



Book Of Werewolves

Sabine Baring-Gould

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The Book of Were-Wolves, written by legendary author Sabine Baring-Gould is widely considered to be one of the greatest classic and historical texts of all time. This great classic will surely attract a whole new generation of readers. For many, The Book of Were-Wolves is required reading for various courses and curriculums. And for others who simply enjoy reading timeless pieces of classic literature, this gem by Sabine Baring-Gould is highly recommended. Published by Classic Books International and beautifully produced, The Book of Were-Wolves would make an ideal gift and it should be a part of everyone's personal library.

Book Of Werewolves Details

Date : Published (first published 1865)

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Tucker says

Europeans who believed they could shape-shift, generally ate children when in proper form, and were often hanged and burned when found out. Really good stuff.

“Job Fincelius relates the sad story of a farmer of Pavia, who, as a wolf, fell upon many men in the open country and tore them to pieces. After much trouble the maniac was caught, and he then assured his captors that the only difference which existed between himself and a natural wolf, was that in a true wolf the hair grew outward, whilst in him it struck inward. In order to put this assertion to the proof, the magistrates, themselves most certainly cruel and bloodthirsty wolves, cut off his arms and legs; the poor wretch died of the mutilation. This took place in 1541. The idea of the skin being reversed is a very ancient one: *versipellis* occurs as a name of reproach in Petronius, Lucilius, and Plautus, and resembles the Norse *hamrammr*.”

Christopher says

I don't really have much of an interest in the supernatural. I do, however, have an intense interest in others who have an intense interest in the supernatural. A meta-interest, I suppose. I'd love to get to know someone who thinks that the Earth is a hollow shell with spaceships inside. Or someone who believes that there are aliens living in our bodies, causing us pain that can be extracted with an electronic device. Or someone who claims to have exorcised thousands of demons and keeps a possessed doll in his living room and writes terrible books about it all.

So I started reading this as a piece of curio. I thought that Baring-Gould actually believed in werewolves, and for awhile it really seemed that he did. He made statements that "like the dodo or the dinormis, the werewolf may have become extinct in our age, yet he has left his stamp on classic antiquity, he has trodden deep in Northern snows, has ridden rough-shod over the mediævals, and has howled amongst Oriental sepulchres." How fascinating would it be to read a 19th century academic study of werewolves by a man who truly believes in them?

Alas, he doesn't really. He pulled a fast one on me. Baring-Gould is a rationalist, one of the ultra-serious, ultra-scientific men of curiosity. His goal here is to examine all of the appearances of the werewolf in literature and recorded culture and provide a rational explanation. His thesis is that, like all myths, the werewolf is the imaginative explanation for natural phenomena. When our unenlightened, unintelligent forefathers (he doesn't actually use phrases like that, but it's very much implied) saw certain heinous crimes, the only explanation they could come up with is that they were committed by animal-like men.

He makes a good analogy. When we say that we hear thunder rolling, we mean it figuratively. We mean only that the sound of thunder is somewhat like the sound of something rolling. (Honestly, I'm not sure I hear the resemblance, but the point is, it's figurative language.) Our pagan ancestors meant it literally. When they heard thunder, they knew it was because the chariot of the gods was rolling by in the sky above. Werewolves are a similar phenomenon. When we hear of a hideous murder, especially one involving something so horrid as cannibalism, we may liken the murderer to a wolf. Our predecessors, however, lacking psychological or

any other explanation for such an atrocity, may theorize the literal transformation of the murderer from human to wolf.

His research is quite impressive. The first half of the book is an exhaustive record of werewolf myths throughout the world. (It's also the most interesting part of the book.) He traces them through ancient Indian, Nordic, Greek, and medieval European cultures. And he did so in 1865, twenty-five years before James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, from which he certainly could have gleaned all of his information if it had existed.

The first two-thirds of the book is fairly riveting. However, in the final part, he investigates contemporary murders and explains how they could be interpreted as the crimes of a werewolf. He gets bogged down in specifics and it becomes a tedious affair.

I'd recommend a perusal of the early parts of this book simply for its curiousness. I've never read anything quite like it.

Suvi says

The structure and topics are uneven, which makes the title a bit misleading. First the author lists different mythologies and folklore (the most interesting part), but then he somehow connects Gilles de Rais to the werewolf myth without ever explaining why he chose this particular historical figure. There's very little of the author's original thoughts or arguments among the recounts of folklore and criminal cases. As interesting (and disgusting) as these cases of cannibalism and corpse mutilators are, some of them are quite a stretch to be linked to the werewolf myth. However, as a reference book this is quite useful and a must read for everyone interested in werewolves.

F.R. says

A frustrating read. Not so frustrating as to make me tear off my clothes and howl wildly at the moon, but frustrating nonetheless.

Sabine Baring-Gould relates various werewolf tales from myth and legend, and then fits into a 19th century idea of mental illness. It's a good idea, disproving supernatural werewolves while still bringing together every single werewolf story to exist in Europe. That's called having your unsuspecting traveller under the moonlight, and devouring him. But it doesn't quite work. No matter who the writer, werewolf tale next to werewolf tale is going to become wearing, and Baring-Gould – even in one volume – proves himself to be a distinctly variable writer. When he gets her teeth into a tale he really can make it scary and dramatic and truly gripping, Unfortunately, he only manages to land his teeth on a few stories here and the rest are averagely and even flatly told – or quoted at length from other sources – and so the whole becomes a disjointed mess.

There is some interesting stuff here, but this is frequently not a particularly interesting book.

Auntie Terror says

Many thanks to the ardent readers at librivox.

This book is not a novel. If it weren't for the werewolves, I'd class it as a historical overview. For it is a collection of myths, folklore and cases surrounding the werewolf.

As werewolves get a lot less coverage than vampires for being less glamorous, I was very happy to have discovered this.

Octavia Cade says

First published in 1865, this really interesting study on the werewolf is notable for what it doesn't show. Ask a random person on the street today what they know about werewolves, and the answer will generally involve silver bullets and a full moon, but the mythos of earlier centuries is very different indeed.

Baring-Gould's assessment of the phenomenon comes from a place of rationalism - it is clear he ascribes symptoms of lycanthropy to mental illness rather than supernatural effect. However the folklore, legends and myths of lycanthropy - and how they appear in history (in the recorded criminal trials of those affected, for example) - describe populations and cultures where this rationalism was very far from a satisfactory explanation for the people involved.

Vinnie says

The main problem with this book is that is horribly misnamed. It should be called "The Book of Cannibals". I was looking for some werewolf mythology maybe some background and origins and instead I get this detailed account of historical cannibals.

In the beginning there are a few instances where the cannibal in question believed or was believed to be a werewolf or at the very least, a shapeshifter of some sort. But by the end of the book there is three chapters in one man who liked to chop up little children because he read somewhere that certain Roman Caesars use to engage in the activity. What does that have to do with werewolves? Nothing.

The author believes that lycanthropy, as a sickness of the mind, is real. That some people are deluded enough to believe they are werewolves. He also believes that folklore has been exaggerated or misinterpreted. I can accept that point of view. But this book is about cannibals. Some of those cannibals believed to be werewolves, others had no association to the word whatsoever.

Nathan Shumate says

Baring-Gould spends too much time discussing "straight" serial killers of antiquity (related to his thesis that some werewolf legends were simply started by what we would today call bloodthirsty sociopaths), but this survey of the common threads of werewolf legends -- that they were evil people and devil worshipers who were granted the ability to transform at will -- is a necessary corrective to both the Hollywood notion of the infected man who is a slave to the full moon, and the current urban fantasy conception of lycanthropes as a distinct shapeshifting species.

Cwn_annwn_13 says

Written in the 1860's but still holding up to the test of time this book ranks as a classic of European lore on lycanthropy/shapeshifting in particular pertaining to werewolves. Worth its weight in gold just for the two chapters on Scandinavian wolf lore, and the idea that the viking berserkers were werewolves/shapeshifters. But besides that there is plenty of folklore on werewolves/shapeshifting in eastern Europe, France, and various other places in Europe. Also historical documentation of medieval serial killers who were alleged to be werewolves is recounted, as well as Baring-Goulds own encounters with local werewolf legends that had people in fear to go in the woods alone in various locales in France that he visited. The only fault I see with this book is that even though for a book written when it was it really covers a lot of bases the vast amount of Celtic shapeshifting/werewolf lore that exists is not included. Regardless this book still remains a timeless classic work.

Ignacio Senao f says

Cuando llevas pocas páginas te preguntas ¿Por qué esta en Valdemar Gótica? Pues es un ensayo del hombre lobo, debería haberlo metido en Intempestivas. Error.

Es cierto que el autor hace un recorrido por distintas épocas y zonas. Y nos muestra que el concepto es distinto según siglo o latitudes. Pero aquí viene lo interesante: nos narra historias por la que se llevo a ese concepto de "Hombre Lobo".

Estos relatos breves son terroríficos y aún más sabiendo que no es ficción del ator, sino que es la información que ha recopilado por distintos medios. Encontramos desde personas que desmiembran, coleccionan seres humanos. Vampiros-hombres lobos. Asesinos en serie.

Nunca me ha resultado terrorífico este monstruo, un perrito grande llega al punto de ternura por muy rabioso que sea. Pero vete a otras leyendas, y luego échate a dormir.

Gary says

This is a very dry read, and you have to really want to know about werewolves to slog through it, but it is full of some very gruesome stories, indeed. Of course, "gruesome" is in the eye of the beholder. The author wrote this at around the time of the civil war in the United States, and what was considered too horrible to be printed then would be put in children's books now. (I exaggerate, but only just.)

I read this book for reference, and will probably refer to it as a source for werewolf and other were-animal stories when the fancy strikes.

If you can find an actual written copy, you'd be better off. The e-book is riddled with transcription errors that probably occurred when the original was scanned using OCR. It often turns 'e' into 'a' or 'o', as well as making other strange substitutions. Which is sometimes easy to catch when the author is writing in English, but almost impossible to catch when he is writing in German, Greek, French, or Latin.

If nothing else, I've found a treasure trove of names, dates, places, and events to research separately.

S.M. says

This was quite a trip. Winding and occasionally racist, and it likely didn't help that the free edition I downloaded from the B&N nook store was poorly formatted. It's interesting, and I appreciated several key things about it--its age, its statements as to what educated people believed at the time of the writing, the fact that most original texts were presented alongside their translations.

It might be short, but it's a slog and it's not for the faint of heart. The last quarter of the book is only tangentially about werewolves. I wouldn't have gotten all the way through it if I didn't need to for grad school.

Dfordoom says

Sabine Baring-Gould's *Book of Werewolves* (which was recommended to me by several people here) was originally published in 1865. Baring-Gould treats the phenomenon of the werewolf as a psychological aberration, as essentially a delusional state. He also relates it to cannibalism, and seems to see at least some of those so afflicted as being what we today would call serial killers. He also links it to the behaviour of the notorious Norse berserkers, who would suffer from an insane battle rage. His speculations on the origin the various names by which werewolves were known in different European languages is intriguing, especially the idea that the term may derive from a word for an outlaw, a man condemned effectively to run with the wolves. He has plenty of interesting Scandinavian folklore and legends on the subject in the book, and also a chilling account of the career and crimes of the infamous Gilles de Retz (or Gilles de Rais), the 15th century French nobleman who murdered hundreds of children. I'm not sure exactly how he saw the connection between de Retz and werewolves, but it's interesting anyway. A fascinating little book.

Mike says

This is probably the most famous of Sabine Baring-Gould's many nonfiction books. While many of the others cover esoteric topics of local folklore and Church history, it is no surprise that this one still attracts modern readers. It is one of the first and still one of the best books on the topic, and is such a standard reference that many later books on werewolves and lycanthropy owe a great deal to his work. In fact the Wikipedia article on werewolves appears, to me, to paraphrase a fair amount of Baring-Gould's exposition on werewolves and lycanthropy in Scandinavian sagas as well as the paragraphs on werewolves and vlkodlak in Hungary and the Balkans.

Baring-Gould attempts at least three tasks: to summarize folklore and beliefs about werewolves and related phenomena; to collect specific cases from ancient, medieval, and modern histories; and to explain the origins of the beliefs and demythologize the superstition. (It's kind of surprising that feels the need to argue the point, but he published this book in 1865 and there were still records of werewolves in living memory at that time; indeed he recounts being warned against werewolves during his own travels in France.)

These tasks do not entirely determine the structure of the book -- he also attempts to give the legends in chronological order, so that the first third of the book looks at linguistic/philological evidence to understand

the legends, and also gives a fairly exhaustive report of instances of men and women assuming the shapes of animals in European literature as well as briefer accounts of similar stories from around the world. He includes stories of physical transformations alongside stories of metempsychosis (the transmigration of the soul into another body) as well as legends where the transformation is only illusory. Baring-Gould gives particular attention to the Scandinavian sagas and mythology, devoting two whole chapters on them. I found a lot of interesting stuff there.

The next third of the book, covering the middle ages and more modern times, focuses on the details of how one becomes a werewolf, how they can be identified, and how the affliction might be cured. Various legends of skin-changers, shape-shifters, and the like are mentioned, with a fair amount of detail on North American native legends, as well as a few legal/criminal cases in early modern times and the reports of witch-finders like Bodin.

The final third of the book is devoted to the “natural” causes of beliefs in lycanthropy, an inventive theory tying lycanthropy legends to legends of ogres and dragons and the meteorological origins of all three(!), and finally longer accounts of cannibalism and serial killing. This book is also thought to be the first to articulate the idea that werewolf legends arose from incidents of serial murders. (However Baring-Gould is writing at a time before “serial killers” were identified as a kind of pathological type, and he just sees sociopathy as part of a continuum of human cruelty and violence -- we all have cruel, violent impulses and some people just act on the worst impulses while most others do not. Maybe the fact that he was an Anglican priest led him to the view that all people are equally capable of sin and evil?) Baring-Gould gives what he says is the first English account of the horrible crimes of Gilles de Rais, expurgated of the most heinous details. While later writers have sometimes attempted to exonerate Gilles de Rais, it is hard not to conclude that he was what we'd call a serial killer today; it is especially disturbing that the power, wealth, and prestige he wielded allowed him to carry out his crimes so openly for years. More stories of cannibalism and murder are presented to give further credence to Baring-Gould's theory that the werewolf legends were simply an attempt to explain the most horrible acts of men.

April-Jane Rowan says

This book was really interesting. It explores how fables of lycanthropy started, detailing different cultures' history and beliefs, showing how each one could have over time been twisted into stories of men turning into beasts. It also gives account of people that hunger for human flesh, becoming animalistic and labelled as 'wolves'. Some of the fables were really cool and I was especially pleased to learn more about Bluebeard, a man whose own story has also been altered over time.

It was a real shame that it wasn't reprinted with its original illustrations despite saying so on the version I read.
