

Review:

Marilyn Lichtman

Donald K. Sharpes (2006). Sacred Bull, Holy Cow: A Cultural Study of Civilization's Most Important Animal. New York: Peter Lang, 302 pages, Cloth (ISBN 0-8204-7902-0), \$77.95

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Abstract: From drawings in prehistoric caves to fast food hamburgers, SHARPES takes the reader on a journey across the world and over time. He weaves his vast knowledge of religion, history and cultural practices with concrete examples drawn from his experiences to help us understand the "human context of the cow". He argues that cattle are an indispensable part of civilized life. The author brings humor and an engaging style coupled with detailed notes and references to his unusual topic.

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1. Introduction

I always thought that my selection of books to read covered a fairly diverse range of topics. On a scholarly level, I engage in reading books related to methodology and content. When reading fiction, I am drawn to tightly wrought spy novels. When reading about art, I am partial to contemporary criticism or biography. I will have to admit, however, that I have never read a book about a cow—or a bull. I suspect that you haven't either. I didn't even know that anyone had written about the topic. Yet SHARPES' book contains some thirteen pages of references. So I decided that the topic was one for serious consideration. I anticipated becoming more knowledgeable, but I didn't expect to be provided with such a vast spectrum of information. Make no mistake; SHARPES is a serious scholar with a wide international reputation. As a philosopher and student of the foundations of education, he has written extensively about teacher education (see SHARPES, 2001). He is currently working on a study of Danish teacher attitudes toward the integration of Muslim immigrants. [1]

In the pages of this book, you will learn about the taming of the bull and the domestication of the cow and their importance from a cultural viewpoint. He suggests that an animal that we take for granted—and that some of us come in contact with on a daily basis—actually has played a critical role in diverse

cultures, religions and social milieus. His widespread examples, covering the globe, help to buttress his argument. [2]

We learn that Cro-Magnon man represented the cow in their early cave drawings some 30,000 years ago. SHARPES makes such an example come to life as he relates a story about his visit to a cave in the Dordogne region of southern France. I, too, marveled at the depiction of such animals and how these early artists made use of the natural contours of the caves in their quite beautiful representations. While the caves I visited in 2006 were not the same as those described in the book, the representations were all too realistic. I wondered whether and why these animals were chosen to be depicted by early man. Could they have been revered as some magical or mystical beings? SHARPES is careful not to provide too many answers. In fact, he raises more questions and provides more information, rather than providing answers. [3]

The first five chapters cover the topic from a historical perspective. We are taken to the birthplace of Western civilization—through Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome. In each of these chapters, SHARPES provides a mix of stories, poetry and art. If you are detail-oriented, you will marvel at the range of information he offers. His visits to many of these places are enhanced by his own photographs showing the bull or cow in either a religious or ceremonial situation. As the evidence mounts, you are led to wonder why the bull is considered sacred. I don't think the question is ever directly answered, however. [4]

I found chapter four quite interesting in its many examples drawn from classical Greek studies and literature. These instances illustrate the wide use of the bull and cow in art, myths and literature. SHARPES builds his case for the importance of the bull with numerous details. I suspect that the average adult or school child in the United States would not have been exposed to most of these examples. It is quite interesting to read some of the poetry and reflect on these long forgotten myths. He concludes the chapter by reflecting on the extent to which Greek civilization has had such a deep influence on all that followed. [5]

While education in the United States may have had as its foundation a study of the classics, in more recent years, education has emphasized practical application. Unfortunately, I believe that the former now often takes a back seat to the latter. In fact, many students have only a fleeting taste of the classics. While some students learn mythology, its relationship to modern life is often touched upon only in passing. I disagree with SHARPES that "Greek literature, its legends, dramas ... and Homeric epics became the core of secondary and collegiate education in the early renaissance ... until the latter part of the 20th century" (p.80). Perhaps it is wishful thinking on his part, but in my experience in American schools in the last thirty years or so, such a classical education is sorely lacking. Whether such an education is available to students is perhaps less important than the point he makes that the Greeks used stories of bulls in poetry, allegories, literature and paintings. And because we have so much knowledge of Greek civilization, its influence has been far-ranging. He uses this idea as a segue into the chapter about the bull in Rome and medieval times. [6]

The following four chapters lead us back to the United States, beginning with the American bison. It was a sad a time in US history when, as settlers moved west, bison herds were decimated. SHARPES doesn't explore the controversy between Native Americans and white settlers that surrounded the destruction of the buffalo, but a PBS documentary vividly describes how millions of buffalo were killed by trappers and traders, commercial killers, and even tourists shooting from their trains. BIERSTADT (1888) tells the story vividly in his epic oil painting, [Last of the Buffalo](#), which hangs in the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. In 1872, for example, 1,5 million buffalo hides were shipped eastward. [7]

Drawing us into the present, SHARPES provides interviews with some of the more colorful characters who were involved with buffalo. He makes use of stories—some factual, but, I suspect, many embellished by time and selective memory. He also includes a chapter on the mad cow disease that first appeared in the US in 2003. Readers from Britain will remember its outbreak there a few years earlier. Finally, the book ends with examples drawn from Africa, India, Latin America and Asia. [8]

2. Why Read About the Bull/Cow?

I asked myself this question when I began the book. What possible significance or interest could the bull or cow have in our lives? Are there other animals that have been used so pervasively in so many cultures? So I began my search on the Internet. I started with the horse. The first item I located was The International Museum of the Horse. Located in Lexington, Kentucky (Kentucky is known for horse racing), this museum mounted an exhibit covering a 3,000-year period of Chinese history exploring the role of the horse. According to their website, "more than 350 artifacts not only illuminated the horse's significance in art, warfare, leisure activities and sport, but also showed how this interaction affected the overall culture." Unlike the buffalo or bison, the horse did not become extinct as it was prized for racing and warfare. I am not suggesting that the horse should take precedence over the cow; I only mention it because I wanted to see if other animals took such a valued place in history. [9]

The book certainly demonstrates that the bull/cow plays an important role as a food source—in spite of the potential problems with mad cow disease and the growing interest in healthy and low fat sources of food. Further, depictions of the bull/cow in ancient painting and sculpture were of special interest to me. That the author had taken these photographs himself is direct evidence of his long interest in the topic. [10]

3. Important Contributions

You might wonder why and in what way this book might be of interest to the readership of *FQS*. It is, first of all, a work of scholarship. By taking a popular and unusual topic, however—the bull and cow—it appears to be somewhat beyond our immediate interest. Most of the content of our books is devoted either to methodology or to the study of human interactions. This book is neither. Yet, I think that this book fits somewhere in the niche between FERRIERES' (2005) scholarly contribution regarding the cow and food and RATH's (1998) humorous history of the cow. You may be stimulated by it to read more about the cow as well as to read about the history of other important animals throughout the civilized world. [11]

There is no doubt that SHARPES is a scholar, as the book is replete with numerous details, footnotes and an extensive reference list. He obviously had a tremendous task before him. Collecting information for about twenty years, he was faced with determining in what ways the information should be organized and presented. He takes you on a journey around the world and across time. Obviously, he has been to many of these locations himself, all of which lends credibility to the account. In some ways, SHARPES comes across as a qualitative researcher. He blends a mixture of detailed interviews, first-hand accounts, photographic evidence and historical scholarship into a tale that becomes immediate and important to the reader. [12]

4. A Wish List

Now for some suggestions. I wanted this book to be edited and focused. I found myself reading many details that did not necessarily move the argument forward. Some times, I was not sure why they were included. For example, Chapter Seven takes us into the history of the West. Why are brief biographies of almost a dozen men included? For me these details took away from the thesis of the book. It did not help me to read that Horace Greeley founded *The New Yorker*—"a weekly magazine devoted to literature, the arts and sciences, which proved unsuccessful finally" (p.133). I am mindful of GEERTZ' (1973) emphasis on "thick description" but in this case the detail does not always enhance the read and I found it distracting. What role did all of these men play in the history of the bull? By including so many tangentially or irrelevant details, I think the author reduced the overall effectiveness of his presentation. [13]

SHARPES suggests that his book represents a cultural study. Although I think he addresses some ideas in the introduction and epilogue, I believe that the book would be stronger if linkages were made throughout the book. What does he mean by culture? Is he referring to art, music and literature? Or is a broader meaning implied? I am not sure. That the cow and bull are depicted so widely across time and around the world is evident from the vast detail that he presents. But what am I, the reader, to make of this? [14]

This book takes us on a journey so familiar yet so unexpected. Almost all of us have eaten a cow, worn something made from cowhide and seen a cow. We have used many expressions with the terms "cow" or "bull" as a part of them. As I read the book, I found myself recalling sayings, songs or phrases with the terms. I suspect that this will happen to you as well! [15]

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Author

[Marilyn LICHTMAN](#) retired as a professor of educational research and evaluation from Virginia Tech, Falls Church and Blacksburg, Virginia. She has taught qualitative research methods for more than a dozen years. Sage published her recent book, *Qualitative Research in Education*, in 2006. Her research interests involve alternative methods of teaching qualitative research. She serves on the editorial boards of *FQS* and *The Qualitative Report*. She is completing her 14th year as a docent at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, one of the oldest private art museums in the United States where she conducts tours for children and adults. LICHTMAN visited a number of prehistoric caves in the Dordogne in 2006 where she saw firsthand examples of bison discussed by SHARPES. In previous *FQS* issues Marilyn LICHTMAN reviewed [Reworking Qualitative Data](#) (by HEATON 2005), [The NVivo Qualitative Project Book](#) (by BAZELEY & RICHARDS 2000) and [Visual Methodologies](#) (by ROSE 2001).

Contact:

Marilyn Lichtman

Educational Research and Evaluation
College of Education, Virginia Tech
5809 Nicholson Lane, #511, Rockville, MD
20852, USA

E-mail: mlichtma@vt.edu

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