

UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

Volume 9, Issue 10 - October 2022



THE MONSTER ISSUE



I wrote a book about tabletop roleplaying games. It's called *Monsters, Aliens, and Holes in the Ground: A Guide to Tabletop Roleplaying Games from D&D to Mothership*. It will be published by MIT Press in October of 2023.

What follows is an excerpt from the book, the chapter, appropriate for this issue, on the *Monster Manual* (1977), the first core rulebook of the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* game. As this is drawn directly from the final text of the book, it has style and formatting that does not match the rest of this magazine. Sorry about that.

* * *

Monster Manual (1977)

The *Monster Manual* marks the start of a strange time for TSR, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and, to a certain degree, the broader world of RPGs. There is a deeper sort of magic at work here, which makes sense, because a book of monsters is a powerful, imagination-capturing thing.

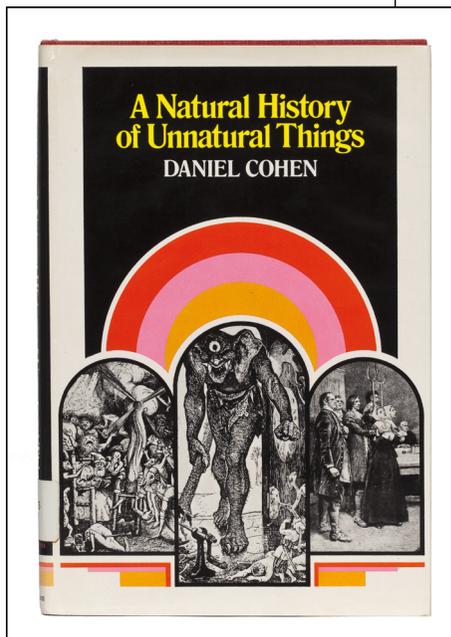
My entrance into *Dungeons & Dragons* was because of monsters. As a little kid, I loved dinosaurs. A little older, I learned about cryptids, like my own local Jersey Devil and the Loch Ness Monster—is it a dinosaur or a monster? Why not both? A little older, and I had a stack of Daniel Cohen books, like *The Encyclopedia of Monsters* and *A Natural History of Unnatural Things*.

It didn't matter if a monster was supposedly real or entirely fictional, I wanted to know all about it. I was not alone in this. Cohen's books, of which there are many, also covered ghosts, horror movies, and pop culture topics outside the paranormal and were aimed squarely at children. They most often took the form of a cyclopedia, with short entries arranged in alphabetical order, crammed with just the juicy details; there was no room for the boring stuff. This sort of reference book was a common format in the pre-internet days—I have piles of them for kids and adults alike on monsters, mythology, the occult, and general oddness, like Barbara

Ninde Byfield's *The Glass Harmonica* (1967) and Rossell Hope Robbins's *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (1959).

Most of them are illustrated, the very best strikingly so, like Louis Le Breton's diabolical engravings of Goëtic demons for the 1863 edition of Collin de Plancy's *Dictionnaire Infernal*. While the Victorian era might seem long ago, the origins of this sort of book go even farther back, to the bestiaries. These books, more properly called *bestiarum vocabulum*, are chronicles of creatures both real and imagined, best known as illuminated manuscripts produced in Renaissance-era monasteries. But the earliest, *The Physiologus*, dates all the way back to the second century and draws from still older sources. Human beings have long been interested in compendiums of monsters, so the emergence of the *Monster Manual* is no surprise, nor is the enduring popularity of RPG monster books among players.

What is surprising, though, is that, once again, TSR was not the first to release a book of monsters. *All the Worlds' Monsters*, from Chaosium, hit shelves before *Monster Manual*, thanks to printing problems that delayed the latter's release from September to late December. Now, throughout its history, TSR occasionally engaged in poor sportsmanship and aggressive tactics (a well-worn joke I've heard was that TSR stood for "They Sue Regularly"), but the company usually appeared above the fray in public. *All the Worlds' Monsters* seems to have riled the company, though, if TSR vice president of game design, Mike Carr's belligerent foreword to the *Monster Manual* is any indication:

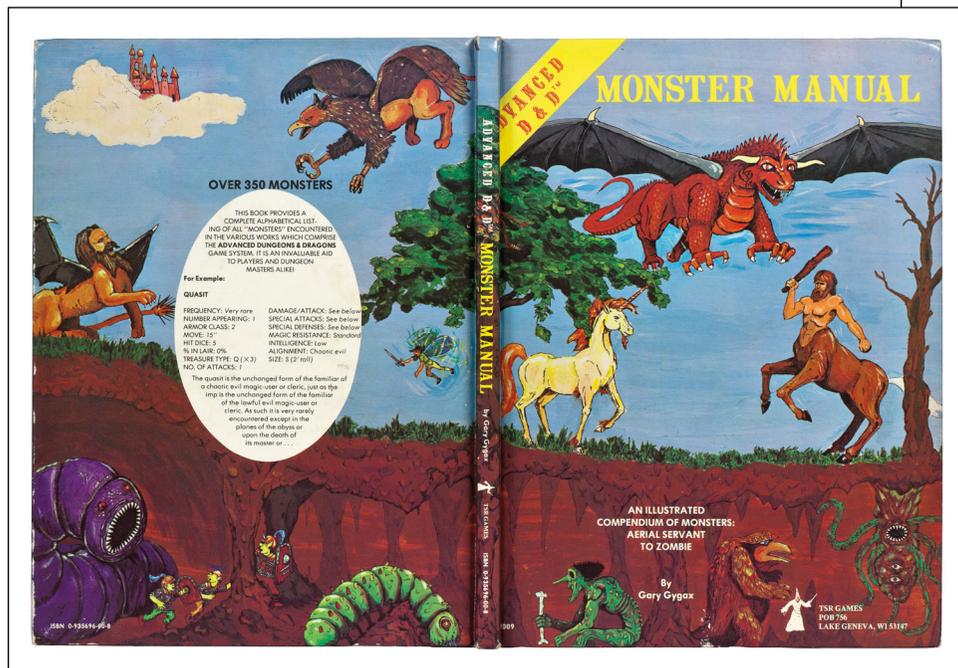


The success of *Dungeons & Dragons* has spawned a considerable number of imitations and spin-off products, perhaps inevitably. Some of these have merit; many, however, do not – and although we may concede their right to exist (however dependent they may be on *D & D*'s audience), we would caution the prospective buyer to consider their true value and not to be confused with those items which bear the *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* name and constitute the official *D & D* family of products. As for value, let the others be measured against the standard of quality we have striven for – a hardbound encyclopedia of monsters, for instance, as opposed to a low quality collection which is poorly assembled and bound.

Salty! Fit more for an editorial in *The Dragon* magazine than at the front of the first book in a much-hyped new line, the foreword is entirely odd. The rest of it is one loud toot of *D&D*'s own horn and sounds insecure more than anything. While the low budget *All the Worlds' Monsters* was the first RPG monster book, it was not the touchstone that the *Monster Manual* was about to become, in part, because of what it is: A luxurious, even decadent book.

This is the first hardcover RPG book and, until the late '80s, the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* line produced the *only* hardcover books in the hobby. That TSR could produce such a book, with its full color wrap-around cover

MONSTER MANUAL, TSR, 1977
GARY GYGAX, COVER BY DAVID C. SUTHERLAND III



art and interior illustrations on every page (for nearly every monster!), was a testament to their lofty position in the world of RPGs. Those qualities further added to the company's prestige by helping them gain access to the shelves of general bookstores, where they got in front of the eyes of shoppers outside of the tiny gamer niche.

The player response to the *Monster Manual* was overwhelmingly positive (it's the only AD&D book that got both a direct and an indirect sequel, for one thing) and a clear contrast to whatever was going on internally at TSR to spur that. Certainly, the book's subject matter of monsters, the most evocative and dangerous component of D&D, contributed to its success, as did its scope—over 350 monsters received attributes and descriptions—but I suspect that it was the artwork that cemented its place as an instant classic.

Up to this point, artwork was scarce in RPGs, both because of the small budgets available and printing constraints. What did appear was often crude and amateurish. Even the color cover art of the *Monster Manual*, by David C. Sutherland III, isn't exactly a well-crafted piece by most standards. His interiors are much better examples of his skill, and the final full-page illustration is an exquisitely detailed rendering that implies the garishness of the cover was a measured artistic choice. And there is something compelling in the cover. It always seemed to have a vibe, perhaps due to its cross-section view, that reminds me of a children's activity book. It certainly promises adventure and exploration.

Inside, Sutherland is joined, primarily, by David Trampier, whose clean, precise lines often evoke the feel of medieval woodcuts. Together, they create a world where green slime drips from the ceiling and treasure chests can come to (hungry) life. RPGs take place in the theater of the mind, but the importance of finally seeing these creatures, often in tableau with unfortunate adventurers meeting their dooms, can't be overstated. Because the illustrations tend towards the cartoonish, these depictions never feel set the way they do in later editions with more detailed, realistic art.

Carr wasn't wrong about *All the Worlds' Monsters*—it was a slapdash affair with typewritten entries and sporadic illustrations of largely arbitrary monsters. *Monster Manual* set the mold for others to follow, including: *Out of the Pit* (1985) for *Fighting Fantasy*, S. Petersen's *Field Guide to Cthulhu Monsters* (1988) and *Malleus Monstrorum* (2003) for *Call of Cthulhu*, *Creatures of Barsaive* (1994) for *Earthdawn*, *The Gloranthan Bestiary* (1988, 2018) for *RuneQuest*, *Galaxy Guide 4: Alien Races* for West End's *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*—all embrace a standard of art and detail created here by Gygax and his collaborators. 🍷