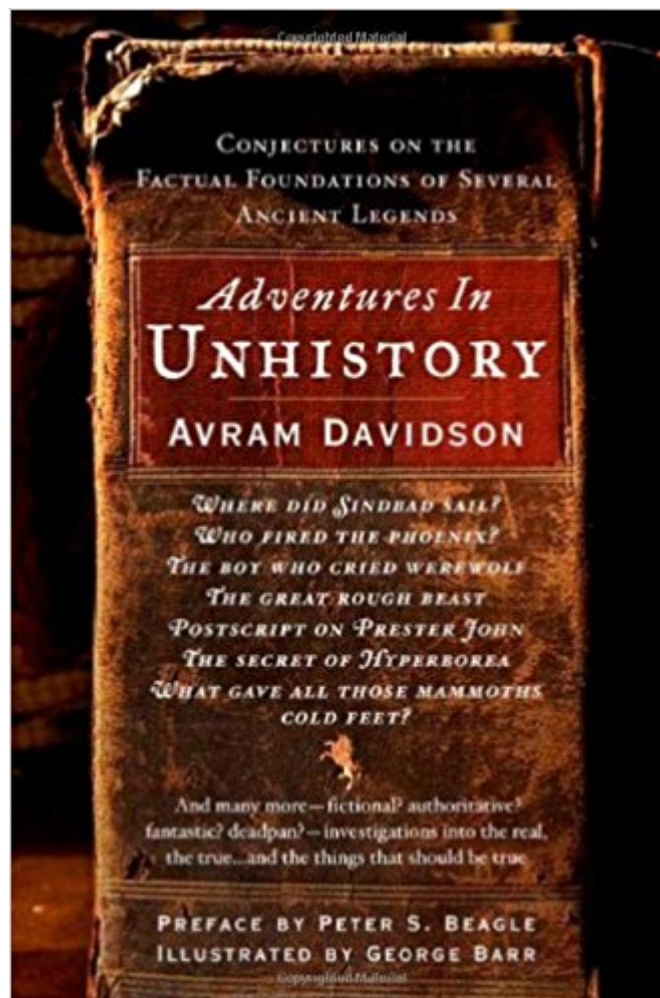




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Adventures In Unhistory: Conjectures On The Factual Foundations Of Several Ancient Legends



Synopsis

* Where did Sinbad Sail?* Who Fired the Phoenix?* The Boy Who Cried Werewolf* The Great Rough Beast* Postscript on Prester John* The Secret of Hyperborea* What Gave All Those Mammoths Cold Feet?—And many more—fictional? authoritative? fantastic? deadpan?—investigations into the real, the true—and the things that should be true—

PREFACE BY PETER S. BEAGLE ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE BARR

"Although the wombat is real and the dragon is not, nobody knows what a wombat looks like and everyone knows what a dragon looks like."

Not a novel, not a book of short stories, *Adventures in Unhistory* is a book of the fantastic—a compendium of magisterial examinations of Mermaids, Mandrakes, and Mammoths; Dragons, Werewolves, and Unicorns; the Phoenix and the Roc; about places such as Sicily, Siberia, and the Moon; about heroic, sinister, and legendary persons such as Sindbad, and Aleister Crowley, and Prester John; and—revealed at last—the Secret of Hyperborea.

The facts are here, the foundations behind rumors, legends, and the imaginations of generations of tale-spinners. But far from being dry recitals, these meditations, or lectures, or deadpan prose performances are as lively, as crazily inventive, as witty as the best fiction of the author, a writer praised by Gardner Dozois as "one of the great short story writers of our times."

Who, on the subject of Dragons, could write coldly, dispassionately, guided only by logic? Certainly not Avram Davidson. Certain facts, these facts, deserve more than recitation; they deserve flourish, verve, gusto, style—the late, great Avram Davidson's unique voice.

That prose which, in the words of Peter S. Beagle's Preface to this volume, "cries out to be read aloud."

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Customer Reviews

Adult/High School

•This collection of short essays is a real treasure. Davidson explains the origins of 15 myths, including werewolves, dragons, mermaids, unicorns, where Sinbad actually sailed, and the phoenix. He agrees with Kipling, whom he quotes as noting: "There are nine and sixty ways/Of constructing tribal lays/And every single one of them is right!" Kipling is just one of the many authors, historians, and philosophers to whom the well-read and eclectic Davidson turns to support the suppositions he himself posits about the "true" origins of each myth. He sometimes pits classic explainers against one another, as in the essay explaining the root of lycanthropy: one could find it in "Bulfinch's Mythology, but Rabelais is more fun." Each aside and every digression offer another path to follow or connection to make. The author's narrative prose itself invites sharing aloud, serving as a great model for student writers. Not only is this a wonderful resource for information on myths and legends, but it also comes with the bonuses of real literary adventures and some of the most entertaining nonfiction writing in the realm of popular culture.

•Dana Cobern-Kullman, Luther Burbank Middle School, Burbank, CA Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"A king's ransom of short fiction from one of America's least-known masters of the form

[These stories are as important and vital as those by Updike and Cheever."--Des Moines Register on The Avram Davidson Treasury

"Not merely a treasury, it's a genuine treasure. Some of its pages will carry you away to strange seas and shores, others will show you the marvellous within the seemingly ordinary, and just about all of them will take your breath away. But that's what magicians do."--The Washington Post Book World on The Avram Davidson Treasury

"Of all writers (except, perhaps, Kipling), the most likely to insert the marvellous into the everyday."--Guy Davenport on Avram Davidson

"One of the finest short-story writers ever to use the English language." --Robert Silverberg on Avram Davidson

"Avram Davidson may have been one of the great short story writers of our times, in or out of the fantasy/science fiction genre."--Gardner Dozois on Avram Davidson

"Davidson was beyond question one of the unjustly neglected writers of the 20th century, an author of immense talent."--Gene Wolfe on Avram Davidson

Avram Davidson is one of the greatest authors of 20th century American literature. Unfortunately, he

chose eccentric and estoric subject matter, and is largely unrecognized. This is another of his quirky, fascinating books. Davidson is very learned, and in this book pulls together a fascinating range of facts. His prose is delightful. It's a highly enjoyable voyage through some of the stranger backwaters of legend and mythology.

It's a pity that Avram Davidson early on got pigeonholed as a writer of science fiction and fantasy, because this designation consigned his work to pulp magazines--thus ensuring that one of the most brilliant stylists of the 20th century (I'll put *The Redward Edward Papers* up against a legion of James Joyce knockoffs any day) would never, ever get either the attention or the respect he deserved. In this, his last book--and only book of nonfiction, so far as I know--Davidson sits back, lights his pipe, and starts wondering. He brings a lifetime of voracious and eclectic reading, his encyclopedic knowledge of the esoteric, to bear on the roots of old stories and the creatures that populate them. Whence the dragon, whence the mermaid, where did Sindbad actually go? But not only is this book a glimpse into (maybe) the genuine origins of old myths, it's also a glimpse into Davidson's brain itself. This is what he wondered about, this is what interested him, this is what he was reading about. This is the stuff that inspired his own work--the raw material of his corpus of stories and novels. And this is how his mind worked, and what a mind it was. He was able to sift between the vast amounts of information in his head to marshall his arguments and assemble his theories, and to do so lucidly, cleverly, and chattily. Some readers will be put off by the style of this last book, which may strike them as overly conversationally erudite bordering on the precious. Others will appreciate it immensely. And others, like myself, will sigh in regret that we never actually got to meet the man and hear him expounding on every topic under the sun in person. Luckily, though, *"Adventures in Unhistory"* gets us pretty close to that.

I am so thrilled to see some of Avram Davidson's work coming back into print! I sincerely hope that this author finds new readers thanks to the work of publishers like this one keeping his work alive. I first stumbled upon a story of his in an anthology (from the '70's), and his story stood out as the most creative and intriguing piece in the book. Since then, I've sought out and found his stories in many anthologies dating from the 60's to his death in the early 90's, as well as several of his novels, and incredible story collections. Although he has written some masterful novels such as *'Phoenix and the Mirror'*, I prefer his style in the short form. He has a unique imagination and an encyclopedic knowledge of obscure history, world literature, & mythology, all on full display in this wonderful book. This is a fascinating collection of essays and quasi-historical entries, assembled in a

somewhat encyclopedic format, a reference book for bizarre literature. It chronicles the missing parts of history, the strange bits that should have happened. There are entries and essays about mysterious and fantastic creatures, mythical lands, bizarre pseudo-scientific discoveries, and other rather dubious information about a broad variety of obscure subjects. I think this particular book reads a bit like the labyrinthine works of Borges if he had written while on hallucinogens... This book may have inspired the form of the recent 'Thackery T. Lambshead pocket guide to ... diseases,' or at least I feel that these two books go together well. Davidson is an absolutely unique talent, but I think this book should appeal to fans of Jeff VanderMeer and the Leviathan anthologies, Kelly Link, Neil Gaiman (who has mentioned his admiration for Davidson), Jeffrey Ford, Gene Wolfe, & R. A. Lafferty (another slightly obscure writer whose oddball work I love). I have been hoping for years for a publisher to re-print this book so I could round out my Davidson collection. 'Adventures in Unhistory' was originally released in 1993, only in a limited collector's edition, which has gone on to become this author's most sought-after work, selling for many hundreds of dollars when it rarely does exchange hands... It has obtained a some-what legendary status, particularly among other authors of speculative fiction who occasionally cite it as a reference or influence, or just let slip in interviews that they own a coveted copy. An essay from this book inspired the idea behind Vonda MacIntyre's novel 'The Sun and the Moon.' Peter Beagle (who introduces this edition) has listed this as a favorite book, and Neil Gaiman has mentioned it on his blog. The original publisher, Owlswick, published a companion volume, 'The Adventures of Dr. Eszterhazy,' which also first came out in a limited edition, as well as a cheaper HC edition, also illustrated by George Barr. I highly recommend seeking out this companion book as well, if you like this volume. If this happens to be your first exposure to Davidson's work, and you want more (you will), or you are looking for a more general introduction to his writing, I highly recommend the 'Avram Davidson Treasury', which is a generous collection of stories from every period and genre which he worked in, including work from this volume, with appreciative essays by the greats of speculative (fantasy) fiction. That collection provides a great overview of his short work. I recommend these great story collections to any reader interested in imaginative fiction. So, in case I wasn't clear: buy this book! Also mentioned in this review, and worth seeking out: 'The Adventures of Dr. Eszterhazy' Avram Davidson, Owlswick press, HC 'The Avram Davidson Treasury' Grania Davis, Orb, PB 'Phoenix & the Mirror' novel, Avram Davidson 'The Thackery T. Lambshead Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases, 83rd Edition' Jeff Vandermeer, et al., collection almost any story collection by R.A. Lafferty

Adventures in Unhistory is a collection of columns in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine by

the late Avram Davidson in the 1980's. In these columns, Davidson takes on a mythological/fantastic subject that has fascinated people for centuries, and unwinds its history and origins in popular culture, and tries to find the grain of truth in the mountain of myth and legend. Its a wonderful set of essays. The style of Davidson is conversational, jovial, joking, digressive but in the end illuminating and entertaining. As I read his analysis of mermaids, werewolves, dragons, Aleister Crowley and others, I could imagine myself in a deli in Manhattan, listening to Davidson over a bagel and coffee explain in a style that has to be read to be fully enjoyed. The book is a real treasure, and I enjoyed it immensely. I can think of a few of my friends who will love this, if they haven't already beaten me to reading Davidson's work. My only regret is that it was too short. I don't know how many of these columns he actually wrote; if another volume of his columns were collected and published, I'd get it in a heartbeat.

A collection of essays--some previously published in divers venues, some not--each around or about some matter of legend (e.g., the phoenix, werewolves, mermaids) or sometimes just fringy science (frozen mammoths, extinct birds). If you're at all familiar with Avram Davidson, you won't be surprised to discover that finding factual foundations is scarcely the point of the essays; the point is listening to a wonderfully erudite and widely-read scholar riffing on a miscellany of eccentric subjects. And I say "listening to" deliberately, because his style is so very chatty and personal.

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