

Bestiaire

DIRECTED BY
DENIS CÔTÉ
FiGa Films: 2012.
Screening at Anthology
Film Archives in New
York 19–25 October.

deer heads. A man walks up to a rotating metal drum and removes what looks like a handful of dusty feathers. He shakes it, slices out bloody bones

with surgical tools, stuffs it, dries it with a hair-dryer and *voilà* — a green-headed duck.

Although Côté insists that *Bestiaire* has no message, it nonetheless depicts perfectly the distorted relationship that zoo-goers and others have with wild animals: no longer free, but dispirited creatures that we incarcerate, ogle, coddle and capture on tiny screens.

That, in turn, raises compelling questions about the role of zoos today. Humans have enjoyed gawking at imprisoned animals since as long ago as 2100 BC, when Mesopotamian kings exhibited lions in cages and pits. The Tower of London was once home to a menagerie that over the centuries featured lions, tigers, alligators and hyenas, whose bodies were dissected in the pursuit of anatomical science. London Zoo took over from it in 1828. Now, an emerging consensus argues that zoos should discard the old 'entertainment' model to devote resources to the conservation of animals that face extinction in the wild. A coordinated zoo-breeding programme of the golden lion tamarin (*Leontopithecus rosalia*), for example, has helped the endangered monkey to thrive once again in its fragmented Brazilian forest habitat.

Life in a cage may protect an animal from habitat destruction, but it also breeds apathy. In one spring-time scene in *Bestiaire*, three bears line up obediently in a pen as a keeper tosses grapes into their open mouths. Denied the opportunity to forage far and wide, they seem to have adapted to a life free from independent exploration.

In an interview, Côté recalled that he wanted his film to be like seeing "through the eyes of a six-year-old who is turning the pages of a bestiary and excited to discover a new picture of an animal at every turn". But the medieval bestiary was also an instructional book, filled with illustrations of animals both real and imaginary — elephants and lions, griffins and unicorns — each of which had a symbolic moral or allegorical value. Like these didactic tomes, Côté's film shows us that we face ethical choices: understand and empathize with the plight of wild animals or treat them as yet more playthings to be photographed, toyed with or stuffed.

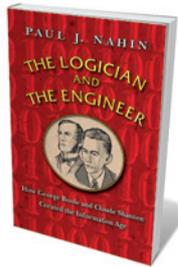
Bestiaire prompts viewers to ponder what it really means to be human — or more accurately, humane — in our relationships with wild beasts. Whether or not Côté intended it, the movie has a message — a powerful one. ■

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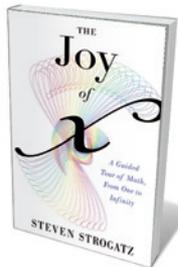
Books in brief

**One Billion Hungry: Can We Feed the World?**

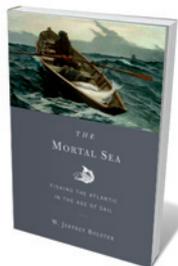
Gordon Conway CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS 456 pp. £46.50 (2012)
Poverty, climate change, booming population, soaring food prices — the obstacles to global food security seem Himalayan. Agricultural ecologist Gordon Conway calls for a "doubly green revolution", with sustainable intensification of production, research and development, and market creation. He ploughs through the crises, discusses methods, delves into the role of farmers as innovators, and faces up to environmental challenges. An impressive marshalling of case studies, new research and long experience from an expert in the field.

**The Logician and the Engineer: How George Boole and Claude Shannon Created the Information Age**

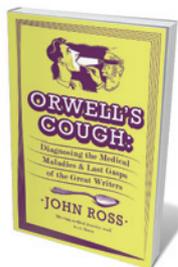
Paul J. Nahin PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS 244 pp. £16.95 (2012)
Meshing logic problems with the stories of two extraordinary men — Victorian philosopher-mathematician George Boole and twentieth-century information theorist Claude Shannon — Paul Nahin fashions a tale of innovation and discovery. Boole's astonishingly advanced ideas seeded Boolean algebra, which underpins the electronic circuits governing today's digitized culture. Alongside a gripping account of how Shannon built on Boole's work, Nahin explores others key to the technological revolution, from Georg Cantor to Alan Turing.

**The Joy of X: A Guided Tour of Math, from One to Infinity**

Steven Strogatz HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT 336 pages £16.87 (2012)
Is infinity a number? What is the point of quadratic equations? Whither topology? Steven Strogatz, a mathematician in the field of complex networks, steers the 'maths challenged' through his home territory. Beginning with the usefulness of numbers, Strogatz strolls through π , the Pythagorean theorem, probability, solid geometry and more, including the anatomy of that marvellous beast, calculus. The interconnectedness of maths in culture — from art, literature, philosophy and law to medicine — is gracefully unravelled.

**Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail**

W. Jeffrey Bolster HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS 366 pp. £22.95 (2012)
Historian and seafarer Jeffrey Bolster "writes the ocean into history", tracing the currents leading to today's serious fish-stock depletion. Focusing on the North Atlantic from Cape Cod to Newfoundland's Grand Banks, he shows how one species after another — halibut, lobster, cod — has been exploited for centuries, long before industrialization. Bolster braids marine biology into a narrative driven by courageous chancers, such as fifteenth-century explorer John Cabot and unnamed hordes of fishermen, to argue that the precautionary approach is key to heading off collapse.

**Orwell's Cough: Diagnosing the Medical Maladies and Last Gasp of the Great Writers**

John Ross ONEWORLD PUBLICATIONS 288 pp. £12.95 (2012)
Shakespeare may have had syphilis and mercury-vapour poisoning, speculates medical doctor John Ross in this engrossing look at how great writers have grappled with illness and disease. From the satirist Jonathan Swift's putative descent into frontotemporal dementia to Herman Melville's bipolar disorder (and possible ankylosing spondylitis), a book that compels respect for the subjugation of suffering behind so many enduring works of genius.