,” *BearVault*, August 25, 2023, updated November 14, 2024, <https://bearvault.com/bear-attack-statistics/>.

15. The relevant literature is vast, and in addition to works cited elsewhere among the places to begin are Bekoff, *Emotional Lives*; Tawada, *Memoirs*; Singer, *Animal Liberation*; Desmond, *Displaying Death*; Kalof, *Looking at Animals*; Nance, *Historical Animal*; Haraway, *Haraway Reader*; Wolfe, *Animal Rites*; Wolfe, *Posthumanism*; Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*; Daston and Mitman, *Thinking*; and Parkinson, *Animals*. Gruen, *Critical Terms*, provides a useful introduction to key terms in the field. Godfrey-Smith, “Visible and Invisible,” focuses on some recent findings. For a discussion of current works in the field of animal welfare, see Sanneh, “Beastly Matters.” Among the historians who have followed the call to understand the relationships between human and nonhuman animals in more reciprocal ways are Flores, *Wild New World*; Fudge, *Quick Cattle*; Ritvo, *Noble Cows*; and Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*. Frans de Waal has long been among the most important scholars whose work has focused on the emotional and cognitive capacities of nonhuman animals: *Mama’s Last Hug* and *Are We Smart Enough*. Rose, *In the Hearts*, traces this history up to the end of the twentieth century.

16. Demuth, “Labors of Love,” 272–73nn3–4, points to many of the most recent studies in animal studies, and her *Floating Coast* reveals what it means to recast the history of the relationships between humans and animals within an environmental framework shaped by competition between capitalism and communism. Weil, *Thinking Animals*, provides a probing discussion of key issues confronting anyone interested in taking seriously what it means to think and write about the relationships between human and nonhuman animals. Davis, *Gospel of Kindness*, explores the relationships between concern for the welfare of humans and that of animals. Nance, *Entertaining Elephants*, provides an exemplary approach of how to combine the scientific and the cultural.

17. Reader #1, Duke University Press. For better or worse, I finished my research before I began to use ChatGPT. However, in March 2025 it answered my inquiry “Why are American bears celebrities?” with this:

American bears often become celebrities because of their larger-than-life presence in popular culture, as well as real-world stories that capture the public’s imagination. Here are a few reasons why they achieve celebrity status:

1. Social Media Attention: Bears, particularly ones in specific locations like national parks or wildlife reserves, can become internet sensations. For example, famous bears like “Yogi Bear” or real-life bears like the “Yellowstone Grizzly” get attention through viral social media posts, creating a kind of celebrity status. People enjoy watching bears in their natural habitats, and sometimes they become known for their quirky behaviors or interactions with humans.
2. Cultural Iconography: Bears have a prominent place in American folklore, mythology, and entertainment. Characters like Yogi Bear, Winnie the Pooh, and Smokey the Bear have been part of American childhoods for decades. They are often depicted as friendly, funny, or heroic, and they represent strength, independence, and resilience.
3. Wildlife Conservation Campaigns: Bears, especially endangered species like the polar bear or the grizzly bear, often become symbols for environmental and conservation efforts. These bears sometimes gain celebrity status as part of campaigns

to raise awareness about habitat destruction, climate change, and wildlife preservation.

4. Real-Life Famous Bears: Some individual bears have become famous due to unique, captivating, or tragic events in their lives. For example, the bear known as “Jelly-stone” in the Smoky Mountains became famous for showing up at tourist attractions, while other bears may become famous for surviving in the wild or for notable rescues.
5. Bear in Entertainment: Beyond TV and films, bears are featured prominently in various forms of media, and some even act as mascots. This often helps keep them in the public eye and elevate their status.

So, whether through fiction, real-life stories, or as part of conservation efforts, American bears have an undeniable celebrity quality. ChatGPT, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://chatgpt.com/c/67388279-48e0-8005-b903-4515cb2d07e9>.

18. Among the places to engage issues of anthropomorphism are King, *How Animals Grieve*; and Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*.

19. On the issue of actual versus represented bears, see Boggs, *Animalia Americana*; Sherry Simpson, “The Metaphorical Bear,” by University of Alaska Southeast, May 5, 2010, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68A-UkLKsJA>; Pearson and Weismantel, “Does ‘The Animal’ Exist?,” 17; Chen, *Animacies*; Woods, *Herds Shot*.

20. The literature on conservation and environmentalism is extensive, but good starting points include Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature*; Demuth, *Floating Coast*; and Heise, *Imagining Extinction*.

21. To help avoid essentializing Indigenous peoples and Euro-Americans, albeit focusing on different places and times, see Cooley, *Perfection*; and Kreiner, *Legion of Pigs*. Other than the contribution of Sven Haakanson Jr. discussed in the chapter on gay bears, I have not been able to locate ample discussions of bears by Native American scholars. So I have had to rely on scholarship by others, which is often both useful and influenced by the counterculture and/or spiritualism.

1. FOLKLORIC BEARS AND ACTUAL ONES: SACRED AND PROFANE FROM THE BIBLE TO CONTEMPORARY CELEBRITIES

1. Bieder, *Bear*, 48–101, provides a survey of bears in legends, one that crosses time and cultures. Also offering wide-ranging information on how different times and cultures perceived bears is Brunner, *Bear*, 1–7, 19–35, 77–89, 103–15, and 211–19. Cold Warriors were among those who embraced the view of the Russian bear as dangerous and uncontrollable.

2. Here I am relying on “What Animal Is Mentioned Most Often in the Bible?,” Bible Answer, December 21, 2017, <https://thebibleanswer.org/animal-mentioned-most-often-bible/>.

3. “Ursa Major,” Chandra X-Ray Observatory, accessed November 5, 2024, <https://chandra.harvard.edu/photo/constellations/ursamajor.html>.

4. Shepard and Sanders, *Sacred Paw*, xi.

5. Rockwell, *Giving Voice*, 161. There are many guides to sources on how Native Americans understood bears, but among them are Shepard and Sanders, *Sacred Paw*;