

Midwestern Strange: Hunting Monsters, Martians, and the Weird in Flyover Country, by B.J. Hollars



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I fell in love with the title of B. J. Hollars's book *Midwestern Strange*, and am glad to review it as I also hail from the Midwest. Among other things, it's the land of the big roadside attractions—the Corn Palace; the Largest Ball of Twine; and pop culture debutantes like the giant Paul Bunyan featured in the movie *Fargo* (1996) or the House on the Rock shown in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001). Hollars here spins a charming narrative travelogue of his “year of living strangely” (1) detailing his visits to and researches into sites of the strange throughout the Midwest.



The book is divided into three sections: Monsters, UFOs, and The Weird. Each section is again divided into three case studies set up in procedural investigatory fashion. They include such tales as Oscar the Turtle, the Minot UFO sighting, and the granddaddy of Midwest controversies (one that divides families and actually has its own museum), the Kensington Runestone. Each case study provides historical context, a travelogue to the strange site in question, interviews with local informants and experts, as well as the author's personal connection to the event. These personal memoirs are perhaps the most endearing aspect of the book. Here Hollars describes his childhood fear of Oscar the Turtle:

[By] the time I turned five I knew to fear northern Indiana's murky lakes[...] . Where others saw nothing, I saw the dark and impenetrable water. And within it, an antediluvian monster, dead-eyed and licking his lips[...] . While my friends all believed their monsters lived under their beds, I knew mine lived just below the waterline. (37-38)

The personal memories and travel narratives restore to the reader the sense of wonder in the strange and unknowable. Similarly, the use of the prosaic Midwest as the site for fieldwork pokes gentle fun at the history of anthropology and exploration narratives. The author's familial self portrait, with the author behind binoculars, his young son in a monster t-shirt, and younger daughter in swim goggles, is a gentle parody of the self portraits of the figurative “heroic colonial explorer” in the “native wilds.”

The sections are not equal in strength. The UFO section is the weakest, while the section on monsters and the finale of the Runestone were the strongest. It is not a coincidence that the strongest sections were those in which the local communities used the strange incidents to develop what public historian Tammy Gordon calls community and vernacular exhibitions: Turtle Days in Churubusco, Indiana; The Mothman Museum in Point Pleasant West Virginia (which Hollars admits is a bit far afield for those of us who are Midwestern purists); the appearance of the Hodag as a community icon in Rhineland, Wisconsin; and the Runestone Museum in Alexandria, Minn. In the words of some of Hollars's informants, these community celebrations of their respective strange heritages give their towns "a dot on the map." (49) Hollars provides wonderful examples of community heritage practices and the process of memory and identity creation that are easily the book's best folklife chapters.

The less compelling chapters are built around UFOs. The participants' desire to prove UFOs' existence and their desire to be taken seriously are less narratively gripping. Describing the followers of *The X Files*' Mulder is not as engaging on the written page as showing them was on TV. Hollars's wonderful wit is not as evident (save when he is joking about space pancakes). And unfortunately, some of Hollars's larger assertions here about the nature of knowledge and science are troubling. While it is true that the communities of UFO adherents and other paranormal investigators engage in behaviors that are often similar to the practices of scientists (publishing, peer critique, conference presentations), such similarities do not necessarily make them "outsider" scientists. While a few years ago I might have been more charmed by the assertions that paranormal investigators are just unappreciated scientists yearning for recognition, in these days of anti-vaxxers, doubletalk defending disingenuous practices in COVID-19 prevention, and QAnon, I am calling on my knowledge of Thomas Kuhn, whose *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* leads me to recognize that understanding scientific change and different knowledge paradigms does not make every such paradigm equal in scientific status or utility.

Still, Hollars's observations on why we find the strange so compelling and how our embrace of curiosity and capacity for belief enhance our humanity are inspiring. In a book filled with tales about oddities such as a disappearing dinner-table-sized turtle, a reader might not expect such lofty observations on human nature and capacity.

The interdisciplinary nature of this project is its greatest strength. It is part history, part popular cultural studies, part folklore—it partakes in the forms of travel narrative, memoir, creative nonfiction, journalism, and ethnography. As someone who teaches in an interdisciplinary program, I admired its freedom and boldness in crossing boundaries. I will shelve this book with other authors like Sven Lundqvist, Tom Engelhardt, and Carol Spindel, whom I recommend as examples for my students wanting to do creative nonfiction/memoir projects.