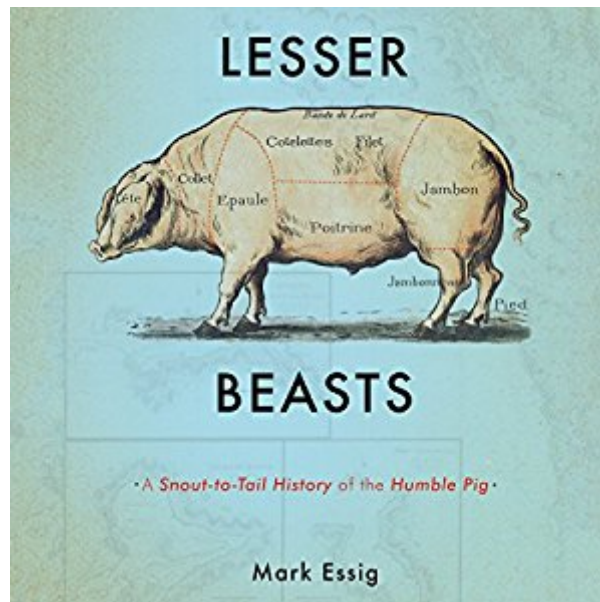


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Lesser Beasts: A Snout-to-Tail History Of The Humble Pig



Synopsis

Unlike other barnyard animals, which pull plows, give eggs or milk, or grow wool, a pig produces only one thing: meat. Incredibly efficient at converting almost any organic matter into nourishing, delectable protein, swine are nothing short of a gastronomic godsend - yet their flesh is banned in many cultures, and the animals themselves are maligned as filthy, lazy brutes. As historian Mark Essig reveals in *Lesser Beasts*, swine have such a bad reputation for precisely the same reasons they are so valuable as a source of food: they are intelligent, self-sufficient, and omnivorous. What's more, he argues, we ignore our historic partnership with these astonishing animals at our peril. Tracing the interplay of pig biology and human culture from Neolithic villages 10,000 years ago to modern industrial farms, Essig blends culinary and natural history to demonstrate the vast importance of the pig and the tragedy of its modern treatment at the hands of humans. Pork, Essig explains, has long been a staple of the human diet, prized in societies from Ancient Rome to dynastic China to the contemporary American South. Yet pigs' ability to track down and eat a wide range of substances (some of them distinctly unpalatable to humans) and convert them into edible meat has also led people throughout history to demonize the entire species as craven and unclean. Today's unconscionable system of factory farming, Essig explains, is only the latest instance of humans taking pigs for granted, and the most recent evidence of how both pigs and people suffer when our symbiotic relationship falls out of balance. An expansive, illuminating history of one of our most vital yet unsung food animals, *Lesser Beasts* turns a spotlight on the humble creature that, perhaps more than any other, has been a mainstay of civilization since its very beginnings - whether we like it or not.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 7 hours and 17 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: May 5, 2015

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00WXS4XF0

Best Sellers Rank: #2 in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Zoology > Mammals

#2 in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Animals > Mammals #3 in Books > Science & Math > Agricultural Sciences > Animal Husbandry

Customer Reviews

This is a very good book, excellently written and full of information. It is not a book on agriculture or domestication, although it includes elements of both. The book is partly an account of the social history of pork eating, with some genetics and modern methods of farming pigs added. It's fascinating as is. Essig likes pigs as living creatures, never losing sight of the animals' intelligence and how they are like humans in some ways. My only reservation is that it doesn't quite live up to the title, which implies a more general history than the book presents. He says the book focuses on the Western experience to make a shorter book, but it leaves out areas where pigs have been of importance, such as Eastern Europe and the Balkans, clearly Western. What he does cover he covers well. This includes how Judaism and Islam came to see the pig as unclean, the Roman love of pork, pigs in Medieval and modern Europe (with a focus on England) and pigs coming to the Americas. The last portion of the book, a sizable chunk of the whole, is primarily the American--that is, US--experience. The book has surprises. His discussion of how some religions see the pig as polluted is by far the clearest I have ever read. He makes an interesting point that we eat lots of animals but the pig can return the favor. He describes how environmental conditions relate. In heavily forested Northern Europe, the forest pig could be semi-wild and subsist on acorns and other foods, but in China with large areas denuded of forest, pigs grown in small stys efficiently produced meat as well as vital fertilizer, and also produced a different sort of pig.

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