
BOOK REVIEW

RANDY MALAMUD

Reading Zoos: Presentations of Animals and Captivity
New York: New York University Press, 1998

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What do people learn at zoos? A friend of mine learned that giraffes can clean out their nostrils with their own tongues. At a zoo I once watched an elephant emptying his bladder... and emptying it...and emptying it—bucketful after surprising bucketful. I learned that a well-watered elephant urinates spectacularly. Of the explanatory signs zoo staff had posted outside the cages and compounds I remember almost nothing.

But then zoos are not about the explanatory signs. Nor, if we think as deeply about zoos as Randy Malamud has, are they about the curious habits of nonhuman animals. As Malamud writes in *Reading Zoos*, “what happens in zoos is essentially not about animals but about people, and is about us in disturbing ways” (p. 233). Zoos highlight the persistence with which human demands obfuscate and distort human experience of animals.

Reading Zoos differs from other zoo studies (among its many merits, the book is impressively researched) in that Malamud focuses upon literary responses to zoos. By means of those responses, he mounts a forceful argument for the elimination of zoos. In the process, he covers the imperialistic history of zoos, their commercial purpose, the display of human oddities, the literal and metaphoric significance of cages, the child’s experience of zoos, and alternatives to zoos.

Two routes lead to the conclusion that zoos should be eliminated. The social constructionist route says that we learn nothing about animals in zoos because the zoo animal is not a real animal. A giraffe in a zoo, Malamud writes, is a “cultural stylization, simplification, distillation, of a giraffe, a sample of giraffe, a (stinted) representation of a giraffe” (p. 29). Similarly, Evernden (1993) asserts that a “solitary gorilla in a zoo is not really a gorilla” but “a gorilla-shaped imitation of a social being [who] can only develop fully in a society of kindred beings” (p.13). Since zoos purport to teach a nature-starved public about natural animals, one cannot deny the utility of arguing that zoos offer only a simulacrum of animals.

Following the second route, one attends to animal grief and humiliation. The gorilla in a zoo is still a gorilla, the giraffe still a giraffe. That is why caging gorillas and giraffes is unethical. Zoos might well express the magnitude of human control over animals, but human powers do not extend as far as changing the nature of those animals.

As a critic who favors this line of argument, I need to make one small correction to Malamud's analysis. In *Animal Victims in Modern Fiction*, I do not conclude that animals are "'blank paper' on which human beings write messages to themselves" (*Reading Zoos*, p. 29). Evidently, my ironic intention in reference to Tester's (1991, p. 46) "blank paper" argument misfired (Scholtmeijer, 1993, pp. 3-4). It is precisely because animals are not blank paper but complete beings with full lives, like ourselves, that zoos are places of torment for them.

While exposing as fictions the conservationist and educative promises of zoos, Malamud sustains an awareness that living, breathing animals suffer in these institutions. In his argument, animal suffering is not merely an unfortunate side effect of otherwise honorable objectives. Like blood sports, zoos express a culturally entrenched "willingness to cause pain to animals in the pursuit of human pleasures" (p. 189).

Zoo attendance, therefore, cannot be a wholly innocent activity. What zoo-goers experience, primarily, is human dominion over animals, the power to wrench individual animals out of their home environments and put them on display for the casual human observer. If literary meditations on zoos are representative, then, at the very least, zoos are sad places. Even minimal attention to the animals means seeing their despair.

Let us give the public the benefit of the doubt, however, and say that zoos satisfy a longing simply to see other animals. After all, nature writers extol the wonders of watching animals. Urban folk, we are constantly informed, have lost touch with animals. Set aside the desire to have exotic animals laid on, buffet-style, for visual consumption; set aside the urge of many zoo visitors to compel the caged animals to attend to them. Is the longing to see animals in itself blameworthy?

Not blameworthy, perhaps, but misguided. Malamud points to a paradox: Animals could not be much more invisible than when they are presented to us in zoos. He cites a comment on oyster-catchers in a zoo from Hoban's *Turtle Diary*. "'These oyster-catchers were so accessible as to be unobservable'" (*Reading Zoos*, p. 158). A "better way to appreciate the animals with which we share this planet," Malamud writes, "depends upon the invisible: upon our imagination of animals...when they are not immediately present" (pp. 184-185; emphasis in the

original). Animals in the wild have no desire to be seen by us, much less kidnapped, penned or caged, and put on display. Thus, an essential aspect of understanding wild animals is *not* seeing them.

Malamud makes an impressive case for the position that zoos are not the answer to modern alienation from animals. Animal suffering is inevitable in zoos. Zoos reaffirm human domination of animals. We need the courage to relinquish power over animals, including “the power that accompanies total visual access” (p. 231).

Reading Zoos is an important addition to the growing number of books on animals providing educational opportunities for consciences. *Reading Zoos* testifies to the power of the written word and the sympathetic imagination to teach us about animals.

References

- Everden, N. (1993). *The natural alien: Humankind and environment*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Scholtmeijer, M. (1993). *Animal victims in modern fiction: From sanctity to sacrifice*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Tester, K. (1991). *Animals and society: The humanity of animal rights*. London: Routledge.