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Joseph R. Slaughter. *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. ix + 435 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-2817-1.

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The title of Joseph Slaughter's masterful new book *Human Rights, Inc.* accurately suggests that the author offers a critical view of contemporary human rights work as too closely allied with corporations and the market logics that late capitalism so assiduously promotes. But rather than analyzing the political economy of human rights, Slaughter takes the question of human rights "incorporation" in an entirely new—and urgently needed—direction. Liberal ideology and neoliberal economic practices may well provide one context for understanding the rapid diffusion of human rights discourse over the past six decades, but Slaughter asks us to consider how human rights have come to make sense—in his phrase, to make common sense—to billions of people from heterogeneous social, philosophical, and theological backgrounds. His answer: that the conceptual framework of rights has been incorporated not only into national constitutions and international covenants but also into modern human subjectivity. Most startlingly, he argues that a great deal of this incorporative work has been accomplished by a particular genre of novel: the Bildungsroman.

This is an argument that will especially appeal to literary historians, for Slaughter has infused renewed vitality into the critical history of the novel. Readers outside literature departments may wish to read his second chapter especially carefully in order to appreciate what the Bildungsroman is, and what it has to do with human rights. Essentially, Slaughter builds on the work of Georg Lukács and other historians and theorists of the novel who have argued that novels of "Bildung" (or the maturation and self-formation of a youthful protagonist, typically through a journey and a series of challenges) enact as a cultural practice the emergence of the modern, bourgeois, liberal subject of rights. Slaughter brings

to this long-standing appreciation of the ideological dimensions of the Bildungsroman the critical practices of postcolonial theory, and he closely analyzes a handful of expertly selected novels from Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the South Asian diaspora.

What emerges from his sustained scrutiny of the "world novel's" engagement with Bildung through the lens of political, literary, and cultural theory is the bracing argument that narrative fiction acts "as a cultural surrogate for the missing warrant and executive sanction of human rights law, supplying (in both content and form) a culturally symbolic legitimacy for the authority of human rights law and the imagination of an international human rights order" (p. 85). Put another way, novels perform the work of incorporating, naturalizing, and normalizing human rights in diverse societies—so that people around the world today believe in human rights even though states flagrantly violate them, and even though international enforcement of human rights is at best highly constrained.

It is at this point that legal theorists, legal historians, and anyone who has thought carefully about international human rights will begin to attend most carefully to Slaughter's work, for he offers insights into phenomena that are much discussed without being fully understood. The standard explanations for the rapid spread of international human rights norms since 1945 understand them to be either a secular moral vocabulary capable of attracting the consensus of UN member states, or a feature and expression of imperialism in its postwar and neoliberal forms, or a political tool that appeals (often for conflicting purposes) to liberal democracies, socialists, and newly independent postcolonial states. The

extremely weak international enforcement mechanisms that have been squeezed out of negotiations at the UN and regional associations of states are typically understood to be the tepid response of states who jealously guard their sovereignty, and who pay lip service to human rights norms while deflecting scrutiny of their human rights obligations. These entirely plausible explanations of why states have, since 1945, proliferated human rights covenants and conventions while also proliferating human rights violations beg the question of why human rights vocabularies appeal to both popular and dissident political movements around the world. Why is it that such a fragile framework for political action has seized the imagination of so many individuals and groups, from such a diverse array of societies?

Joseph Slaughter invites us to consider the possibility that human rights have become so popular through a process of enculturation and subject formation that has spread through the dissemination and reinvention of the Bildungsroman. In sketching his argument here, I have necessarily skipped over its many dimensions and subtleties, including fascinating expositions on the tautology vs. the teleology of human rights, on the legal meaning of “person,” “personality,” and “personality development,” on the public spheres of human rights, and on the responsibilities of readers. Suffice it to say that Slaughter approaches his topic from many angles, and that each chapter offers its own rewards: in each, he focuses on two novels (making reference as needed to other works of narrative fiction, testimonies, plays, and so forth) and on key texts of international human rights law (and above all on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

Driving his argument through extended close analysis of a handful of primary texts allows Slaughter to demonstrate how thoroughly the Bildungsroman and human rights law are constituted in and through each other. The thoroughness of Slaughter’s study offers a major advance in the emerging field of literature and human rights. Most of the scholarship currently available either uses the tools of literary and cultural theory to demonstrate the inadequacy of human rights frameworks or imports concepts from human rights law to critically illuminate representations of rights violations in literature. Both approaches implicitly reinforce the boundaries of “human rights” and “literature” as discrete discursive fields. In contrast, Slaughter’s analysis of the incorporative and normalizing function of the Bildungsroman opens a new understanding of how literature and human rights frameworks produce meaning in and through each other. The stakes—as well as the rewards—are high when

approaching literature and human rights law as mutually reinforcing producers of the contemporary consensus on human rights. Slaughter approaches this challenge by examining “the formal properties of [the] imaginative texture of enabling fictions (which recurs throughout the text of human rights law) to show how the gap between natural and positive law ... is largely a cultural gap—a gap that is ordinarily bridged not by the coercive force of law but by the ‘consensual’ work of culture” (p 55).

The principal novelists on whose work Slaughter focuses include Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, Tununa Mercado, Michael Ondaatje, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Christopher Hope, and Calixthe Beyala. Their novels do not so much represent world regions as they exemplify motifs and critical engagements that run throughout classic forms and contemporary reformulations of the Bildungsroman. Some readers will yearn for a greater range of exemplary novels. Multiplying the sources of evidence would indeed have made some elements of the argument more persuasive, but at the expense of the depth of argument that Slaughter pursues here. The author clearly prefers depth and density—the argument is approached from multiple angles, and nailed down tightly at every turn—and these qualities mark the book’s dedication to rigorous scholarship. The bibliography is also excellent, and another sign of the book’s rigor.

General readers might prefer an argument with a bit more breathing room. By way of contrast, consider Lynn Hunt’s recent book *The Invention of Human Rights* (2007). Hunt, a historian, offers an argument that the epistolary novel participated in a fundamental reorganization of sympathy that was necessary for individual rights to be conceived as human rights in the late eighteenth century. Hunt writes for a trade publisher (Norton), and her work might well reach more readers. But her treatment of the construction and operation of the epistolary novel appears thin in contrast to Slaughter’s extensive theoretical analysis of the Bildungsroman.

A question neither author approaches is whether the epistolary novel or the Bildungsroman perform their distinctive cultural and political work as literary genres in isolation from other forms of literature. Slaughter’s analysis is so persuasive because the Bildungsroman displays such a tight historical relationship with the emergence of the bourgeois male European citizen/subject of rights in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the postcolonial reformulations of the Bildungsroman similarly coincide with the postcolonial claims and coun-

terclaims placed on liberalism, citizenship, and rights. But what of other forms of the novel? Does the novel more broadly have a distinctive relationship to human rights law? What about poetry, theater, and the short story? What about other arts, such as film and visual arts?

That these questions remain unanswered by Slaughter (and by Hunt and other scholars) reflects the newness of the field of human rights and literature (and the arts more broadly). Yet as Slaughter's bibliography makes clear, he is indeed working within not only an emerging field but also a compelling one. Narrative fiction does indeed do human rights work—but not necessarily the hu-

man rights work it at first glance seemed to do. Slaughter concludes his book with a series of reflections on the responsibilities of readers, and this ethical turn echoes and expands upon the very best of prior scholarship, such as Thomas Keenan's *Fables of Responsibility* (1997). The ethical dimensions of thinking clearly about literature and rights underscore the urgency of Slaughter's efforts. Literary representations do much more than mirror instances and patterns of human rights violations, and they do much more than inspire compassion for those who suffer rights abuses. Human rights have arrived in literary studies and, with Slaughter's book, literary studies are now also dialogically engaged with human rights law.

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