

The Siberian Tiger as Myth

The Lore of John Vaillant's 'The Tiger'

BY JONATHAN BASTIAN, LITERARY CRITIC, EXPLORE BOOKSELLERS

You have to imagine the location.

You are 6,000 miles to the east of Moscow, nearly a quarter-way around the world, but still technically in Russia. To the south is China. Japan is just off the coast.

This is an area known as Primorski Krai.

Walk through the dark forests and you'll see many unusual things: species of the boreal subarctic overlapping with species of the subtropics. In other words you have caribou and Timberwolves mingling with leopards and tigers and poisonous snakes.

Equally mysterious is an animal that most people never see — an animal that is perhaps symbolic of the entire region. Silent, vast, fierce, adaptive, the Siberian (Amur) tiger is chillingly mystical.

They are the stuff of myth, legend, fable. Many people living in the Primorski Krai will never see an Amur tiger, even though they know the tigers are out there, hunting, watching, waiting.

These, to me, are the fascinating elements of John Vaillant's "The Tiger." But at the same time, they are not why the book will most likely become a consistent bestseller.

There is also the commercial angle, which is why Brad Pitt has already purchased the movie rights to the book: In 1997, one of these Amur Tigers began luridly killing a group of humans.

John Vaillant is a smart guy. His previous book, "The Golden Spruce," is becoming a classic to the outdoorsy set. He is not interested in Hollywood or bestsellers. He's more interested in quality and the context in which he presents his subject. Which makes me wonder whether Vaillant was really interested in the commerciality of the story, or if he felt that exploring the more profound aspects of the story would be too esoteric without a little drama?

For example, there is a blurb on the back of the book by George Schaller, who traveled with Peter Matthiessen in "The Snow Leopard." Schaller is a legendary hard-ass who is not interested in fluff. I also know that Vaillant looks up to Schaller tremendously and reveres "The Snow Leopard."

At the same time, Random House



(the publisher of "The Tiger") is using trashy mystery/thriller language to promote the book: "It's December 1997, and a man-eating tiger is on the prowl. ...The tiger isn't just killing people, it's annihilating them."

I can just imagine Vaillant reading this when the book was first printed, and maybe throwing up in his mouth a little bit.

Why? Because Vaillant is trying to take the conversation deeper. Early in the book Vaillant even writes, "The tiger has been a fellow traveler in our evolution, and, in a sense, our peer. In Asia, there is no recess of human memory in which there has not — somewhere — lurked a tiger. As a result, this animal looms over the collective imagination of native and newcomers alike."

This I like more. I mean, have you even seen one of these tigers, even if only in a zoo? They generate such feelings of awe and fear that they become nearly biblical. Their strength is beyond our comprehension. Their ability to take life is staggering. In this way, we have come to revere these animals the way we revere higher powers, deities, gods. It makes complete sense to have people worshipping these animals — to see them inscribed on caves and carved in trees.

Vaillant understands our devotional attachment to these tigers through our evolution. In order to stay alive and co-exist, we've been forced to treat these animals with fear and respect, and that's been happening for thousands of years. For this reason, they been emblazoned in our collective minds and myths.

But this is changing. Now we kill the tigers for money. We drive them to the brink of extinction. The Chinese will pay filthy amounts of money to smuggle them across the Russian border.

Lets us hope that those creatures find a way to survive. Because when they die, a part of our humanity will die with them.

Jonathan Bastian is the host of "Page by Page" on Aspen Public Radio (Wednesdays, 6 p.m.). Listen to Jonathan's conversation with John Vaillant at www.pagebypage.org. You can write to him at jonathan@explorebooksellers.com.

POETS' CORNER

Every week, *Time Out* will present a poem from a member of the Aspen Poets' Society. To find out more about the group, visit aspenpoetsociety.com.

'What's a Dreamer' by Kim Nuzzo

You are the Jonah who lives in me;
I am the paradox.
We made contact just inside a desperate hope.
From among the planets, a tiny bit of stubborn sunniness fell.

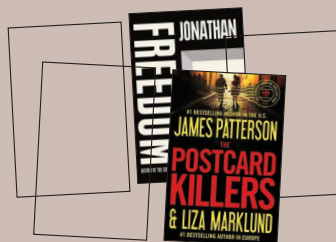
What would a symbol look like if it were us?
If I move toward you, will you burn up on me? That's why we need a more formal class

in dream matter. That's why spiritual physics.
And that's why God
allowed us to love each other. She herself made junk of the void
and called it unknowable. A tiny bit of imagination.
In space.

It's all a little bit strange.
For one thing, the way our dreams feed the physical world.
What would Jesus or Love do?
These eyes, this mouth,

the way your body fits. If love may be fallen into,
so might we slip through a crack.
So might gravity suck us toward the great sky in our own heavenly crowns.
O, dazzle me into wings. Everything floats. Falling.

NYT Best-selling Hardcover Fiction



1. "Freedom," by Jonathan Franzen
2. "The Girl Who Kicked The Hornet's Nest," by Stieg Larsson
3. "Dark Peril," by Christine Feehan
4. "Lost Empire," by Clive Cussler With Grant Blackwood
5. "The Postcard Killers," by James Patterson and Liza Marklund

Top 10 Bestselling Books

BOOK TRAIN
723 Grand Ave.
Glenwood Springs, 945-7045

1. "The Wimpy Kid Movie Diary" by Jeff Kinney
2. "The Girl Who Played with Fire" by Stieg Larsson
3. "Olive Kitteridge" by Elizabeth Strout
4. "Apparition Manor" by Kathy Rippey Fleming
5. "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo" by Stieg Larsson
6. "House Rules" by Jodi Picoult
7. "Glenwood Springs History" by Jim Nelson
8. "The Pacific" by Hugh Ambrose
9. "The Kind Diet: A Simple Guide to Feeling Great, Losing Weight, and Saving the Planet" by Alicia Silverstone
10. "Shutter Island" by Dennis Lehane

EXPLORE BOOKSELLERS
221 E. Main St.
Aspen, 925-5336

1. "Moonlight Over Pearl, Stories from Aspen" by Paul Andersen
2. "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo" by Stieg Larsson
3. "The Girl Who Played with Fire" by Stieg Larsson
4. "Aspen's Rocky Mountain Paradise" by People's Press
5. "The Help" by Kathryn Stockett
6. "The Price of Revenge" by Denny Vaughn
7. "The Three Weissmanns of Westport" by Catherine Schine
8. "The Big short" by Michael Lewis
9. "Out of the Canyon" by Art Daily
10. "The Routes of Man" by Ted Conover

PITKIN COUNTY LIBRARY STAFF PICK

E Party: Vol. 1, 'Starting in the Middle'

BY STEVEN NEMEROVSKI

Billionaire Alex "Atlas" Stein has gladly immersed himself in Aspen's natural beauty on a permanent basis in his golden years, but he also wants to create a significant legacy before he rides off into that last sunset. He invites a few trusted and highly skilled friends to his Red Mountain home with the goal of forming a third political party that will succeed in driving vital issues such as education and the economy. So begins an enlightening journey into the belly of the American political beast that instructs as well as entertains.

This unconventional novel, using email correspon-

dence and columns by an esteemed political pundit, provides an insider's look at both political campaigns and the legislative branch, while demonstrating how the current system of corruption might be effectively circumvented. The subtitle refers to Alex's desire for the E Party to bring the dialogue back to the center, by "starting in the middle." Illinois is chosen as the geographical starting point, in part for its absence of political contribution limits and also for its electorate's level of disenchantment with politics as usual. The author, Steven Nemerovski, has been actively involved in

Illinois government for most of his career. Like Atlas, he has made the Aspen area his home. His knowledge of both locales and the Illinois political scene enriches the story, which takes some unexpected twists in the second half.

The book also serves as a call to billionaires on Red Mountain and beyond to do something for this ailing country and, in the words of certain pop singers, "get this party started." Check out the author's website at www.epartynovel.com for more information. — **Audrey Tolle**

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