

Children's Literature, Domestication, and Social Foundation - Narratives of Civilization and Wilderness

Book Review

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Children's Literature, Domestication, and Social Foundation: Narratives of Civilization and Wilderness
Layla AbdelRahim
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"[C]ivilized reason begets monsters, for through stories that try to explain our *raison d'être*, it weaves a narrative of captivity, servitude, and death" (AbdelRahim, p. 23).

Anthropologist Layla AbdelRahim's 2015 book *Children's Literature, Domestication, and Social Foundation: Narratives of Civilization and Wilderness* is about the underlying premises that inform the perspective with which we view the world and thus imbue both our scientific and fictional narratives. The book is as much a study of the methodology involved in epistemic production as it is an examination of the foundational stories of origins, both scientific and religious, and children's literature, which constitutes an "anthropological informant in the field" (AbdelRahim, p. 2). By analyzing children's literature "as knowledge, culture, and social foundation," the book investigates how scientific and fictional human and nonhuman narratives inform culture, social life, and fiction, and how fiction informs science and influences the world (AbdelRahim, p. 20).

AbdelRahim begins by problematizing the book's grounding terms in the introduction: "culture," "wilderness," "wildness," "civilization," "colonization," and "literature." Proceeding "from the Word to the World," this book is divided into three well-organized chapters, dedicated to epistemology, ontology, and anthropology. Throughout the book, she asks how a nexus of domestication, colonization, and literature plays out in the "sacred texts" of our societies. This question is explored through analysis of the various socio-economic and political systems in wilderness and civilization and by tracing these underlying premises in the foundational narratives of civilization, such as religious, scientific, and literary. This analysis is then applied to the various children's stories that are examined in subsections, with titles such as, "Winne-ther-Pooh as Other," "Taming Children's Inner Landscape and Other Wild Things," "Do Children Dream of Cyborg Love," and "Anne's Choice," to name a few, along with other studies that bring different works of art and theory into conversation.

The first technology of domestication, she suggests, was language and disciplinarity. Literature has been an integral part of the technology of domestication for thousands of years. Civilized narratives, from ancient Japanese and Chinese works, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Winnie-the-Pooh*,

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to *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Arabian Nights*, continue to preserve socio-economic inequality and relationships of debt while rationalizing murder through ontological reasons for killing. Acts of violence are justified if carried out against disobedient individuals.

AbdelRahim challenges the widely-held assumption of civilized narratives that wild life is dangerous. Relying on palaeontological finds and anthropological research, she observes that human civilization emerged only 10,000 years ago and quickly resulted in the Holocene Extinction or, in other words, human-made destruction of life. Accordingly, it implies that older species than humans have possessed the complex intelligence necessary to coexist. Unlike in a state of wilderness, civilization attributes a utilitarian purpose of the world, exemplified in the hierarchical food chain, with the human animal depicted as the ultimate predator. Remarkably, even anthropology as a discipline sets humans apart from other animals. The author attributes the origins of this narrative to the assumption that the carnivorousness of Paleolithic hunters led to larger brains and an improved socio-economic organization. However, in the introduction, she discusses palaeoanthropological evidence showing that, in fact, *Homo sapiens* had much smaller brains than other kindred lineages (AbdelRahim, pp. 12-13). Furthermore, she argues, hunting led to the Agricultural Revolution, which, in turn, enabled the emergence of civilization. At that moment, the critical shift in human consciousness occurred. Humans, who used to perceive themselves as an organism among many others, began to distinguish themselves from others. This knowledge institutionalized an anthropocentric worldview that justified the domestication, control, consumption, management, killing, and ownership of nonhumans by humans. The shift in self-consciousness revolutionized subsistence strategies and eventually enabled the institutionalization of violence. There is no system of murder in the wilderness, contrary to civilization.

The first part of the book is dedicated to examining the origins and function of language, symbolic thought, and narratives. The author argues that for the civilized mythology to continue, humans must be domesticated and accept the meta-narrative of civilization. A key site for socialization is fictional and scientific narratives, especially those written for children. Literature has become one of the most important forces of socialization, and children's stories play a key role in socializing young individuals into exploitative and hierarchical social relationships (AbdelRahim, p. 230). The book examines how civilized societies' underlying premises are dispersed into culture through science, religion, and perhaps most effectively through children's literature and, along with material realities, shape the experiences of children. They structure children's inner landscapes and turn them into "human resources." It is a transformation that is required to keep the system going, and the costs are high "in terms of loss of empathy, understanding, and quality of experience" (AbdelRahim, p. 18). As AbdelRahim notes, "Children's culture presents a particularly potent nexus of narratives since children are born wild and it takes years to domesticate them through narratives and pedagogies" (p. 32). The fundamental stories in our society—those that inform our conceptions of education, health, diet, social justice, property, worship, obedience, knowledge, nation, and our daily movements—are often stories we read as youth. Their messages are internalized and often remain with us, unquestioned and uncontested. They are passed on from one generation to the next.

While many fictional and scientific stories are analyzed and compared, AbdelRahim hones in on three globally influential works by children's authors. These are *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *The Adventures of Dunno and Friends*, and the Moomin series. She demonstrates why these stories illustrate three social-political ideologies, paradigms, and contexts from which they arose—capitalist, socialist, and anarchist—that are rooted in ontologies of civilization and wildness and their underlying premises. *Winnie-the-Pooh*, by A.A. Milne, was written during the era of the British Empire and presents a capitalist world of agricultural civilization, in which humanism breeds sterility. *The Adventures of Dunno and Friends*, a trilogy by Nikolai Nosov, was written during the Soviet era (and was the first book AbdelRahim learned to read) and depicts an anarchist-socialist community among a wide range of other socio-economic systems. The Moomin series, by Tove Jansson, for which writing began in Finland during World War II, presents wild and harmonious relationships in an anarchistic society.

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