

Del Samatar and Sofia Samatar, *Monster Portraits*.
Brookline, MA: Rose Metal Press, 2018. 84 pp.
Softcover, \$14.95.

2018 was a great year for monsters. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* celebrated its 200th anniversary, *The Shape of Water* won best picture at the Academy Awards, and Emil Ferris's graphic novel *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* won three Eisners, the most vaunted award for comics in the U.S.

Siblings Sofia and Del Samatar's new book *Monster Portraits* settles comfortably among these celebrated texts. Itself a monstrous hybrid of many genres—picture book, travel narrative, memoir, science fiction story, philosophical treatise, and scholarly gloss—*Monster Portraits* gathers centuries of monsters close for examination and honour. These are, after all, “portraits,” not the mug shots that society expects of those it deems dangerous, criminal, or monstrous.

Sofia Samatar's credentials straddle academic writing and fiction, and her brother Del brings a versatile visual arts skill set. Del's experience as a tattoo artist is evident especially in bold,

thick-lined illustrations like “The Perfect Traveler,” labeled “Figure 1” of twenty-two monsters. Each monster is paired with brief musings that run more associative than explanatory, and which fall somewhere between prose poems and flash fiction. As the book continues, unlabeled monsters and sketches slip between the chapters and figures, and many of the illustrations increase in complexity, recalling intricate precursors like William Blake or Honoré Daumier, whose work you’re more likely to see framed in a museum than etched onto skin and muscle.

These are images readers can lose themselves in, much like the narrative versions of Sofia and Del lose themselves in their travels over the course of the book. “We went into the field to study monsters in their environment,” the book begins. “We thought it would be like a holiday or a game. Instead it became a journey that lasted an indeterminate length of time.”

The journey is the thread that connects these short, fragmented pieces. Sofia convinces Del to write a book with her, to “tell [their] lives through monsters, as the ancient Egyptians told the year through the myth of Osiris. A mirror becomes architecture when you pass to the other side: this is what we had understood as children.”

As the children of a white Mennonite mother and a Somali father, both Del and Sofia were well trained at a young age in the unpredictability of societal categories. Throughout the text, Sofia inserts snippets of memoir in which others examine and try to categorize both her and her brother. Monstrousness thus becomes a metaphor for all types of exclusion, including racial, as both well-meaning and just plain mean people work to fit them into boxes. In “Nameless,” for instance, Sofia recalls a moment of being trapped within her companions’ “detailed racial cartography”: “They were trying to figure out if I was *métisse* or *chabine*. *Métisse* is dark-skinned with European features, *chabine* is light-skinned with African features.” In the end, however, an angelic guide made of fire and snow—likewise category-defying, because these elements shouldn’t be able to exist in the same being—encourages the narrative version of Sofia to celebrate her “monstrous” status.

In a February 2018 roundtable discussion on *Electric Literature*, Sofia mused about her attraction to writing “speculative memoir.” She notes in the transcript that although memoir “is already strange and tricky and fraught in its relationship to memory,” for her, adding an element of the fantastic—rather than attempting to add more and more true-to-life detail—is what makes a piece more real to her. It is “[a]s if you’re taking a memory that’s already decayed and then tearing it up, or sewing a bunch of feath-

ers onto it. It becomes a bit monstrous. And this ... is when it's finally recognizable as yours" (Cheney).

Those inclined to dismiss *Monster Portraits* as "light" or less-than-literary because of its speculative bent would do well to read up before they pass judgment: the endnotes reference a dazzling array of sources, from Rabelais to Hélène Cixous, Aimé Césaire to Roland Barthes. The fragmented nature of the narrative, in fact, most often reminded me of Pascal's *Pensées*, or complex poets like Ezra Pound or Jorie Graham, as my mind stretched across gaps to fill in the generous intellectual spaces.

How are we meant to take these monsters? Overall, they run the visual gamut from horrifying and unsettling to friendly and even a bit goofy. It's hard to tell whether we should be awed, amused, scared, transfixed, or all of the above. Most often, however, Sofia's text aims to subvert assumptions about who's monstrous and who's "normal." Historically, of course, people in power have applied the label "monster" to marginal groups anytime they needed to justify genocide, enslavement, or general ill treatment. In contrast, this text asks us to consider whether the biblical Abel could be seen as a monster, and paints saints as pests. In "The Book of the Kryll," for example, saints have become a "seasonal nuisance," part of the setting rather than the heroes of the story. "Outside, saints fell from the trees. ... One of the sewing sisters stopped working and stuck a broom out the window to brush off the saint. 'Let one get in and they'll all start,' she explained" (31). Sofia is not trying to argue that all good is evil and all evil is good. Saints can be annoyingly perfect—too perfect—but as she notes in a February 2018 interview on *LitHub*, "when you try to redeem the idea of the monster, to embrace that identity—well, evil still exists" (Cain).

So who is the monster in this book? The answer to that question shifts depending on your own *where* or *when*. "We went to all the wrong places, my brother and I, and we were wrong within them," writes Sofia in "Liber Monstrorum," the book's penultimate piece. If you don't pay close attention, you might be surprised to find yourself the monster when you thought you were the "normal" one. But as Sofia writes, "[t]ry as much as possible to conform and you will be saved by a wily grace. Imperfection is your genius." It is the genius of the Samatar siblings as well, in this wily and glorious triumph of a book.

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Works Cited

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