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Penguinalia

Stephen Martin, *Penguin*. London: Reaktion, 2009. 224 pp. \$19.95.

It will be best for you to know something of the present reviewer's background and predilections, in order that you may place my commentary in context. I consider myself a lifelong penguin aficionado: the fascination began in childish infatuation with form and appearance (those cartoon caricatures were so darn cute!), grew through textbook studies of life-cycle and natural history (actual birds described by ornithologists like Roger Tory Peterson), and has produced an intellectualized affiliation and even totemism of personal vocation and human aspiration/adaptation (this animal can "fly" only by going deep down, like the philosopher's *Untergang*; wings of fantasy yield to acceptance of limits and cultivation of alternative aptitude, like happier members of *homo sapiens*).

Given these starting points, it should be no surprise that I find congenial the author's approach to his subject via narratological identity interpretation: "our stories reflect the world around us and make us what we are" (167); "over the last 500 years the penguin has become a much loved and malleable symbol" within such storying (169). Much of the book elaborates this overarching thesis. For Stephen Martin, "they [penguins] have become vehicles for the expression of our hopes, fears and humours" (105). Indeed, the penguin sometimes serves as a mirror or doppelgänger of (hu?)mankind, "confuting that definition of man to be *Animale bipes implume*, which is nearer to a description of this creature" (49). At other (though often linked) times, penguins take on the aspect of comedians or vaudeville characters—e.g., as "entertainers in zoos" (107). So close do these birds track our spiritual composition that Martin observes "they began to convey messages, not just of life's lessons but of other aspects of the human relationship to the world" (89). For example, penguins have served as envoys of environmentalism: "characters in the drama of man's cruelty and carelessness of his impact upon the natural world" (115), they elicit an ecologic "sense of fragility or vulnerability" (165). Last, lately yet not least, the penguin has played proxy roles in social controversies wherein the species or particular specimens become vectors of gender politics and/or family values concerning issues of homosexuality and/or monogamy (see chapter 5).

Martin closes his account with extended allusion to a factual tale that carries bioethical and ecosophic import—it's the story of a penguin captured by Aussie crayfishers, befriended cross-species (tamed/named), and lost back to the sea after an extended period among those featherless bipeds who live mostly on land. The final scene of departure is poignant, as recorded by one Dr. Nicholls: after mutually sporting about in the surf for a while, Billy starts to hunt on his own—whereupon “we called to him by name, and, turning his head, he answered once or twice with a loud squawk, but kept paddling oceanwards all the time. He had suddenly realized that he was once again in the open ocean” (169, quoting Hull). I cite this passage not to indulge hackneyed nostalgia for “nature’s call of the wild,” but rather to draw attention to a very different, even contrary, undertow—one we might call the cultural conscience of exclusionary language. For notice that the original storyteller used gendered/personalized diction in reference to Billy-the-feral, whereas our author recounts the tale utilizing abstract/reifying indexicals and pronouns instead: “the Erect-crested penguin *that* [not who] in 1910 made *its* [not his] appearance on a beach in Lorne,” afterwards *it* [not he] calmed down,” the fishermen “called out to the penguin, encouraging *it* [not him] to follow them,” and so on (169). This contrast shows, I think, a profound liability of perspective in Martin’s social-historical method: “the penguin” can appear in this light always only as an object of human agency, never as a subject or locus of self-generating intentionality or meaning. Possibly a pitfall of this Reaktion series as a whole, it can and should be avoided nonetheless and I certainly hope at least some of the other authors manage(d) to grant their species greater voice(s).

There are a couple other aspects of the book that potential readers might find it handy to know in advance. The photos and other graphics are various and engaging, though not always as well-woven into the writing as one would like (in this last respect it pales in comparison to my still-favorite illustrated piece of textual penguinalia, John Sparks and Tony Soper’s 1967 classic *Penguins*). Martin does pretty well to provide global coverage—still, his antipodean pedigree and more generally Commonwealth bias show through and may leave American or continental European (not to mention mainland Asian or African!) audiences somewhat alienated. Overall, this is a good—not great—volume: worth the money and time if readily available, but not something for which to go out of your way in hunting down or shipping from afar.