

Review of *Fabulous Monsters*

Meghan Cox Gurdon, *Wall Street Journal*

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Alberto Manguel's sprawling, erudite "A History of Reading" (1996) ranged over humankind's long relationship with the written word. In "The Library at Night" (2005) and "Packing My Library" (2018), written at the creation and dismantling, respectively, of his private collection in an old French barn, he reflected on the connections between books as material objects and extensions of the self. Now, dotted with droll little drawings by the author, "Fabulous Monsters" (Yale, 228 pages, \$19.95) invites us to recall the intriguing, often tangential characters that we've met in literature and that, in certain cases, have accompanied us on life's journey. He speculates about the inner life of Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, and admires Phoebe, Holden Caulfield's little sister. He muses about our need for monsters, such as Dracula, the wendigo and the chimera, and in his musings enlists philosophers, anthropologists and historians. There is something flattering in the way he raises us, as readers, to his exalted plain of reflection.

It's so exalted that now and then we may stumble on a sentence and cock our heads as we think, wait, what? ("Little Red Riding Hood is emblematic of individual freedom, which is perhaps why the hood of France's revolutionary Marianne is the same color as hers.") But unexpected juxtapositions are what make the book enjoyable. This is art, after all, not science: Literary characters are idiosyncratic, our responses to them are idiosyncratic—Mr. Manguel's fondness for Edward Casaubon, the dry pedant from "Middlemarch," is certainly idiosyncratic—and by the end readers will be glad to have revisited old

acquaintances (Queequeg or Job) and shaken hands again with those (Heidi's grandfather or Long John Silver) they may not know well.