

What The Fake!

Picture this: it's 1907, and you're traversing a windy, dirt-clad path in Bendigo's Kamarooka Shire. Every now and again, a breeze disrupts the tangled eucalypt canopy, beckoning in strobes of light and illuminating crowds of critters as they dance through the undergrowth.

Peaceful, right? Now imagine, in one of those brief light-filled moments, you spot a dark, slinking mass. It vanishes in the blink of an eye, leaving only the memory of a sinuous frame wrapped in a silky onyx coat.

And so borne was a legend that's held Victorians in its grips for the past 118 years. Often adopting the names of its latest sighting, the myth of the Kamarooka Black Panther has provided an endless source of speculation.

There have been thousands of reported sightings of these big cats, from the Dandenong ranges to the Great Ocean Road. Native to Africa and Asia, the panther isn't exactly equipped for Dorothy Mackellar's "sunburnt country". Some theorise they're the freed mascots of American soldiers brought over in WWII. Others believe they're the escapees of disbanded traditional circuses.

If you consult Australia's environmental department, they will tell you that they're just a rumour. But if that is true, how do we explain these sightings? Are they simply overindulged house cats? Feral felines bulked up from a life in the mountains? Or perhaps they're rock wallabies, their dark coats playing tricks on the mind.

Like the Australian panther (allegedly), our imaginations have long been prone to running wild. From the very beginning, our species has been faced with baffling events: mystery illnesses, sudden rat infestations, and left-handed people, to name a few. While modern science has shed light on these ambiguities, for a while, all we had for an explanation was imagination. We determined that rats must have appeared via spontaneous generation, that illnesses were caused by bloodsucking monsters, and that those who neglected their right hand must be witches.

The unknown captivates us; we can't help but investigate. Any phenomenon with ambiguous causal origins becomes a birthplace for myth and folklore, blurring the lines between fact and fiction. It stands to reason, then, that perhaps the most interesting things are not what we know but what we don't know.

The Facebook page, "Panther Sightings Victoria", now has over 107.9 thousand followers. Between images of fat barn cats and poorly photoshopped pumas, there are some convincing arguments, but part of me hopes the elusive panther remains elusive. Sure, the brief period of vindication would be delicious, but the ambiguity would be gone, taking with it the childlike joy of speculative imaginings.

I don't want your fun facts. I want your fun mysteries – the unsolved and overthought. I want ambiguity.