



Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy

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It's easy to dismiss taxidermy as a kitschy or morbid sideline, the realm of trophy fish and jackalopes or an anachronistic throwback to the dusty diorama. Yet theirs is a world of intrepid hunter-explorers, eccentric naturalists, and gifted museum artisans, all devoted to the paradoxical pursuit of creating the illusion of life.

Into this subculture of insanely passionate animal lovers ventures journalist Melissa Milgrom, whose journey stretches from the anachronistic family workshop of the last chief taxidermist for the American Museum of Natural History to the studio where an English sculptor, granddaughter of a surrealist artist, preserves the animals for Damien Hirst's most disturbing artworks. She wanders through Mr. Potter's Museum of Curiosities in the final days of its existence to watch dealers vie for preserved Victorian oddities, and visits the Smithsonian's offsite lab, where taxidermists transform zoo skins into vivacious beasts. She tags along with a Canadian bear trapper and former Roy Orbison impersonator--the three-time World Taxidermy Champion--as he resurrects an extinct Irish elk using DNA studies and Paleolithic cave art for reference; she even ultimately picks up a scalpel and stuffs her own squirrel. Transformed from a curious onlooker to an empathetic participant, Milgrom takes us deep into the world of taxidermy and reveals its uncanny appeal.

Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy Details

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Elizabeth says

If you like looking at taxidermy in museums, you will love this book. If you are into sort of offbeat practices and subcultures, you will love this book. And, perhaps most surprisingly, if you are a lover of animals and nature, you will love this book. In short, this is a book that anyone with a passing interest in taxidermy should read. But such readers are hardly the only audience for Milgrom's entertaining, educational, and thoroughly readable account of her own fascination with taxidermy, which logically culminates in her account of her own attempt to taxidermy a squirrel. Where she goes and who she meets before that, though, is what drives the unexpectedly brisk narrative up until then.

Ana says

Enjoyable book about an often misunderstood craft which sometimes aspires to art.

I'm of two natures when it comes to taxidermy. I hate seeing trophies on walls and the recent 'renaissance' of taxidermy as a decorating trope left me cold and sad. But I also love natural history museums and the amazing examples of taxidermy that can be found at good ones.

This book made me realize the tremendous amount of work and knowledge that goes into making an exemplary piece of taxidermy.

The chapter on Emily Mayer, one of Damien Hirst's fabricators, was particularly interesting, allowing us inside the inner sanctum of her studio.

Fascinating stuff :)

Danelle says

In *Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy*, Melissa Milgrom takes us on a journey that's equal parts fascinating and disturbing. There's a journalistic feel to the writing; it's not a manual and it's not a history, but it is a little of both. Milgrom spent years researching this book; it's both informative and interesting - a 'behind the scenes' glimpse into a world you're typically not allowed to peek at, or perhaps, would even want to.

I am a huge museum geek - I love visiting museums. I blame my type-A personality for my museum love; my tendency toward organizing, labeling, categorizing, and archiving things. My personal favorites at the museum include the giant dioramas - those stop action sequences of animals and places (and times) I may never get to see or experience otherwise. I'm mesmerized by them and I see the artistry involved, but I'd never really thought about the work behind those animals, until I read this book. I love what those dioramas have taught me and my children and countless other museum-goers, but there are times when I feel a little creeped out by the animals in those dome-shaped rooms behind the glass, so still you could SWEAR you just saw one breathe. Equally chilling are the means by which many museums got their specimens in the beginning. Most museums got their specimen collections via hunting parties that went on multiple safaris to seek out and kill the creatures that would go on display. These men went out and shot and killed animals so that they could recreate life without the living part in their respective museums. (It's madness!) Milgrom

points out in chapter 3 that some museums were started just by acquiring specimens from one or two people's personal collections. (The British Museum was started in 1753 when England bought a "collection" from a Dr. Sloane. His "collection" contained a mere 19,290 animal specimens and fossils).

One chapter had a bit of an expose feel to it as it discussed the removal of HUNDREDS of specimens from AMNH that were just DESTROYED - another death for the already dead animals. A travesty in the taxidermy world. There were other chapters on Damien Hirst and Emily Mayer that were a little difficult to read; probably because they are into the blood and guts, the rotting of it all. (Hirst is the artist who displays whole sections of animals in large glass panels. Mayer is the taxidermist who makes his art possible.) It was interesting and uncomfortable, which is, I suppose, exactly Hirst's aim.

The book has longish chapters on individual taxidermists, their specialties, and lots of historical and some scientific information. There are bits of museum history as well. Sound interesting? I wouldn't pick it up unless you're sure you could stomach some in-depth writing on the procedures and tools used for creating taxidermy replicas of everything from rodents to elephants. Procedures that include (but by no means are limited to): scraping deer skull plates clean, macerating bison skulls to "remove the meat", "disarticulating hind legs by cutting the ball joint out of the hip socket" (p.241), etc. Tools that sound like they are more at home in a medieval chemist's shop: toe probes, lip tuckers, tail splitters, skinning hooks, etc.

Most surprising to me were the 'naturalists' who were so taken by their obsession to recreate these natural scenes, did so under the pretense of preserving the animals forever, in case they ever went extinct, when it was these same men who drove the animals to extinction or near-extinction hunting for that perfect specimen.

Overall I can't get over how in love with nature and animals these taxidermists are, yet, it seems completely at odds with what they do.

Well, maybe I understand a little bit. I am a vegetarian and I love looking at dead animals in a museum.

Laura says

For a peek into the world of taxidermy and the history of natural history museum exhibits, this isn't a bad place to start.

However, I'm losing patience with books where the writer is so busy inserting herself into the story that she becomes the focus instead of her subject. Milgrom's constantly creeped-out reaction was distracting to say the least. It's as if she wasn't quite comfortable with the fact that she was publishing a book on taxidermy and wants to make sure the readers know that she isn't really so weird as to think it's totally cool. Her entire account of the British taxidermy show consisted mainly of her frustration over it not being what she expected, rather than a true account of what it was. I am especially disgusted with her dedicating the entire last 2 chapters to her personal attempt at mounting a squirrel (with all the freaked-out squeamishness she can muster) and entering it in competition. I also found myself questioning her reliability as a narrator with a number of jarring animal descriptions -- such as noting the "golden fur" of a snow leopard, or relating that someone went around with "pockets full of muskrats" (I'd like to see you stuff a single muskrat into a single pocket).

In spite of all this, there is some good history mixed in and this serves as a decent jumping off point for

learning about some of the great hunter/naturalists of the 19th and early 20th century. It provides a very cool window into how natural history museums (and the public perception thereof) have changed drastically over time. I found myself Googling many of the pieces Milgrom mentions.

Sarah Rogers says

Growing up as a taxidermist's daughter, this book hit a nostalgic note for me. I found the history and current climate of taxidermy in the western world fascinating, and I now have plenty of fodder for a few conversations with my dad... heck, maybe I'll see if he's still got those muskrats that we started as a father-daughter project years ago (but never finished)!

Something refreshing about this book was the author's interactions with more conservative taxidermists, curators, naturalists, etc. As someone who leans towards the liberal-snowflake side of things, and in a country so polarized at this point in time, the book reminded me of all that I share and have in common with people from the opposite end of the political spectrum. Perhaps not what I was expecting in a book about taxidermy, but I noticed and enjoyed the differing perspective.

L.P. Coladangelo says

4.5/5

Extraordinarily well-researched, wonderfully paced and tenderly written, this almost novelistic journey into the world, history, art, and science of taxidermy is an excellent deep dive into this strange and arcane trade. Covering all corners of the modern practices and competitive spirit among present-day taxidermists, as well as the techniques and personalities of taxidermy's early years and heydays, anyone with an interest in natural history, museums, contemporary art, and scientific exploration will find something to hang (or mount) their hat on.

Chloe says

I remember, eons ago (okay, like eight years ago) picking this out from the stacks of my high school library. I was fascinated by it, because I considered myself a bit of a strange kid, and what's stranger than taking your housecat and stuffing it to become a permanent living room fixture? Alas, there are no housecats being stuffed in this book, but it is delightfully strange and full of enough fun, morbid, natural history facts to make up for it! There's also some thought-provoking, albeit brief, musings on whether or not taxidermy is art, as well as interesting peeks into the very different taxidermy subcultures of American and Britain. I'd forgotten most of the details of this book, but I did vividly remember the chapter where Milgrom herself stuffs a squirrel, and I can't lie, I'm wondering if I have the stomach (and the spare money) for perhaps stuffing a squirrel of my own!

Melki says

*"What you need for this kind of work is a strong stomach and lots of patience."
94-year-old Lillian Schwendeman, skinner and creator of artificial ears.*

I'm pretty sure **everything** you will ever need to know about taxidermy (unless you decide to try it for yourself,) is contained in this book. From its beginnings to its staggering popularity during the Victorian Era to its use in contemporary art - it's all here.

Here are just a few fun and amazing things to be learned:

---The jackalope was invented by a Wyoming taxidermist in 1932.

---It takes a professional 28 hours to mount a squirrel.

---Erosion molding is an unbelievably grisly process involving coating the outside of an animal with silicone. The fur will stick to the rubber shell while everything else decomposes. Urp!

---Taxidermists are vulnerable to all sorts of diseases, including bubonic plague, Lyme disease, rabies, and cat scratch fever. (Take that, Motor City Madman!)

---If you attend the trade fair, you can purchase chicken feet injection fluid, artificial coyote throats, and tanned sable scrotums - a steal at only \$7.50 each.

During the big finale, the author skins and stuffs a squirrel. She manages to not throw up. That's better than I would have done.

I would have preferred a few more photos, but other than that...a fascinating look at an unusual subject.

If you're interested, here are a few sites worth checking out...

Here is a virtual tour of the Smithsonian's Mammal Hall:

<http://www.mnh.si.edu/vtp/2-mobile/#m...>

Meet Walter Potter, one of England's most famous taxidermists. Scroll down to see the amazing detail in his *Death and Burial of Cock Robin*. And keep going to see the *Two-headed kitten*.

<http://www.taxidermy4cash.com/potter....>

And if it's the truly bizarre you're after, say "hello" to CRAPPY TAXIDERMY: <http://crappytaxidermy.com/>

Enjoy!

Donna says

While this book definitely has its moments, it's more about telling tales from the world of taxidermy and the author's time spent in it than providing a broader view of the subject. The writing style frequently got in the way of the content thanks to jumpy chapters, sentences that were sometimes unclear, and awkward transitions between the author's experiences and her research.

My biggest issue with the book was that the author didn't seem to care much about her subject. She brushed right past a lot of really cool facts and history, but would then do something like devote an entire page to a spoilery plot description of Daphne du Maurier's Jamaica Inn when introducing an auction at the place that inspired the novel. She seemed more engaged during her brief encounter with artist Damien Hirst, and while discussing his work, than she did during any of her time with actual taxidermists, leaving me with the impression that she chose her subject more for quirk factor than actual interest.

I think I uncovered the reason for my issues with the focus of the book during the scene where Milgrom attends a conference of Britain's Guild of Taxidermists. She repeatedly bemoans the fact that the participants seem more interested in drinking and chatting than in teaching her about taxidermy. That's when it hit me. I wasn't connecting with Milgrom's style of nonfiction writing because she's the kind of writer who thinks that spending a few days getting sloshed with UK taxidermists is frivolous, while I'm the kind of reader who thinks that sounds like a really awesome weekend.

It was unbelievable to me that this book had no pictures. I kept putting it down to run to the computer to look up the things she described, so here are links to sites with photos of a few of the works mentioned:

Walter Potter's Museum of Curiosities

Ken Walker's Irish Elk

Not even her own attempt at taxidermy seemed to bridge the distance between the author and her work. After her entry was critiqued at the World Championships, Milgrom says, "my squirrel missed the mark because I didn't love it enough." It's kind of why I felt her book missed the mark, too.

john calkin says

I thought I wanted to learn taxidermy when I was a boy, and I stumbled across this book while cruising Amazon for modern how-tos. This book is not a how-to. It's one of those rare books that seem to come out of nowhere and light up the time it takes to read it. Milgrom travels a lot to gather material and I was happy to tag along. I wouldn't have thought that the history of taxidermy would be interesting, but it is. I wouldn't have thought that museums would have collected thousands of animals looking for the most representative example of a species, but they did.

Taxidermists are as dedicated and obsessive about their work as any other artists. In America, we still have lots of huntable animals, the freedom to own guns, and hunters who wish the memory of their hunts to be preserved with mounted animals. In Europe, taxidermists mostly depend on road kill and the natural deaths of owned animals for work. Milgrom became interested enough in the work of her new friends to mount a squirrel of her own and enter a big-time competition to get a feel for the experiences of her new contacts. (No, she didn't win anything, nor expect to.)

Read the other reviews for more specific book descriptions. Anti-hunters and vegans should probably avoid it. I enjoyed every word. It's a gem.

Sharon Porter says

Always good to learn a different perspective and this book definitely did that!

April says

It's not a great sign when you read a book to learn more about a subject and find yourself correcting the author. I got the impression that she wasn't REALLY interested in taxidermy, that she was actually interesting in writing a book with a little shock value. Because taxidermy is WEIRD, right? SO WEIRD.

It seemed dated despite not being old. Too bad. I wanted to like it.

Virginia says

I bought this book in a gift shop at the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History, which I did not think was that far a stretch at the time, but looking back, this was an interesting decision on the part of the Smithsonian. Chapter 4 of this book covers in detail the ways in which the Smithsonian, in revamping their displays in the early 2000's, systematically and needlessly destroyed irreplaceable artifacts of great historical, artistic, and biological value in the name of "cost efficiency," even though there were other options available. For instance: one of three blue whale mounts in the world – hacked apart and stuffed into a dumpster to save money. Now there are only two - in New York and Tokyo. Dioramas that painstakingly recreated environmental biomes which are now no longer found in the wild were dismantled, hacked apart, and burned. Offers from other museums that would preserve and maintain historical displays were rejected. Ugh. This chapter made me almost literally sick, and simultaneously furious. And I can't believe the Smithsonian decided to sell this book. In hindsight, this may have been a small act of rebellion on the part of some individuals, and the big bosses in charge of buying stuff to sell in gift shops obviously have never read it.

I am now very curious to go back to the museum and look at some of the displays described in this book in detail. So there's that.

It helped to have previously read *Dragon Hunter: Roy Chapman Andrews & the Central Asiatic Expeditions* by Charles Gallenkamp, about Roy Chapman Andrews (Yvette Borup Andrews, his first wife, was amazing), and to be passingly familiar with Carl Akeley. This book mainly concentrated on museum taxidermists, artists, etc instead of the people who mount hunting trophies, commercial taxidermists.

Emily Mayer sounds AWESOME. I love her art, and her attitude, and her personality. If the goal of taxidermy is to cross the uncanny valley and create animals that are as close to life as possible, she is the person included in this book who I feel is closest to that goal. I mean, I have had rodents as pets for years and years and years, and I am very familiar with what they look like - and even after looking at this mouse for a long time, knowing it is a mount, I cannot really pinpoint whether it is alive or not. And this dog? I wouldn't necessarily be able to tell with a deer or a lion or a bird, but to succeed in the challenge of taking on an animal like a mouse or a dog, where people live with them and are intimately familiar with every detail of

how they look - that's amazing.

I think one of my favorite things about this book is the way the author immerses herself in the subject matter - she doesn't just interview these guys by phone, she went and stayed in their houses (Ken Walker, Emily Mayer) and really got an in depth picture of who these people are personally, and the reality of the taxidermy field today. Her personal journey as detached sort of scientific observer to someone who then stuffs her own squirrel was almost as interesting as the people she interviews.

I really feel, as someone who knew practically nothing about taxidermy prior to reading this, that the author captured the spirit and essence of the field, the history and artistry of taxidermy as well as the occasional kitschiness of it all. There is a section towards the end of the book where she is describing the critique she is receiving from Jack Fishwick at the World Taxidermy Championship for her squirrel (*Gray Squirrel, Yellow Dawn*): "I think it's very good for a first attempt...but you have been hanging around taxidermists for the past two years - perhaps the best taxidermists in the world. You have an advantage! You are not starting at rock bottom. You have tons and tons of info you could have studied." Personally I feel that his critique was a little off the mark - the author did succeed - what she was preserving was not a squirrel, but the field of taxidermy, through this book.

Elizabeth says

I wanted to like this book a lot more than I did. While there is some interesting information in this book, the writing style often made it jumbled. Instead of being one tale covering the history of taxidermy and renowned taxidermist past and present, *Still Life* was read more as a collection of essays that repeated the same story, taxidermists love nature and animals and hope to recreate life in their mounts. I didn't get the sense that Milgrom really had any interest in taxidermy or natural history and this book desperately needed some passion. This book could also have been improved with a few pictures to show the different styles, techniques, and pieces she was describing in each chapter. In the end I found this book more anecdotal than informative which was a disappointment to me.

Ethan Gilsdorf says

Imitation of life

A tour of the hidden subculture of taxidermy — with recipes

By Ethan Gilsdorf | Boston Globe, March 14, 2010

When the Parisian taxidermy shop Deyrolle went up in flames two years ago 90 percent of the inventory was lost to the fire and smoke — thousands of specimens, from fossils to beetles, rabbits to polar bears, some reaching back to the store's 1831 origins.

The loss touched not only natural history buffs, but casual window shoppers like myself. When I lived in Paris, I'd bring visitors to see Deyrolle's majestic zebras captured midprance and the fierce tigers with jaws agape, winding up for a serious snarl. But I also found my curiosity colored by horror, pity, and disgust. As an animal lover, taxidermy unsettled me. I wanted to look away. Yet, I could not, and eventually, staring into

the glassy black eyes of a lion, I was able to see beauty in death.

That's one of the paradoxes explored by Melissa Milgrom in her debut book, "Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy." Milgrom, who has written for The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, takes us on an absorbing tour through this "incomparable tool for displaying the wonder and beauty of animals." Part craft and art, both hobby and business, and mixed with science and theater, taxidermy begins with a corpse, then tears it apart to infuse the body again with the illusion of spirit. One competition judge describes it as an attempt "to duplicate what God made."

Like many forays into little-known subcultures, Milgrom's survey is chock-full of colorful characters. But these are no kooky amateur trophy mounters; they're top practitioners — true taxidermy geeks. We begin with a prolonged visit to a third-generation New Jersey taxidermy shop called Schwendeman's, run by a father and son. We meet competitors at the annual World Taxidermy Championships wheeling mounted leopards through hotel lobbies and preening their entries' fur like nervous competitors at the Westminster Kennel Club dog show.

Our skilled reporter later attends the auction of a collection of Victorian anthropomorphic "curiosities" — ridiculous yet painstakingly crafted dioramas of 20 kittens in wedding dresses, or 98 birds reenacting the nursery rhyme "The Death and Burial of Cock Robin." She lurks to capture conversations (often off-color) and scatters in snippets of taxidermy history. While we probably spend too long, almost three chapters, with British "anti-taxidermist" Emily Mayer, who fabricates cow heads and sharks for artist Damien Hirst's installations, the book's heart lies with Ken Walker, a two-time WTC champion. The swaggering but affable Walker excels in the "Re-Creations" category. He crafts a giant panda from dyed bear skins; his huge prehistoric deer is cobbled together from elk hides. In a funny life imitates art twist, he's also a skilled karaoke singer, with a dead-on Roy Orbison impersonation.

While Milgrom takes a back seat to the taxidermists, she does pop up from time to time to offer commentary. For example, at the auction she remarks how depressed she feels, realizing a beloved British collection would be broken up. After backstage tours of Smithsonian attics and trade show floors, she remarks, "How tired my eyes were from all that I had seen." So, too, are the reader's after her exhaustive litanies of muskrats, coyotes, mallards, and perch. Too much detail can be a liability.

Because the author insists on inserting her "I" into this sort of investigation, we naturally expect to learn more about her own interest in taxidermy — what she has at stake. The book need not be a quest for personal meaning, but Milgrom's own investment needs more backbone than the first chapter's meager admission that, on a safari to Tanzania, upon seeing a hunting party's booty of carcasses, she wanted to know "what compels people to want to transform animals into mantelpiece trophies." Otherwise, sans soul-searching, perhaps it's better the author keep her distance.

Another misstep: The somewhat perplexing first chapter muddles topics — her admiring visit to Schwendeman's with her African trip and what feels more like concluding not introductory remarks. Section breaks and some reorganization early on might have provided a firmer foundation for the book. A further quibble: Photos would have helped to illustrate the mounts she discusses.

But false moves aside, Milgrom artfully uncovers a hidden world. We learn recipes for pickling skins, how to mold fake tongues and lips, and smell the stench of rotting flesh. We grasp how the 19th century's insatiable lust for specimens led to the slaughter of thousands of beasts. And we understand taxidermy's new ironic role in preserving species that man keeps driving to extinction.

Like other misunderstood subcultures, taxidermy deserves our respect. “Still Life” elevates it from kitsch and merely weird and morbid. The book ends, fittingly, with the author stuffing her own squirrel. She wins no prizes, but comes to understand first-hand the art’s absurd devotion, as well as the hard truth that “no matter how hard a taxidermist tries, he or she can never bring the animal back to life.”

Ethan Gilsdorf, author of “Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks: An Epic Quest for Reality Among Role Players, Online Gamers, and Other Dwellers of Imaginary Realms,” can be reached at ethan@ethangilsdorf.com.

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