

***Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power, and Popular Culture.* By Jane Caputi. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. Pp 468, ISBN 0-299-19624-0)**

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better than suburbs on an objective scale of human habitation? The silences beg the basic question, “Can an escapist stick and ball game accurately gauge authenticity?”

Retro Ball Parks is an interesting but ultimately unsatisfying study. Considering contemporary baseball’s immersion in a neo-liberal economy where corporate mobility and profit margins preclude social spending, the topic deserves a fuller economic and historical treatment. A relatively brief, single case study cannot be convincing on the controversial points Rosensweig pursues, unless the reader is convinced before opening the book.

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There are certain works that are considered classics when it comes to interpreting mythology in the context of culture; Sir James G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, for example, or Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. It has long been recognized, however, that these classics tended to reflect a very Western, white, straight male-centric point of view, to the exclusion of all others. Also, these works focused on things of the past rather than more modern culture. They lose a large degree of their relevance now that the majority of Westerners no longer receive a classical (or even Biblical) education.

Since the end of the Second World War, however, there has been a concerted effort to draw links between our contemporary culture and those of the past. Some scholars have taken advantage of the interest in such modern mythologies as Tolkien’s Middle-Earth or Lucas’ “galaxy far, far away” to reintroduce the ancient stories, albeit with a different interpretation. Other scholars, such as Marshall McLuhan, have also taken on the formidable task of interpreting today’s culture in a mythological way. *Goddesses and Monsters* is one such work.

Jane Caputi is a renowned feminist scholar who has published works on a wide variety of subjects, from sex crimes to reclaiming language. She is currently a professor of women's studies and communication at Florida Atlantic University. Her latest work is actually a collection of essays that she has published in a diverse number of journals, including the *Journal of Popular Film and Feminist Studies*. These essays take a number of popular culture "icons" and interpret them from a feminist perspective. The result is a collection of postmodern "takes" on (primarily) North American culture and society and the grim issues that lie below the surface, such as sexism, racism, and even capitalism. The overarching theme of *Goddess and Monsters* is that ancient mythologies and prejudices are very much alive in our society, despite our attempts to disassociate ourselves from them. We link images of nuclear explosions with acts of God. We reproduce ancient images in advertising campaigns. Everything old is new again, but that does not mean it needs to be that way.

It is easy to accept some of Caputi's arguments. For example, the chapter that suggests that *Sleeping with the Enemy* is the sequel of *Pretty Woman* is a fascinating piece of work. It is amazing to see the parallels between the two films: both star Julia Roberts as a woman in trouble (a prostitute in *Pretty Woman*, a battered wife on the run in *Sleeping with the Enemy*). The Richard Gere character in *Pretty Woman* could clearly become the Patrick Bergin character in *Sleeping with the Enemy*. The fairy tale could easily become the nightmare. It would have been interesting, however, to compare the two films starring Jennifer Lopez (i.e., *Maid in Manhattan* and *Enough*) which follow similar patterns and plotlines to those discussed.

Another equally fascinating essay examines the idolization of Diana Spencer during her term as Princess of Wales, and her virtual deification after her death. Caputi recognizes that Diana was placed into a religious framework as the "people's princess", but focuses instead on the parallels between Princess Diana and the ancient Goddess Diana. Both are associated with the symbols of the heart and the rose. Both were reviled by their respective patriarchal cultures. Both were universally popular among "the people". Perhaps, as Caputi argues, the new Diana has stepped into the place of the old as part of a new pantheon.

Some of Caputi's interpretations are more difficult to accept. She has a very psychoanalytical view of movies like *Jaws*, where she draws

an analogy between the shark and female genitalia, namely the vagina dentate or “toothed vagina”. Caputi also suggests that the movie “emerges as a full-blown male nightmare, not only of castration, but also of abortion” (29). This is rather difficult to accept. It seems highly unlikely that either Steven Spielberg (the director) or Peter Benchley (the author of the original book) approached *Jaws* in that context. *Jaws* is about the triumph of man over beast. For some scholars, including Caputi, this is only the first step in analysis: man triumphs over nature. Nature is female, therefore *Jaws* is really about the triumph of man over woman. But here we get into an interesting problem. The majority of viewers saw the movie from the same viewpoint as Spielberg and Benchley. Perhaps sometimes a shark is just a shark.

One aspect of *Goddesses and Monsters* that made me particularly uncomfortable was the use of explicit language, particularly when describing female anatomy. I certainly do not dispute Caputi’s right to use whatever language she wishes in her work. Nor do I feel that her book should be censored. The language does, however, have the potential to limit the audience. Some may be repelled, not by the ideas presented, but by the lack of euphemism. I realize that scholars such as Caputi would point to this as an example of what is wrong with our society, but *Goddesses and Monsters* is really not the sort of book one can feel completely comfortable reading on a bus.

Yet it is an important book precisely because it challenges conventional viewpoints. Caputi is not afraid to write frankly and clearly, and *Goddesses and Monsters* is clearly intended to make the reader think. She presents some interesting (and sometimes shocking) arguments about visual culture in North America. Some readers may find that the book contains a few leaps of logic, but that is likely a matter of personal belief, rather than what is actually written. If you keep an open mind, you will find that this book takes you on an interesting, albeit unconventional, journey through our culture.

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