



Review:

**Barbara Alice Mann and Kaarina Kailo,
*The Woman Who Married the Bear:
The Spirituality of the Ancient Foremothers*
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023)**

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Barbara Alice Mann and Kaarina Kailo's *The Woman Who Married the Bear* is a monumental exploration of ancient spirituality rooted in the relationship between women and bears. This interdisciplinary work boldly revisits the myths, traditions, and ecological wisdom of matristic societies, reframing these stories as foundational to understanding human interconnectedness with the natural world. Mann, a historian of Native American traditions, and Kailo, a scholar of feminist and ecological studies, blend their expertise to offer a compelling narrative that challenges patriarchal distortions of history while providing insights into ecological renewal and cultural recovery.

Mann and Kailo introduce their work with an evocative declaration: "*This book walks fearlessly into the cave, following the umbilicus connecting the sauna and the moon lodge to the Mother spirituality around Bear in their dance of cyclical rebirth*" (p. 1). The book examines bear myths from Indigenous American, Finno-Ugric, Siberian, and other global Northern traditions, presenting the bear as a symbol of regeneration, the feminine, and



ecological harmony. Through their meticulous analysis, the authors position these narratives as deeply relevant to contemporary environmental and social crises.

Conceptual Framework and Thematic Depth

At the heart of the book is the concept of 'Original Instructions,' which Mann and Kailo define as ancient ecological and social principles transmitted through bear myths. These instructions emphasize harmony with the natural world and communal welfare, values that the authors argue have been overshadowed by patriarchal ideologies. Kailo writes, "*Putting the world back together requires humanity to recover the sacred, its Original Instructions*" (p. 11). This recovery, they suggest, is critical to addressing the modern world's ecological and social imbalances.

Mann and Kailo explore how the bear's cyclical behaviours—hibernation and spring regeneration—mirror human life cycles, making the bear a universal symbol of rebirth and continuity. As Mann notes, "*The woman who becomes Bear by mating with Bear thus becomes the she-bear ancestor of humanity...The bear's den is the female womb, and the Paleolithic bear caves are the prototype of sacred sites*" (p. 3). This connection between the bear's den and the womb is central to the authors' argument that ancient bear myths celebrated the sacredness of the feminine and its role in creation and regeneration.

The book is divided into two parts: the first focuses on bear myths in North America, examining Indigenous traditions and their deep ecological roots, while the second explores Eurasian bear myths and their reinterpretations under patriarchal systems. Through this structure, the authors trace how these stories evolved, highlighting the shift from matristic narratives to male-centered myths during the Bronze Age. Kailo critiques this transformation, stating: "*Clearly, something happened between the Paleolithic and Bronze Age, a cultural switch that moved the long-standing focus from Mother to Father*" (p. 102).

Methodological Strengths and Interdisciplinary Approaches

One of the book's greatest strengths is its interdisciplinary approach. Mann and Kailo draw on archaeology, mythology, feminist theory, and Indigenous studies to reveal patterns across cultures and time periods. Their method involves peeling back layers of patriarchal reinterpretations to uncover the original meanings of these myths. As the authors explain, "*We scour traditions...scraping off the overlay of the later ages, in the foreign and*

damaging interpretations thrust upon them over time” [sic] (p. 12). This meticulous process allows them to reconstruct the ‘original patina’ of bear myths.

The authors’ feminist critique is particularly compelling. They challenge the male-focused interpretations of ancient bear ceremonies, arguing that these narratives have been stripped of their matristic origins. Kailo writes, *“The studies of bear ceremonials focus on male hunting...whereas the mother who gave him birth is left on the back burner, like Virgin Mary, a mere prelude to the important ‘master narrative’”* (p. 76). This reframing restores women’s centrality to these stories, emphasizing their roles as creators, nurturers, and spiritual leaders.

Mann’s analysis of Indigenous American traditions further enriches the book. She explores how women’s agricultural practices aligned with the bear’s behaviour, connecting human and ecological rhythms. For example, *“The bear’s times of year are clearly female associated...their cycle is too clearly associated with human gestation to be missed by anyone paying attention”* (p. 21). This insight underscores the ecological wisdom embedded in these traditions.

Scope for Further Scholarly Exploration

Despite its many strengths, the book leaves some areas for further exploration. While Mann and Kailo effectively critique patriarchal distortions of bear myths, they could expand their discussion of how these narratives have persisted despite cultural erasures. Additionally, while the book’s accessible language is a refreshing departure from academic jargon, the dense interdisciplinary content may still be challenging for general readers. More contextual explanations of key terms, such as ‘Original Instructions,’ would help bridge the gap between specialist and non-specialist audiences.

Another area for improvement is the limited focus on how these ancient principles can be practically applied in contemporary contexts. The authors touch on the relevance of bear myths to modern ecological and feminist movements but could provide more concrete examples of how these traditions might inform present-day practices.

Cultural Relevance and Contemporary Applications

Mann and Kailo’s work is deeply relevant to contemporary issues of ecological sustainability and gender equity. As Kailo observes, *“Traces of the Woman Who Married the Bear are evident in the life-celebrating, socio-cosmic matrix that honors especially the*

icons of regeneration" (p. 120). By reclaiming the spiritual and ecological wisdom of bear myths, the authors offer a framework for reimagining humanity's relationship with nature.

The book's critique of patriarchal narratives also resonates with ongoing feminist discourses. Mann's reflection on Indigenous traditions highlights the importance of restoring women's roles in spiritual and cultural practices: "*In the long-ago, the Woman Who Married the Bear promised life...Bear's story links the patterns of stars in the Breath of Sky to the matching pattern of seasons in the Blood of Earth*" (p. 15). This poetic imagery underscores the universal relevance of these myths as symbols of regeneration and harmony.

Scholarly Impact and Target Readership

The Woman Who Married the Bear is a significant contribution to feminist scholarship, mythology, and ecological studies. Its interdisciplinary approach and feminist critique make it an invaluable resource for scholars of mythology, gender studies, and environmental history. As Kailo writes, "*Bear is neither revisionary nor patriarchal in origin. Instead, Bear is rooted in something that we might call 'our own'*" (p. 149). This assertion encapsulates the book's mission to reclaim the sacredness of the feminine and its relevance to modern challenges.

The book is also accessible to non-academic audiences interested in mythology, spirituality, and ecology. Its emphasis on storytelling and the interconnectedness of life offers a powerful reminder of humanity's deep ties to the natural world.

Conclusion

The Woman Who Married the Bear is an extraordinary work that bridges the past and present, offering profound insights into humanity's spiritual and ecological heritage. Mann and Kailo's reclamation of bear mythology is both a scholarly achievement and a call to action, urging readers to recover the wisdom of the Original Instructions. As they poignantly remind us: "*To ignore Mother is to lack respect, something Bear warned against*" (p. 86). This book is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the intersections of mythology, ecology, and gender in a world increasingly disconnected from its roots.

About the reviewer

Carla Ionescu, PhD, is an ancient historian specializing in the study of Artemis and ancient goddess traditions. She is the founder of The Artemis Research Centre, where she leads the Artemis Mapping Project, aiming to digitally map and preserve ancient temples dedicated to Artemis across the Mediterranean, Balkans, and Middle East. Dr. Ionescu also hosts "The Goddess Project" podcast, exploring the mythologies, rituals, and legacies of ancient goddesses.