



Lesser Beasts: A Snout-to-Tail History of the Humble Pig

Mark Essig

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Unlike other barnyard animals, which pull plows, give eggs or milk, or grow wool, a pig produces only one thing: meat. Incredibly efficient at converting almost any organic matter into nourishing, delectable protein, swine are nothing short of a gastronomic godsend—yet their flesh is banned in many cultures, and the animals themselves are maligned as filthy, lazy brutes.

As historian Mark Essig reveals in *Lesser Beasts*, swine have such a bad reputation for precisely the same reasons they are so valuable as a source of food: they are intelligent, self-sufficient, and omnivorous. What's more, he argues, we ignore our historic partnership with these astonishing animals at our peril. Tracing the interplay of pig biology and human culture from Neolithic villages 10,000 years ago to modern industrial farms, Essig blends culinary and natural history to demonstrate the vast importance of the pig and the tragedy of its modern treatment at the hands of humans. Pork, Essig explains, has long been a staple of the human diet, prized in societies from Ancient Rome to dynastic China to the contemporary American South. Yet pigs' ability to track down and eat a wide range of substances (some of them distinctly unpalatable to humans) and convert them into edible meat has also led people throughout history to demonize the entire species as craven and unclean. Today's unconscionable system of factory farming, Essig explains, is only the latest instance of humans taking pigs for granted, and the most recent evidence of how both pigs and people suffer when our symbiotic relationship falls out of balance.

An expansive, illuminating history of one of our most vital yet unsung food animals, *Lesser Beasts* turns a spotlight on the humble creature that, perhaps more than any other, has been a mainstay of civilization since its very beginnings—whether we like it or not.

Lesser Beasts: A Snout-to-Tail History of the Humble Pig Details

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From Reader Review Lesser Beasts: A Snout-to-Tail History of the Humble Pig for online ebook

Cree says

I always thought pigs were interesting creatures. Now I know they are. it is fascinating to know that Pigs have always been the O.Gs. They been holding humans down for centuries.

Jessica says

Accessible and fascinating history of the pig and pork. A tad repetitious for the first bit - human culture kept repeating itself so it's hard to avoid - but the timeline moves along at a good pace. Lots of interesting tidbits that most readers won't know and a few interesting illustrations accompany the text. This isn't a "morality" book like, say, Foer's Eating Animals or Omnivore's Dilemma, but it certainly will make anyone think about this animal and how we, as a culture, treat it. Very easy to read and a good one for natural and anthropological history buffs as well as any foodie, farmer, or ecologist's shelf.

Jessika says

Look, I picked this book up for the most superficial of reasons: I liked the cover. But since I am trying to broaden my reading, this was seemed a good fit. And wow. I was so pleasantly surprised by how accessible and honest-to-god enjoyable this was to read. Essig has a wonderful, conversational style that made reading this a true joy.

Essig does highlight the religious angle, but he teases out the more interesting relationships between pork and social class and personal freedom. When lower class have more access to pork, the elite shun it. When pork is scarce, the elite are all about it. When the poor can provide their own food, the rich get concerned and pass laws to control that shit. It's really fascinating.

And did you know pigs were HANGED LIKE CRIMINALS? I DIDN'T. I also didn't know that pigs had a track record of breaking into houses and biting children, so. Learning something new everyday.

Jean says

The dog and pig domesticated themselves. In the distant past, wild pigs came into early human settlements and stayed. Pre-Christian European societies loved the pig. Move into the desert areas and the pig was shunned. In England there were penalties for destroying oak trees as acorns made the best pig food.

What I found most interesting was the early European explorers would drop a boar and sow on an uninhabited island to make it into a future food supply stop. The Spanish conquistadores introduced pigs to South American. Essig claims it was the pig that allowed China to feed its massive population.

Essig not only covers the history of the pig but the anatomy, physiology, factory farming and the culinary arts of the pig. The book is well written and research. It provides all you would ever want to know about the pig in an entertaining and educational manner. Essig also reviews the religious views of the pig throughout history. I know that Winston Churchill is the most quoted person in the world, but I never expected to find a quote from him in a book like this. The quote is "A dog looks up to you, a cat looks down at you, but the pig looks you in the eye and treats you like an equal." This book was a delight to read.

Joe Barrett does a good job narrating the book. Barrett is an actor and award winning audiobook narrator.

Rolando Beramendi says

I am a "Porketarian", and Mark's book makes me love the Pig even more. His research is so thorough and his narrative is so personal, I felt I was sitting with him or listening to him speak to us as he did at Zingerman's Camp Bacon two years ago. I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in history, anthropology and animal husbandry. He made me quite aware that rich farmers and big corporations are feeding the poor people, while small farmers sell theirs at farmers markets for four times the price of Walmart, and they are struggling... and only rich people can afford it!

This book will sit right next to SALT, and COD, since my interest is on food and ingredients. Let's hope many people will read it, so that we can have more "Virtuous Carnivores" as he calls us and continue to preserve the pork's ability to "divide"!

Bravissimo Mark!

Aaron says

This book is legitimately good and its kind of weird that I read it. Pigs are these really cool animals and we probably shouldn't eat them anymore.

Mahlon says

I thought this work would be more about cooking and eating pigs(which I like very much) instead there was much more pig Biology then I was expecting, but if you like pig Biology this may be the book for you.

John says

I listened to this book on Audible. Perfect for those who like to listen to non-fiction. The book is what it purports to be: a history of the pig from earliest times to the present. The book discusses the pig's earliest role in keeping early settlements free from garbage, its as a food source for the poor, the Roman's love of pork, and the role of pigs in settling and feeding America. The author primarily limits his discussion to the role of the pig in the west, although he provides some anecdotes about pork production in the far east. I don't think there was any question I ever had about pigs that was not answered in this book.

The book ultimately ends with the age of modern industrial pork production, which is depressing. But the author correctly points out the dilemma -- "humane" pork or inexpensive pork? -- and notes that pork producers are slowly making improvements. Your take on this probably depends on whether you like bacon.

Dead John Williams says

Dear Pig are you willing to sell for one shilling your ring?

The complete history of the pig. How the pig has fed us, delighted us, assisted us, repelled us, and finally shamed us. Reminded me very much of Cod by Mark Kurlansky in that it is very thorough, well written and engaging from the get go. The pig through the ages and how it has adapted to everything we have asked of it. How it helped us conquer the West and the East and the North and the South. How the pig has marched beside us on our genocidal forays to other lands. How other creatures perished in the heat and humidity or the cold but not old pig.

How pig has come to be reviled by religions and lauded by farmers.

There is a lot in this book and I was dreading the end because it is inevitable when laying out how this animal has served human kind so well and for so long that its present state has to be told as well.

And what do we do to thank the pig for its eons of faithful service? We keep it in metal cages where it is unable to turn, lay or even shake its head. And we do this knowing that pigs are highly intelligent, social creatures. What does that make us? and who really are the lesser beasts?

A brilliant read!

Michael Flanagan says

A book on the history of the pigs, how can one resist the powerful pull of such a book? The answer for me was I could not and I was rewarded by one of the best reads of the year for me.

Lesser Beasts is one of those books that is perfect in everyway it is history at its engaging best. By telling the story of the pig Mark Essig also piggy backs the story of the human race in it's telling. By tracking the evolution of the pig and its relationship to humanity it examines, religion, farming practices, economics and sociology.

My view of the pig has been for ever changed I know have much respect from this lesser beast. This respect though will not stop me eating bacon but I will chose my pork products more carefully from now on. If you are looking for a awesome read that is left of centre than absolutely read this book.

Amanda says

The title says all you need to know about the subject of this book.

Essig has written an witty, interesting, intelligent and ultimately confronting book on our tasty friends.

While they have been with us for millennia, often in very close quarters, they have been loved and shunned

in equal measure. Now, unfortunately, they are largely abused and mistreated due to the industrial production systems which give us cheap pork, at the cost of the the pig's welfare, well-being and 'pigness'. Though Essig's writing is frequently amusing, at this stage there is nothing for those of use with any concern for the proper treatment of animals to laugh at. But maybe that will change.

Lisa Kelsey says

I enjoy reading these "micro-histories" and since this one involved an animal--one that you can eat, it combines two of my greatest interests. I was fascinated with the story of how pigs were domesticated and co-evolved with humans in some ways similarly to dogs. Because of their nature however, pigs are unique among domesticated farm animals. Essig does a great job of describing just why that is, much of it having to do with the fact that they are omnivorous--and pretty smart.

I learned a lot of interesting--often disturbing--things about these animals, including the changing historical attitudes towards them (often based in religion but also in social ways), their role in driving Native Americans off their lands, and how taking away access to raising them was used to control freed slaves and poor whites in the South after the civil war.

Essig very skillfully leads the reader right up to the present, in the later chapters turning to the problematic ways pigs are being bred and raised in this country. There is hope for a change to more humane methods here, but unfortunately in China where pork consumption is soaring, the practices are moving in the opposite direction.

This book is interesting and fun to read, but as someone who eats pork, it also gives me pause. It certainly makes me want to cut down on or buy only humanely raised pork.

Andy says

These single-topic books like Salt: A World History are hit or miss. This one's a hit. It stays interesting from beginning to end by not getting bogged down anywhere too long. It ends up with a middle of the road conclusion that I think would be very reasonable movement forward from where we are now with industrial pig farming.

Zach says

A good look at the political economy and environmental history of pigs. I learned so much about pigs! And about how closely their fates and ours have entwined.

The book is really strong when it's doing class-aware analysis of pig-eating throughout time. I'm sad to say that I knew so little about the important role that pigs played in traditional farm (and, over time, urban) life as the receptacles for all manner of waste. The book reminded me of the significant differences between pigs and nearly all other domestic farm animals, and reaffirmed my belief that they are far more clever than most give them credit for. (And that they likely have emotional lives of their own, a current in animal history that I

wish Essig went into a little more.)

While other books have walked through the ethical minefield of meat eating, Essig takes a political economy approach, and focuses his attention (and some needed alarm) at how market capitalism has remade the cultural practice of pig-eating from something that was once an ethical compromise in a harsh world into a regime bordering on nihilism.

My only critique is that the author should have used the opportunity to inveigh more forcefully against the current abhorrent way in which millions of pigs suffer and die. Though all the tales of how human societies related to pigs in the past are really amazing and can and should shed light on and inspire current modes of husbandry, the fact is: ethical carnism does not exist in late capitalism. Any demand for meat feeds directly into a market almost entirely controlled by vertically integrated confinement operations. The author's final thoughts in the book are elegantly stated -- we must learn to accept higher prices for animal welfare -- but after learning all I did in this book about pigs and their lives, I can't help but feeling that calling for a higher price on their meat as your parting thought somehow, well, misses the whole point.

Daniel says

This has to be one of the best and most engaging books I've read this year. It was well-written, and flowed in a logical and easy to read way. The information was well researched and drawn from a variety of sources. The author managed do this while putting his unique spin on the book and without making the book dry, which so often happens with cultural histories. I have already recommended this book to family and friends and will continue to do so.
