



On Tarzan

Alex Vernon



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This book explores our fascination with the King of the Jungle. On Tarzan is a sometimes playful, sometimes serious, and always provocative consideration of the twentieth century's best-known fictional character. It is also the first book-length investigation of a century's worth of Tarzan's incarnations and our varied imaginative responses to them. As Alex Vernon looks at how and why we have accorded mythical, archetypal status to Tarzan, he takes stock of the Tarzan books, films, and comics as well as some of the many faux- and femme-Tarzan rip-offs, the toys and other tie-in products, the fanzines, and the appropriation of Tarzan's image in the media. Tarzan first appeared in 1912. To ponder his journey from jungle lord then to Disney boy-toy now is, as Vernon writes, to touch on childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, especially for the male of the species on colonialism and nationhood on Hollywood and commerce, race and gender, sex and death, Darwin and Freud. On nature - is Tarzan friend or foe? On imagination and identity. Vernon exposes the contradictions, ambiguities, and coincidences of the Tarzan phenomenon. Tarzan is noble and savage, eternal adolescent and eternal adult, hero to immigrants and orphans but also to nativist Americans. Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan story is racist, but Tarzan himself is racially slippery. Although Tarzan asserts his white superiority over savage Africans, his adventures flirt with miscegenation and engage our ongoing obsession with all things primitive. As the 2012 centennial of Tarzan's creation approaches, the ape-man's hold on us can still manifest itself in surprising ways. This entertaining study, with its rich and multilayered associations, offers a provocative model for understanding the life cycle of pop culture phenomena.

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