

The Wild Animal Story: Animals and Ideas

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The late nineteenth century witnessed the development of a new and very popular kind of animal story, the “realistic wild animal story.” Called a distinctly Canadian form of literature, it also became an important part of popular culture in the United States, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century. The wild animal story combined elements of nature writing and animal fiction. Traditionally, nature essays about animals emphasized more or less detached scientific observations of animals or the author’s emotional responses to them. Earlier forms of animal stories tended to be fictional accounts in which the animals were little more than humans in furry or feathery coats, whose narrative role was to instruct and morally elevate the reader. Sometimes the animal characters literally dressed in human clothing. English animal stories like Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Books* (1894, 1895) and Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* (1907), for example, presented animals as, essentially, English folks pursuing their roles in a social hierarchy. The more realistic stories of domestic animals, such as dog stories, present animals as eager to serve their masters.¹

In the realistic wild animal story, however, the animals “live for their own ends,” rather than for human ends. The stories emphasized the perspective of the animal itself. As Charles G. D. Roberts, one of the creators of the genre, put

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it, “the interest centres about the personality, individuality, mentality, of an animal, as well as its purely physical characteristics.” Although the accounts are presented in story form and employ fictional devices, the authors assert that their tales are factual and represent accurate natural history. This new image of wild animals can be illustrated by contrasting two forest romance novels: English naturalist W. H. Hudson’s *Green Mansions* (1904) and Charles G. D. Roberts’ *The Heart of the Ancient Wood* (1900).² Each novel involves a young woman who lives in harmony with nature, loves all wild creatures, abhors killing, and prohibits hunting in her region of the forest. The male protagonist in each realizes that he can win her love only by overcoming her independence and bringing her back into society. Despite their similarities, however, the natures of the animals in these two books differ completely. In Hudson’s novel, the reader sees the animals as a part of the forest backdrop. They are generic representatives of their species with little personality and certainly no personhood. In Roberts’ novel, however, they become characters with distinct personalities who are central to the plot.

Over the years, wild animal stories were neglected by scholars, perhaps because they were thought of as minor works written for children. Even Roberts’ stories were rarely considered worthy of serious examination until the 1960s, despite his having been called the “father” of Canadian poetry and of Canadian literature as a result of his other writings and his having been knighted for his literary work. Ernest Thompson Seton, another Canadian founder of the genre, was also overlooked by scholars, although his wild animal stories are the only ones to have remained continually in print through the twentieth century. Since the 1960s, however, a number of scholars have studied the genre. Most of their publications focus on the work of its founders, Roberts and Seton. This is unfortunate, because so many other authors wrote wild animal stories, including William J. Long (a contemporary of Roberts and Seton), Rachel Carson, Sally Carrighar, Fred Bodworth, and Farley Mowat.

Although realistic wild animals stories are offered to readers as accurate natural history (a claim that has been disputed, as we shall see), their representations of animals differ, reflecting the differing views of the authors regarding the nature of their beasts and historical changes in societal concepts of animals and nature. For this reason, these stories provide a wonderful window through which to examine the social construction of nature and animals.

Animals are ideas as well as living, breathing creatures. Despite the fact that wild animals live lives independent from our own, throughout history people and cultures have given them special meanings and responded to them in terms of those meanings. We can only dimly interpret the complex meanings of Stone Age animal paintings found on cave walls, for example, but it seems reasonable to believe that these meanings influenced and reflected the ways that the painters thought about and interacted with the animals of their time. Deer have gone through a variety of transformations: as symbols of the erotic, femininity,

innocence, holiness, the crucified Christ, nobility, nature, and wildness. They have been viewed as emblems of tragedy and innocent victims.³ More recently, deer have been viewed as vandals (of urban shrubbery) and as a crop for harvest (by hunters). René Descartes and his followers considered animals to be machines, and the animal rights movement views them as persons.

Through all of this, the animals continue being what they are, regardless of what people think of them. But the way people think of them does have a major impact upon their lives. Despite the fact that they have an existence independent of our constructs, the ways we view wild animals are not without consequence. Our conceptions of animals help to shape our actions toward and responses to them; and they are reflected back to us by the conditions we impose upon their lives. Whether deer are viewed as a crop to be harvested or as persons with rights, for example, has an enormous impact upon them.⁴

There were a number of precursors to the wild animal story, but two books in particular paved the way and helped to create a market for the genre. The first was English writer Anna Sewell's novel about the life of a horse as told by the horse, *Black Beauty* (1877). *Black Beauty* thought and spoke as a four-legged human, but his message was an appeal for the humane treatment of domesticated animals. Its popularity in England and North America led to its being dubbed "The Uncle Tom's Cabin of the Horse" and marked the growing public interest in animal welfare. *Black Beauty* helped countless readers to empathize with the experiences of animals. The second book was Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*.⁵ Its enormous success both demonstrated the appeal of stories about wild animals, fabrications though they were, and further stimulated that market.

The realistic wild animal story burst upon the scene and achieved wide public attention with the publication of Ernest Thompson Seton's *Wild Animals I Have Known* (1898), which went through sixteen printings in its first four years alone. It was not, however, the earliest publication in this genre. United States author Charles Dudley Warner was perhaps the first North American writer to describe events from the point of view of a wild animal. His story "A-Hunting of the Deer" (1878) depicted the hunt as the deer experienced it. Seton, a Canadian, first began to experiment with the genre with "The Drummer on Snowshoes," published in 1887 in *St. Nicholas*, and brought it to fruition in his now classic tale of Lobo the Wolf, "The King of the Currumpaw: A Wolf Story," first published in 1894 and later reprinted as "Lobo: The King of Currumpaw." Charles G. D. Roberts, another Canadian, wrote poetry, novels of the Canadian wilderness, and "hook & bullet" stories that, ironically, emphasized the viciousness of animals before developing his own realistic wild animal stories. His first venture into the genre was his now classic "Do Seek Their Meat from God" (1892). This and other wild animal stories were included in his book *Earth's Enigmas* (1896).⁶

Although both Roberts and Seton have been called the creator of the realistic wild animal story, it is best to call them cocreators. The work of each paralleled and may have been influenced by that of the other. In any event, neither began cranking out wild animal stories in quantity until the publication of Kipling's *Jungle Book* and the resulting increase in public demand for animal stories.

"The literary in Canada," wrote Northrop Frye, "is often only an incidental quality of writings which, like those of many of the early explorers, are as innocent of literary intentions as a mating loon." He went on to propose that Canadian literature is best "studied as a part of Canadian life." He remarked that he found Canadian poetry reflected "a deep terror" in response to nature. This may be a result of life in isolated communities surrounded by wilderness, which also led to a "garrison mentality." Margaret Atwood further developed these ideas in her influential book *Survival*, arguing that survival is a central theme in Canadian literature, be it in the face of a hostile wilderness or threats to its culture. (By contrast, she suggested that a central theme in American literature is the frontier as a symbol of hope and new opportunities.) Associated with the survival theme is that of being a victim, which may in part be a response to the nation's colonial history. She also argued that the theme of survival is closely associated with "the will *not* to survive." "Certainly," she wrote, "Canadian authors spend a disproportionate amount of time making sure that their heroes die or fail. Much Canadian writing suggests that failure is required because it is felt—consciously or unconsciously—to be the only 'right' ending, the only thing that will support the characters' (or their authors') view of the universe." This argument stimulated a good deal of discussion, including arguments to the contrary. Nevertheless, as she wrote, "Like any theory it won't explain everything, but it may give you some points of departure."⁷

The stories by Roberts and Seton seem to support this argument. Roberts' "Do Seek Their Meat from God," for example, tells of a woodsman who finds his child being stalked by mountain lions. He kills the cats, thus saving his child. But Roberts goes on to add an ironic twist: the lions' kittens are later found dead from starvation; the life of the woodsman's son was purchased at the expense of the mountain lions' young. The woodsman and the lion pair were engaged in a common struggle to ensure the survival of their offspring. They shared the same moral ground. In another tale, one of Roberts' characters explained the nature of life in the wild by saying, "Oftentimes it's seemed to me all life was jest like a few butterflies flitterin' over a graveyard." Trappers finally managed to lure Seton's extraordinary wolf Lobo to his death by means of the scent of his beloved mate, Blanca, who had been killed earlier. When his readers complained about the deaths of so many of his animal heroes, Seton explained, "The fact that these stories are true is the reason why all are tragic. The life of a wild animal *always has a tragic end*." He also explained, "For the wild animal there is no such thing as a gentle decline in peaceful old age. Its life

is spent at the front, in line of battle, and as soon as its powers begin to wane in the least, its enemies become too strong for it; it falls.”⁸

Despite their commonalities, Roberts’ and Seton’s animals are quite different from each other. Roberts’ animals are immersed in the Darwinian struggle for survival and their deaths reflect this struggle. Yet, despite their universal deaths, life goes on—as symbolized by the “butterflies flitterin’ over a graveyard.” As Joseph Gold noted of Roberts’ stories, “In the long run death itself has no sting and is ironically defeated by the uses nature makes of its processes. All things conspire to sustain life and the stories create a very strong sense of rhythmic pattern and cycle of the season, of birth and death, of mating and separating, and these patterns persist no matter what the creatures, what the setting or what human interference is attempted.” In addition, by including humans in this common struggle Roberts demonstrated the kinship between humans and wild animals. This insightful contribution to literature provided a theme to which Roberts returned again and again. Seton’s animals, on the other hand, were virtuous creatures. As Seton wrote, he “tried to emphasize our kinship with the animals by showing that in them we can find the virtues most admired in Man. Lobo stands for Dignity and Love-constancy; Silverspot, for Sagacity; Redruff, for Obedience. . .” He even argued, “The Ten Commandments are not *arbitrary laws given to man*, but are *fundamental laws of all highly developed animals*.”⁹

If, as Atwood and others have argued, Canadian literature reflects a struggle for survival in a fearful wilderness, why do wild animal stories not depict wilderness animals as monsters? Atwood answers this question by arguing that the animals are all victims, they are all killed, and Canadians identify with them as victims. This becomes another bond of kinship between animals and people (in this case, Canadians).¹⁰

In domestic animal stories, the animals adjust to and serve the needs of their human masters. In Fred Gibson’s novel *Old Yeller*, for example, the dog becomes a hero by defending a girl from the mother of a bear cub she had found. (In a wild animal story, the mother bear would have been the hero for trying to save her cub from the human.) This emphasis of the human’s interest over the animal’s is characteristic of most United States literature, in which animals tend to serve as symbols or the goal of human action, as in Melville’s *Moby Dick* or Faulkner’s “The Bear,” or in which animals accommodate themselves to humans. “Indeed,” writes James Polk, “the patterns in American writing about animals seem almost inverted in Canadian counterparts, where the emphasis is not on man at all, but on the animal.”¹¹

Many authors in the United States, though, did produce their own body of realistic wild animal stories that emphasized the animals’ perspective. However, these often presented a more romantic vision of nature and animals. The U.S. writer William J. Long,¹² for example, denied that there was a Darwinian struggle for survival in nature based on his belief that wild animals have no aware-

ness of such a struggle. He believed that life in nature is a “gladsome” life and that death comes swiftly and without trauma. He also argued that wild animals can reason and teach their young in much the same way as do humans, a central premise of his book *School of the Woods* (1902). In his story, “Wayeeses the Strong One,” he even claimed as factual a story of a wolf leading a pair of lost Indian children to their home.¹³ This up-beat vision of nature was particularly appealing to his United States readers. Although Long has been largely forgotten, his books were quite popular and widely used in school classrooms during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Long may have been among the most romantic and anthropomorphizing of North American nature writers, but he was not the only one to idealize animals. In James Oliver Curwood’s *The Grizzly King* (1916), for example, a Grizzly Bear confronted an unarmed hunter who had once shot him. The bear reared on his hind legs, ready to kill the hunter, but then decided to leave the frightened man alone and walked off. “You—you are a monster with a heart bigger than man!” the hunter exclaimed. “If I’d cornered you like that I’d have killed you! And you! You cornered me, and let me live!”¹⁴ The animal was morally better than the man, a theme often encountered in wild animal stories.

Stories about domestic animals tended to subordinate the animals’ interests to those of their human owners. However, some of these stories, especially dog stories, bridged the genres of the realistic wild animal and realistic domestic animal stories. Most notable of these is Jack London’s *Call of the Wild* (1904), which begins as a traditional dog story, telling of Buck’s luxurious life on a California estate, how he was kidnapped, brutalized, and sold to become a sled dog in the Yukon Gold Rush, and how he finally found kindness with a beloved master. But the novel ends as a wild animal story, as Buck becomes aware of an inner urge to independence and the fulfillment of his primitive nature as a wild creature. Throughout the book, London presents his reader with a Darwinian vision of nature and a sense that, in shedding the trappings of human society and domesticity, Buck was reverting to his true, wild identity. He even has visions of ancient times, hairy men, and his canine ancestors. With the death of his beloved master, Buck breaks free of his bond to humanity, runs off into the wilderness, and becomes the leader of a wolf pack.

Call of the Wild was a book for its time—a time of growing interest in the preservation of wilderness, disappearing species, and natural resources. The animal welfare movement was also growing, as was interest in the study of nature as a hobby and as a new pedagogical movement. Books about wilderness, such as John Muir’s, were gaining popularity along with all sorts of books about nature and wildlife. In addition, the Gold Rush had stimulated great interest in the Yukon and Alaska. London’s tale found an eager market.

His companion novel, *White Fang*, reversed the process: a wolf-dog born in the wilderness is found by humans and, after going through a series of owners, is tamed and goes to live on a California estate as a family pet. Although it ends

as a traditional domestic animal story, *White Fang* begins as a wild animal story and the first part of the book that describes. White Fang's puppyhood is an outstanding example of the genre. London made a great effort to tell these stories from White Fang's and Buck's perspectives, without making them think entirely as humans do.¹⁵

John Muir's extraordinary story "Stickeen," first published in *Century* magazine in 1897, clearly is not a story about a wild animal, but Muir brought to this dog story the view of animals that was characteristic of the wild animal story. "Stickeen" was written at the same time that the wild animal story was being created. Clearly, this idea about animals was "in the air" and finding expression in North America. Stickeen was a very independent and hardy mongrel but, Muir wrote, "none of us was able to make out what Stickeen was really good for. He seemed to meet danger and hardships without anything like reason, insisted on having his own way, never obeyed an order, and the hunter could never set him on anything, or make him fetch the birds he shot." Stickeen would, though, accompany Muir on his wilderness walks. On one fateful trip they became stranded on a glacier in the midst of a storm. Their only route to safety was across a seemingly impassable crevasse. Muir found and traversed a treacherous ice bridge that crossed the crevasse, but Stickeen was reluctant to venture onto it. In witnessing the dog's intelligent appraisal of the situation, his anxiety and fear of the crossing, and his ecstatic joy when he had successfully crossed the crevasse, Muir felt he had had a glimpse into the dog's soul and recognized a kindred creature with intrinsic worth. "At first the least promising and least known of my dog-friends," Muir wrote, "he suddenly became the best known of them all. Our storm-battle for life brought him to light, and through him as through a window I have ever since been looking for deeper sympathy into all my fellow mortals."¹⁶

Although Stickeen was hardly useful to people, he turned out to be good for himself. Like the creatures in wild animal stories, he lived for his own ends despite his enjoyment of human companionship. Muir's tale recounts both Stickeen's ordeal and achievement on a glacier and Muir's own realization of the mental, emotional, and spiritual potential of animals.¹⁷ This is uncharacteristic of most dog stories, or other realistic stories about domestic animals.

The Darwinian Revolution was a long and difficult process of intellectual and cultural change. As a cultural phenomenon, it required the public to learn and accept a new set of ideas regarding the nature of history, organic change, and our place in the world. In a sense, this revolution is still in progress. The realistic wild animal story was a response to the Darwinism that presented readers with ways to accommodate the notion of natural selection and the amorality of nature. Robert MacDonald, for example, sees the genre as a "revolt against instinct" and Darwinian amorality. In these stories animals do have their instincts, he contends, but they are also rational and ethical; they rise above instinct. "The works of Seton and Roberts are thus celebrations of ratio-

nal, ethical animals, who as they rise above instinct, reach toward the spiritual.” This is certainly true of the work of the U.S. writer William J. Long, who argued that animals reason, have souls, and may even have an afterlife. Lisa Mighetto similarly argued that the efforts of many writers to demonstrate that animals live ethical lives in harmony with each other reflected an anxious rejection of the cold amorality of the Darwinian vision of nature.¹⁸ Spiritual and moral matters aside, by the end of the nineteenth century many people recognized that instinct alone is not a sufficient explanation for much of animal behavior. However, the psychology of the day offered only options of instinct and reason to explain behavior, which encouraged some people to opt in favor of animal reasoning.

Thomas Dunlap has argued that wild animal stories helped readers not to reject Darwinism but to assimilate it. Roberts’ stories, for example, often showed that humans and wild animals shared the common tasks of protecting, feeding and raising their young. If one prevailed over the other, they nevertheless shared the same moral ground and similar emotional and mental lives. At the same time, humans also stood outside nature by virtue of their ability to make and use tools and to reshape and distort nature. Seton presented a similar view of nature, although he often softened the Darwinian image of nature as a stage for carnage and placed a greater emphasis on humans as senseless killers.¹⁹

Although wild animal stories employed narrative devices of fiction to engage their readers and tell their stories, they were marketed as natural history, and their authors repeatedly attested to their faithfulness to nature. They frequently claimed that their stories were based on field observations and that the events of the stories actually happened. Nevertheless, in 1903 the dean of American nature writers, John Burroughs, launched a blistering attack on what he called “sham naturalists.” He argued that many popular writers, including Seton, Roberts, Long, and London, were frauds who overly dramatized animal life in order to sell their books to an eager but gullible public. This began the often humorous, but no less serious, Nature Fakers controversy.²⁰ Most of the writers kept their heads down, did not defend themselves publicly, and escaped relatively unscathed. Long, however, aggressively defended himself in magazines and newspapers, and thus became the focus of the battle. The controversy continued for four years until Theodore Roosevelt publicly supported Burroughs’ position and condemned Long. The President expressed special anger at the publishers whose classroom editions of wild animal stories introduced shoddy and even bogus natural history into the public schools.

This battle was over three closely related issues. The first was the necessity of accuracy in nature writing, including wild animal stories. The controversy helped to establish at least informal standards of accuracy in nature literature. As Clarence Hawks, a minor practitioner of the wild animal story, wrote, “I now realized that if I ever make a bad break in regards to my natural history. statements I was doomed.”²¹ The second issue was the question of what the

nature of animal mentality is; to what extent animals are governed by instincts or reason. This issue continued to be a topic of lively debate throughout the century. At its root, though, the controversy was about establishing a balance between emotion and science as means to understand and appreciate nature—the literary expression of a debate that was going on throughout the nature study movement at that time.

Although wild animal stories were an important expression of cultural responses to Darwinism, they were more overtly tied to the animal welfare movement. They presented animals as individual, sentient creatures capable of feeling mental and physical pain. They often appealed to and promoted humanitarianism by showing their readers, through the animals' own eyes, the impact of hunting and trapping. For example, T. Gilbert Pearson, who would become an early leader of the Audubon movement, wrote a school reader of bird stories to teach an understanding and appreciation of birds. It ended with a tale of boys thoughtlessly slaughtering them. One of the study questions was, "Do you Suppose a bird really cares when its companions are killed?" Seton, Roberts, Long, and others presented predators in a more positive light than did most nature writing of their time. They often depicted wolves, for example, as sociable creatures who avoid humans, rather than bloodthirsty monsters eager to drag off children. Their visions of wolf behavior often turned out to be more accurate than those of Theodore Roosevelt and most professional naturalists of their time. Some writers even expressed views akin to those of the animal rights movement. Seton, for example, proposed that, since "animals are creatures with wants and feelings differing in degree only from our own, they surely have their rights. This fact, now beginning to be recognized by the Caucasian world was emphasized by the Buddhist over 2,000 years ago." Long's *Brier-Patch Philosophy* (1906) is an unrecognized "classic" in the early literature of the movement.²²

The wild animal story seemed to die out in the early twentieth century. The Nature Fakers controversy may have contributed to this, but there were additional factors involved. Alec Lucas suggests a number of them: "Perhaps people tired of learning that animals and men are alike and learned from two world wars that they are too much alike. Perhaps urban people, now removed three or four generations from their country forebears, have lost touch with nature almost completely. Unquestionably the biological sciences have been replaced in public imagination by the physical. What might once have been a nature story is now science fiction." William Magee argued that wild animal story writers faced a problem in making animals who lived for themselves of interest to readers. They simply ran out of plots and ways to introduce variety into their stories. These writers, he argued, "expose the limits as well as the vastness of the expanded range of characters and topics for fiction. Art and life may be one, but stories of animals living only for themselves must still appeal to readers that are human."²³ Nevertheless, the wild animal story did not completely disappear.

Few women wrote wild animal stories during the first part of the twentieth century and none of their works have endured. It was two American women, however, who were responsible for the transformation and rebirth of the genre in the 1940s: Rachel Carson and Sally Carrighar. Most of the early writers of wild animal stories were interested in the lives of individual animals and their stories often promoted the humane treatment of individual animals. Carson and Carrighar wrote stories that represented animals not so much as heroes and individual personalities as representatives of their species living within an ecological community of animals.²⁴ Both based their stories on a careful reading of scientific literature, as well as observations in the field. Their stories, especially Carson's, arose out of an ecological worldview rather than the humanitarian and animal rights perspectives emerging at the beginning of their century.

Under the Sea-Wind (1941), Carson's first book and her only major excursion into the wild animal story, followed the activities and life cycles of marine animals and the ways their lives intertwine. Although it was not financially successful when it was first published, it became a best-seller following publication of Carson's next book, *The Sea Around Us* (1951). *Under the Sea-Wind* reflected the strong influence that Henry Williamson, English author of *Tarka the Otter* (1927) and *Salar the Salmon* (1935), had upon Carson's writing,²⁵ but its combination of lyrical prose, ecological vision, and careful science was uniquely Carson's.

Sally Carrighar's first book, *One Day on Beetle Rock* (1944), follows a day in the lives of a number of animals in Sequoia National Park. Each chapter tells the story of a single animal, much as in a traditional wild animal story. The animals featured in each chapter, however, also appear in the other chapters, creating an intricate tapestry depicting the animal community of Beetle Rock. Carrighar wrote that she had no model for the kind of writing she wanted to do, although Gale Lawrence has suggested that she may have been influenced by the work of Williamson and Carson.²⁶ Both Carson and Carrighar allowed their readers to experience animal lives through the animals' own eyes and other senses. They were, however, very careful in their language to avoid humanizing their animal characters. Theirs was a more behavioristic representation of wild animals, in contrast to earlier writers who presented animals as personalities, although Carrighar was later criticized for anthropomorphism.

Vera Norwood has argued that women nature writers present a distinctly female vision of the natural world.²⁷ European American women, in particular, view nature in domestic terms: they see nature as a household and often recognize their roles as protectors of this home and its residents. This was particularly true, she feels, of early writers whose roles were confined within the boundaries of their home and family. Sally Carrighar's life and work help to confirm Norwood's theory. In her autobiography, Carrighar tells of an event that occurred while she was doing field work for *One Day on Beetle Rock*. She was living in a cabin close to her animal characters. She fed them and they

adapted to her presence. Outside the cabin one day, a Goshawk dropped out of the air, grabbed and flew off with a grouse. In a wave of panic, many of the other animals ran into her cabin; even a buck tried to get in. As time passed, the animals continued to spend time inside her cabin. Carrighar realized that she had found what she had sought all her life: "Here I have found it, home at last—and with all these delightful children."²⁸

It is more difficult, however, to affirm that Rachel Carson's work reflects such a distinctively female vision of nature. She was trained in the biological sciences and had a very strong ecological understanding of nature. Ecology itself uses a household metaphor of nature. After all, the word "ecology" is derived from the Greek *oikos*, which means "house." Ecology is the study of our natural home. It, too, recognizes that we are all part of a larger community or household, which we must try to protect—a point of view that is now widely accepted and held by both men and women. Carson's writing may represent the convergence of female and scientific approaches to nature. Men have also adopted Carson's and Carrighar's approach to the animal story. New Zealander turned Canadian, Franklin Russell, for example, used it in his book *Watchers at the Pond* (1963).²⁹

Canadian writers introduced the next innovation in the wild animal story, which reflected growing public concern about environmental destruction and the extinction of species: the themes of survival and victimization carried to an extreme.³⁰ These were not the first writers to pursue this theme. Seton, for example, wrote in 1901, "I do not intend primarily to denounce certain field sports, or even cruelty to animals. My chief motive, my most earnest underlying wish, has been to stop the extermination of harmless wild animals." For another example, Grey Owl (Archie Stansfield Belaney, an English emigrant to Canada who adopted the persona of an Indian) used his writing to help protect and restore the declining populations of beaver. Their stories, however, did not embody the ecological perspective and environmental angst of more recent writers. In these new stories, individual animals became representatives of their vanishing species. The curlews whose lives Fred Bodsworth followed in his *Last of the Curlews* (1955) were quite literally the last of their species. The destruction of the wolves in Farley Mowat's *Never Cry Wolf* (1963) was representative of the threat to all wolves in North America. Ecosystems, as well as species, face danger. In his *Animals of the North* (1966), William O. Pruitt, Jr., used the method of Carson and Carrighar to evoke the subarctic Canadian forest ecosystem and reveal the human threats to it. Writers in the United States also adopted this new approach. Sally Carrighar, for example, followed the life of a Blue Whale in her last book, *The Twilight Seas* (1975).³¹

Never Cry Wolf is an unusual example of the wild animal story. Mowat's humorous account of studying wolves close-up in the barren lands of northern Canada is as much a story about his evolving understanding of wolves as about the wolves he lived among. In constructing this semifictional account of his

exploits in the north, Mowat came up with a solution to a central problem in the genre. As William Magee pointed out,³² it was difficult for authors to come up with fresh plots and to maintain human interest in tales about animals who lived for themselves, rather than to meet human needs. Mowat found a way around this by letting his readers learn the ways of the wolves' lives as they unfolded to Mowat. The conflict between his initial, traditional view of wolves as savage beasts and his growing realization that they were nothing of the sort—together with the series of humorous circumstances in which he found himself—are captivating. Still, at the same time, the reader recognizes wolves as creatures who live for their own ends, as well as the human threats to those ends.

Mowat also presented a different picture of the Darwinian struggle that is so much a part of wild animal stories. The relationship between the wolves and their caribou prey was not simply one of conflict and death. Instead, the wolves seemed almost merciful, killing only the old, weak, and disabled caribou. In exchange for feeding on the herd, the wolves kept it healthy. The caribou did not even appear to be particularly fearful of their predators. This relationship of mutual exchange provided a new vision of nature that resolved many of the uncomfortable aspects of Darwinism. Nature might still be amoral, but it was not exploitative and no longer characterized by savagery and destruction.

The wild animal story genre quickly made the leap from the printed page to motion pictures and, later, television. This began with the translations from book to film; perhaps the first book to make this transition was London's *Call of the Wild*. The plot of the 1935 Fox film, starring Clark Gable and Loretta Young, was only loosely based on the novel. Young was introduced as a love interest and the film's plot was quite different from London's, placing greater emphasis on human conflict. Subsequent versions of *Call of the Wild* (including the 1972 MGM version starring Charlton Heston and a 1976 Charles Fries production based on a script by James Dickey) tended to be more faithful to the novel, but also tended to emphasize the experiences of their human characters. These problems are, in part, a product of the medium: motion pictures often must appeal to human interest to capture the attention of a large audience, including many people with little or no interest in nature; it is difficult to represent the inner life of an animal in a visual medium; the medium's time constraints place severe restrictions on what it can accomplish; and, no doubt, script writers and directors want to place their own creative stamps on their films. Although some of the filmmakers felt free to alter radically the story line regarding the human characters, most tried (with varying success) to be more faithful to the tale of Buck's answering the "call of the wild." Film versions of London's *White Fang*, beginning with the 1936 Fox version, presented similar difficulties.³³

Disney's 1983 film version of Farley Mowat's *Never Cry Wolf* was remarkably faithful to the spirit of the novel and was, as one critic put it, "one of the

most beautifully photographed wilderness films.”³⁴ In an important departure from the novel’s story, however, the bush pilot, played by Brian Dennehy, did not simply drop Mowat off in the wild wastes of the Canadian North, as in the novel; he returned as an entrepreneur who was trying to bring recreational development to the wilderness. Moreover, the human threat to wolves was emphasized with the killing of some of the wolves Mowat was studying. This introduced a plotline to what had been an episodic novel. It also reflected the enormous growth of environmental awareness and public sympathy for wolves over the twenty years since the book appeared—a sympathy that Mowat’s book had helped to generate.

Given the nature of the medium, it is understandable that few efforts have been made to produce film versions of classic wild animal stories told from the animals’ vantage point, but French filmmaker Jean-Jacques Annaud’s *The Bear* (Columbia, 1989) represents a brilliant attempt to do just that. Based on James Oliver Curwood’s novel *The Grizzly King*, the film presents the story of two bears in largely visual terms with a minimum of dialogue. If anything, the cinematic version placed less emphasis on its human characters than did the novel, or other film renditions of wild animals stories. *The Bear* demonstrates that, with the right story and cinematic approach, it is possible to render classic wild animal stories into successful films. Curwood’s relatively simple story line and antihunting theme hung on the moral superiority of a bear; that, together with Annaud’s cinematic technique and the visual combination of an orphaned cub, a formidable adult bear, and a spectacular landscape, made a winning combination. Even before reaching the United States, *The Bear* had earned \$100 million.³⁵

There are other ways, of course, to craft cinematic wild animal stories. A unifying narrative thread or story line is often employed in film and video documentaries about wild animals. The multitude of nature documentaries that have appeared in movie theaters and on television owe an enormous debt to Walt Disney’s 1948 film *Seal Island*, the first of his “True-Life Adventures.” Disney first became interested in filming nature when he sent cinematographers into the field to do background and motion studies in preparation for animating *Bambi* (1942). During World War II, his studio cranked out a series of informational and training films. After the war he decided to refocus on entertainment. “We’ll make educational films,” he said, “but they’ll be sugar-coated education.” Disney was interested in Alaska and hired Alaskans Alfred and Elma Milotte to spend a year photographing the region’s natives and wildlife. Their footage of seals intrigued him and he had it edited into the twenty-seven minute film, *Seal Island*. RKO was reluctant to distribute a film “too short to sell.” Disney set out to prove the studio wrong and arranged for a showing of *Seal Island* in a Pasadena theater in December 1948. Its reception was enthusiastic, and the film received an Academy Award, as did many of the following movies in the True-Life Adventure series.

Disney's True-Life Adventures set a new standard for nature films. Although their story lines were often minimal, their extraordinary photography (sometimes taking years to shoot) and editing grabbed the audience's attention. Anthropomorphizing animal heroes and "choreographing" the animals' movements to music provided human interest, but also drew sharp criticism from wildlife experts and film critics. Nevertheless, these films introduced millions of people to the wonders of nature and wildlife and influenced the generation that would give birth to the environmental movement of the late twentieth century. They were also good financial performers. *The Living Desert* (1953), for example, cost \$300,000 to produce and earned \$4 million.

Disney's True-Life Adventures represented an interesting balance between realistic wild animal stories and educational natural history films. The animals did live for their own ends, rather than those of people; indeed, human beings were absent. Disney brought still stronger and more imaginative story lines to his series of "True-Life Fantasies," beginning with *Perri* (1957), a film about the life of a squirrel based on the novel by Felix Salten, the author of *Bambi*.³⁶ As the name of the series implies, however, this series placed less emphasis on natural history education. Disney's groundbreaking films paved the way for the present generation of nature film and video producers, who continue to confront the same tensions among scientific documentation, good story telling, audience interest, and anthropomorphism.

The later part of the twentieth century witnessed the development of a new kind of animal story that is characterized not so much by animals that live for their own ends as by humans who live for the animals' ends. In these stories, the human heroes fight to save the life and freedom of a wild animal, often of an endangered species. The protagonists move beyond calling attention to threats to wildlife—they take action. Farley Mowat's *A Whale for the Killing* (1972), an early example of the genre, also provides an example of how an author's original, complex vision can be winnowed away in the process of turning a book into film. The book tells of Mowat's effort to save a Finback Whale, trapped in a saltwater pond on the coast of Newfoundland, Canada, from local folks who want to torment and kill it. He placed their behavior in the larger context of Canadian government policies that had reshaped and destroyed the region's economy and way of life. The townspeople were as much victims of their government as the whale was of theirs. The whale's death became symbolic, not only of the threat to all whales, but of the destruction of traditional ways of life by modern progress. The 1981 film version of the novel, produced for ABC by Playboy Productions, although it kept many elements of the novel, modified and simplified the story and stereotyped the hunters, protestors, and other characters. It was easier to label the heroes and villains. Both novel and film however, end sadly with the whale's death.³⁷

The best known example of this new approach to wild animal stories on screen is *Free Willy* (Warner, 1993). A troubledboy, Jesse, is rescued from

delinquency by his love for Willy, a Killer Whale he encountered in an aquarium while doing his community service there, cleaning up graffiti he had painted on its walls. The whale was thought to be untrainable, but the boy established a bond with the Orca, became his trainer, and taught him all sorts of tricks. When Willy's life was threatened, Jesse and his friends managed to release him into the ocean. The whale escaped over the final barrier to freedom by leaping on Jesse's command. Willy returned for a sequel set in Alaska, in which Jesse saved him and his family from a burning oil spill and business people who wanted to "rescue" Willy and sell him to a marine park.³⁸

The Willy films rode the wave of public interest in protecting whales and made their own contribution to promoting this sentiment. The basic relationship between Willy and Jesse, however, was that of beloved pet and master, despite Jesse's role in returning the whale to the wild. The differences between Orca and human were minimized and Willy's behavior was anthropomorphized to make the film appealing to children and adults alike. The video box for *Free Willy* featured a photo of Willy leaping to freedom over Jesse at the boy's command. The box for *Free Willy II* (Warner, 1995) showed Jesse riding on the back of the whale, from the scene in which he made a big impression on his new girlfriend. This conflict between wishing to turn wild animals into cute pets and the desire to ensure their survival as autonomous beings in the wild pervades American society.

Fly Away Home (Columbia, 1996)³⁹ is similar to the *Free Willy* films, but draws an even closer bond between person and wild animal. A child finds more than a dozen Canada Goose eggs in a wetland destroyed by unscrupulous developers. She incubates them and raises the chicks. After a wildlife officer threatens to pinion the adult geese, she and her father train them to follow an ultralight plane. Father and daughter then show the geese how to migrate by following the aircraft south. In the process, the geese help to forge a bond between father and daughter, who had been estranged by divorce. Again, we have the story elements of a child being helped through her relationship with wild animals who need protection from the villains threatening wildlife and the environment, and of a successful effort to return animals to the freedom of the wild.

The pattern varies in *The Amazing Panda Adventure* (Warner, 1995),⁴⁰ when some boys rescue a Giant Panda from poachers in China and take it to a panda research center operated by the father of one of them. In the process, the shaky bond between father and son is strengthened. Although here the animal is temporarily taken out of the wild (and at great peril to the children), it is done only to protect the panda from danger. These films follow the pattern established by Mowat's *A Whale for the Killing*, but they provide clear and stereotyped villains, endearing and terribly cute, gentle animals, and a human interest story line in which the relationship with the animal improves the child's life. Furthermore, these films end on an upbeat and hopeful note: the animals are

saved, after a heroic effort by the protagonists, who devote and sometimes risk their lives to promote the best interest of their animal friends.

The “save the whales” theme also appeared in an unlikely film, one of the *Star Trek* series. *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (Paramount, 1986)⁴¹ was directed by Leonard Nimoy, who also helped to create the story. Here, Admiral Kirk and his crew had to go back in time to the late twentieth century to collect a pair of Humpback Whales, the only creatures who could save the Earth of the future from destruction by communicating with an all-powerful attacking alien probe. In the doing, they discover that the whales are intelligent and live for their own ends and they rescue them from the harpoon of a whaling vessel. The film was intended to promote public interest in protecting whales and may well have done so, despite some very unlikely premises. (How, for example, could the limited gene pool of a pair of whales be successful in repopulating the future Earth’s oceans with Humpbacks?) This film did not fall into the trap of terminal cuteness in which the other films we have examined were caught. It did, however, portray the whales as creatures possessing a greater gentleness and, perhaps, greater wisdom and morality than do humans. In an inversion of the “save the whale” theme, the whales saved humanity and the Earth by communicating with the aliens.

This merger of science fiction and animal films opens up an interesting area for analysis. The late 1970s and 1980s witnessed a series of science fiction films in which space aliens were not out to invade and destroy Earth. Instead, they were gentle creatures of goodness—almost angels. This trend got under way with the religious imagery at the conclusion of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and continued with *E. T.*, *Cocoon*, *Cocoon: The Return*, *Starman*, and others.⁴² During that period, in which the world was facing the potential dooms of nuclear war and environmental collapse, filmmakers created angelic alien others to uplift their audiences. They found an eager market; Steven Spielberg’s *E. T.*, for example, made more money than any previous motion picture. These aliens offered a hopeful alternative to the dark and pessimistic face of humanity that filled newspaper headlines.

Similarly, American popular culture came to view whales, wolves, pandas, and other wild creatures as representatives of the purity, gentleness, and innate wisdom that seemed missing from the late twentieth century. This appeal to an angelic other, be it a space alien or wild animal, appears to be part of a common cultural phenomenon. Lisa Mighetto argued that the view of nature in the early realistic wild animal stories provided their readers a comforting alternative to the Darwinian view of the world as one of amoral conflict and competition. Perhaps the “save the critters” films offer a similar comfort to present-day viewers.

Animals *are* ideas, as well as living, breathing creatures. And the idea that their lives are gentler and possibly wiser than ours has been a very important element in the most popular wild animal films of our time. They are also pre-

sented as animals whose lives are threatened by humans and become symbolic of the larger environmental threats that we face. These films present another idea of animals that is becoming pervasive in popular culture: that animals are persons. A December 1990 *Los Angeles Times* poll, for example, found that 47 percent of Americans believed that “animals are just like humans in all important ways.”⁴³ This idea has been around for a century or more but has become widespread in recent decades, in part through the promotional efforts of the animal rights movement. The “save the animals” films represent a fusion of the traditional animal story, environmental concerns, and an animal rights view of animals—all wrapped up in the search for a mythic alternative to the troubles of our times.

The realistic wild animal story is likely to continue as a viable part of nature literature and other media. Over the decades, it has changed in response to the issues and concerns of the times. The early stories emphasized the personalities and lives of individual animals in response to Darwinism and public concerns regarding the humane treatment of animals. The stories of the mid-twentieth century introduced a new ecological perspective, which grew into the environmental focus of the latter part of the century. And these themes were recast from an animal rights perspective and as a mythic response to social anxiety at the end of the century. Wild animal stories will continue to evolve in response to the social challenges of the future and changing ideas about animals.