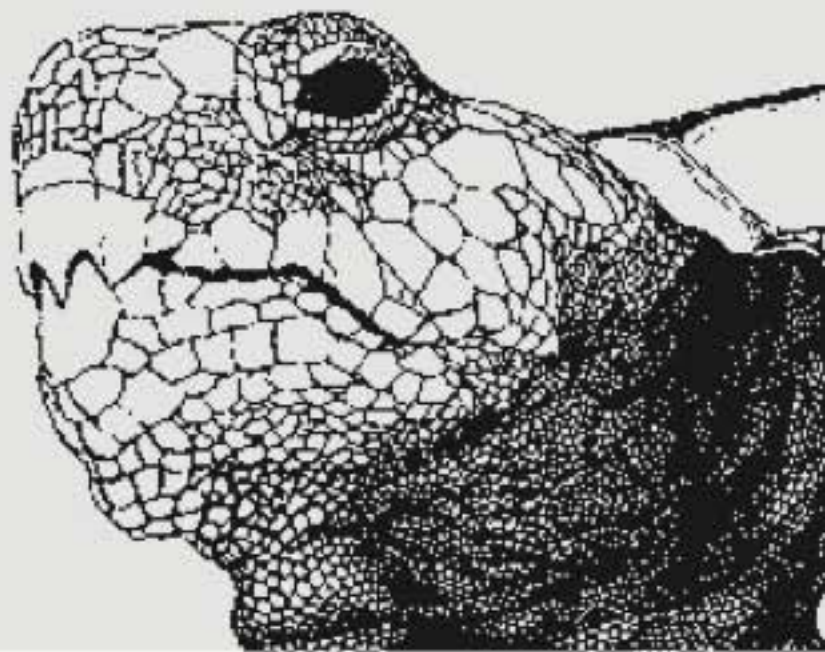


Zeno's critters

Reaktion Books have been producing a series of titles on animals, familiar and less so.

Oliver Rathmill finds pleasure in the essay on the humble tortoise.

Tortoise by Peter Young, Reaktion Books, 2003, £12.95, pbk



Tortoise is Peter Young's contribution to the new Animal series from Reaktion Books which explore the cultural histories of some familiar and less familiar creatures (Other current titles are Ant, Crow and Cockroach, with more titles to follow later this year.) Starting with the observation that tortoises are the oldest living land reptile the book goes on to map out the evolutionary and ecological history of the tortoise and its role in history worldwide encompassing mythology, science and its role in art and religion.

The author does this with a clear passion for the animal, and has loaded the book with an enormous and eclectic assortment of tortoise related particulars. There are points where it may be a little too eclectic, although you may start a paragraph exploring the role of the tortoise in West African creation myths, you may end it learning about Nietzsche's thoughts on contemporary philosophy. Yet it is this idiosyncrasy which lends the book such charm, and ensures that the reader is not overloaded with tortoise facts.

Divided into seven chapters, each focusing on a broad theme such as the natural history, cultural, mythological, literary and artistic representations of the tortoise, the history of human exploitation of the tortoise and its current conservation status, the book builds up a vivid picture of tortoises and our interactions with them. We learn of the tortoise's central role in creation myths from around the world, how the well protected tortoise has inspired the design of the great siege engine Humpty Dumpty, which collapsed irrevocably into the city ditch at the Royalist siege of Gloucester during the English Civil War, and is now remembered in nursery rhyme as an accident-prone egg. Among the stream of tortoise anecdotes and facts we discover that Katsuge had a fondness of tortoise smiles in his writing; that they were the first creatures to visit the moon and return to Earth in the Soviet Zond satellites in 1968 and 1969 and that a fully grown Galapagos tortoise can easily move a piano or walk through an internal wall.

Tortoise is intriguing reading and will appeal to a broad range of readers. The eclectic nature of its style ensures that there is something for everyone. I would especially recommend it to every tortoise lover, as it will certainly deepen any appreciation of these remarkable animals. If tortoises don't interest you that much, I still suggest that you have a look at the Animal series for an enjoyable and enlightening exploration of the creatures that share our world.

Oliver Rathmill is a biologist and survival skills specialist.