

REVIEW OF *DEVOLUTION*

Are you fed up with pretentious city people looking at nature through rose-colored glasses? Do you think all those meditation-obsessed wannabe hippies need to be reminded that the REAL world is a bloody struggle for survival?

...if your answer is “no”, then, like me, you might find the early parts of this book a bit tedious. It moves slowly and the characters are caricatures.

This quote sums up the theme of the book pretty well:

Do you know that more people are hurt by bison in North America than by sharks all over the world? Do you know why? Because they try to ride them. Tourists from New York or Tokyo, whatever urban bubble, literally try to jump on the buffaloes’ backs. Feed them, hug them, take selfies with them. They think they’re at a petting zoo, or in a Disney movie. They’ve never learned the real rules, so they think they can just make up their own.¹

Is that actually true? For sharks, Wikipedia says: “Every year, around 80 unprovoked attacks are reported worldwide.” If you try to look up how many people are hurt by bison each year, it’s hard to find national statistics—all I can find are statistics for Yellowstone specifically, and the most rigorous-looking source I can find seems to cut off in the year 2015, but a 2024 NYT article says that “[o]n average, there are one to two reported incidents of bison injuring visitors annually.” Even if we double that to 4, the only way the book’s claim could be true is if Yellowstone accounts for a mere 5% of yearly bison attacks in the US. If that were so, I’d think it’d be easier to find information on those attacks, but who knows. Anyway, even if bison were injuring—or even *killing*—a hundred people each year, in a country of 333 million people that’s hardly evidence of some cultural epidemic of naivety. (Yeah, yeah, it’s just a novel, I know.)

Total tangent: I tried asking Claude and ChatGPT to fact-check the above claim too.

- Claude agreed with me. It cited statistics about Yellowstone and from the International Shark Attack File and concluded “[s]hark attacks globally seem to outnumber bison attacks in North America by a significant margin”. It’s not obvious whether it really tried to rule out the possibility of substantial attacks happening outside Yellowstone, though.

¹Max Brooks, *Devolution: A Firsthand Account of the Rainier Sasquatch Massacre*, First edition (New York: Del Rey, 2020), 244.

- ChatGPT initially thought the book was right. But when pressed for statistics, it too just gave data from Yellowstone and the ISAF, from which the bison-hurt-more-people conclusion seems to be a total non sequitur. I think two factors confused ChatGPT. First, typical articles on bison attacks present them as an underappreciated problem (*did you know bison can actually be really dangerous???* *they attack a couple people in the park each year!!!*) while typical articles on shark attacks present them as an overblown threat (*did you know sharks only attack 80 people each year???* *Jaws got everyone scared over nothing!!!*). This difference in presentation was also reflected in ChatGPT-4o's response, suggesting it may have decided the matter based on the tone of the articles rather than an actual comparison of numbers (just like a lazy human!). Second, when challenged, it finally concluded that "while the total number of shark attacks globally is higher, the number of bison-related injuries in a localized area like Yellowstone National Park can exceed the number of shark attacks within that same context." This suggests it was confused by the fact that bison attack more people than sharks do *in Yellowstone*.

All that aside, the book is pretty entertaining once the action gets going.