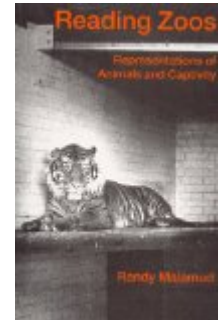


Randy Malamud. *Reading Zoos: Representations of Animals and Captivity.* New York: New York University Press, 1998. xii + 320 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-5602-7.



Reviewed by Dale D. Goble

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Reading Zoos is a diatribe: "I do not like zoos," Randy Malamud states (p. 1). As a diatribe, *Reading Zoos* lacks balance; the material is one-sided; the evidence stacked. Like all successful diatribes, however, the book will change the way you see zoos.

Malamud sets out to "problematize zoos" and demonstrate that they are "a cultural danger, a deadening of our sensibilities" (p. 5). He thus is "more concerned with what the imprisonment of animals says about the *people* who create, maintain, and patronize zoos," than he is with the effect of zoos on the animals confined in them (pp. 3-4). He seeks to examine the cultural role of zoos through "zoo stories--a catchall reference to a diverse range of literary and popular cultural artifacts" (p. 5). These stories include not only traditional literary creations such as plays, poems, novels, and short stories, but also "literally, reading zoos themselves" (p. 10). Malamud's reading of these various stories convince him that "zoos are seen, literally or metaphorically, as places of cruelty, deadened sensibility" (p. 15) that cage not "a real giraffe, but rather with a cultural stylization,

simplification, distillation, of a giraffe; a sample giraffe; a (stinted) representation of a giraffe" (p. 29) because it is a giraffe ripped from its habitat. "Zoos are not a microcosm of the natural world but an antithesis to it" (p. 30). As such, they mirror the relationship between human cultures and the natural world rather than relationships within the natural world. And, since zoos are part and parcel of "the forces that created Blockbuster Video and Disney World, Mall of America and Pizza Hut as our cultural venues," they are destructive of the natural world that they purport to portray (p. 34). Zoos thus serve to obscure both the impending "geocide" and the fundamental connection between humans and other animals.

Malamud organizes *Reading Zoos* under a handful of general categories --exhibiting imperialism, cages, pain, spectatorship, and kids and zoos--and examines a group of stories arranged around each category's theme like a spiral. Whether the spiral always reaches its point is questionable.

An example: Malamud begins the chapter titled "Exhibiting Imperialism" by locating zoos "in

the praxis of imperialism": "The zoo's forte is its construction of zoogoers as paramount, masters of all they survey, and zoo animals as subalterns" (p. 58). The zoo thus is "the analogue ... to the colonialist text in literary culture" (p. 58). Just as Rudyard Kipling's stories diminished the autonomy of Indians by coopting the 'native' experience, so the zoo animals are diminished by the control that zookeepers exercise--control not only over the physical condition of the animals but also of the 'nature' of the animals that is conveyed by the authoritative description accompanying the animals. The zoo, Malamud argues, is both a model of empire--because of the dominion that humans exercise over the animals--and a metaphor for imperialist society--because it imposes a unilateral and exploitative power relationship on nature. The zoo is "fundamentally a construct of imperial society" (p. 59). To prove these points, he sets out to "rehistoricize zoos by deconstructing the myths, lies, and prejudices of imperial history/natural history" (p. 60).

Malamud marshals compelling evidence that the London Zoo was established and expanded in step with the expansion of the second British Empire. As he notes, "The man [Sir Stamford Raffles] who made his reputation by conquering and administering England's imperial outposts in Asia ended his career by establishing the Zoological Society of London" and by endowing the Society with his personal collection of animals (p. 76). Similarly, gifts from conquered subjects regularly flowed into the imperial capital. And the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* trumpeted the correlation between "the extensive possession of Great Britain throughout the world" with the London Zoo's extensive collection of wild animals. (p. 73).

But one zoo does not define the class and Malamud's argument that "the zoo is indeed fundamentally a construct of imperial society" (p. 59) overreaches--I kept wanting to say "Yes, but ..." For example, there is a list of American cities that

"founded and developed zoos as a testament to their stature and a stepping stone to greater aspirations" (p. 61). But of the cities on the list--Philadelphia, Chicago, Washington D.C., the Bronx, and San Diego--only Washington was an "imperial" city--unless "imperial" is itself a metaphor. A more apt description is that offered by William Cronon in his study of the development of Chicago: boosters sought to promote their city in the hopes that it would grow and they would prosper.[1] A zoo--like a world's fair--demonstrated a certain level of wealth and organizational ability that suggested that a city was bound for greater glory; they were claims for recognition rather than repositories of gifts from tributaries.

Similar difficulties pop up in Malamud's quick review of the use of animals in international politics--recall the pandas that China sent the United States after Nixon's visit. Again, the exchange of animals between nations does not necessarily reflect an imperial relationship. China was not acknowledging the suzerainty of the United States; the pandas were not acknowledgment of inferiority, they were rather a reward for doing what the Chinese desired. The reality, in other words, seems a lot messier than Malamud suggests.

The book's saving grace is that Malamud recognizes the difficulty. In a discussion of Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "The Flamingos," Malamud comments that Rilke is "able to ignore the dynamics of animal captivity when he goes to the zoo" and present the animals as spiritually empowered (p. 150). This perspective, he notes, "reveals that my expectations regarding a monolithic logic and rhetoric--that is, the hypothesis that zoo stories will unilaterally advance the case against zoos--may sometimes extend farther than the texts themselves justify" (p. 150).

My recurrent wish was that Malamud had offered a text written in more shades of grey since he is clearly right on several of his theses. Zoos are inherently cages and the current trendy attempts to replicate habitats do little to change that

reality; zoos are poor places to see truly wild animals since they are little more than living picture books of the coffee-table genre--a giraffe in a zoo is not a giraffe on the savannah; the lot of animals in zoos often includes a substantial measure of pain; the process of looking at zoo animals is somehow out of focus; the use of zoos as repositories for nearly extinct animals is problematic if there is no chance that the animals can ever be returned to the wild because they have no habitat to return to; and most fundamentally: that humans have ambiguous, complex relationships with other animals--relationships that can seldom be reduced to clean, moral resolutions. But all of these issues are less clearly black-and-white than the diatribe format allows.

Take a serendipitous example. As I was finishing this review, the *New York Times* reported that a male Barbary lion had been discovered in a failed circus; that discovery led to a further search that turned up a handful of the species which was exterminated in the wild in 1921. There are now plans to reestablish the species.[2] Other captive breeding programs have led to the reintroduction of red wolves, Mexican wolves, black-footed ferrets, and Guam rails. These reintroductions may or may not succeed for any of a number of reasons --but all of them have depended at least in part on zoos.

One additional caveat. In *Reading Zoos*, Malamud also sets out to demonstrate that a critical reading of such texts has relevance to those outside academe. He proposes to offer an *ecocritical* reading that will "make amends for the past deficiencies of literary scholars" who often have retreated "'into a professionalism characterized by its obscurity and inaccessibility to all but other English professors'" (p. 6).[3] A laudable goal--but one that Malamud unfortunately fails to meet. He often slips into the "obscurity and inaccessibility" that he decries. The book seeks to "problematize zoos" (p. 5) and "rehistoricize zoos" (p. 60); it speaks of zoos as attempts to assimilate the 'other'

a process that leads to "*the reproduction and circulation of mimetic capital ...*" (p. 11); it invokes "the praxis of imperialism" (p. 58), the "construction of zoogoers as paramount ... and zoo animals as subalterns" (p. 58). It is, of course, possible to understand Malamud's points. But the language does force someone outside the discipline to parse the sentences--which is unfortunate when other, less jargon-studded language is available.

Notes:

[1]. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991.

[2]. Donald G. McNeil Jr., "Out of a Failed African Circus, a Lion of Legend," *New York Times*, June 28, 1999, at A4.

[3]. Quoting Glen A Love, "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism," *Western American Literature* 25 (1990): 201-15, at p. 211.

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