

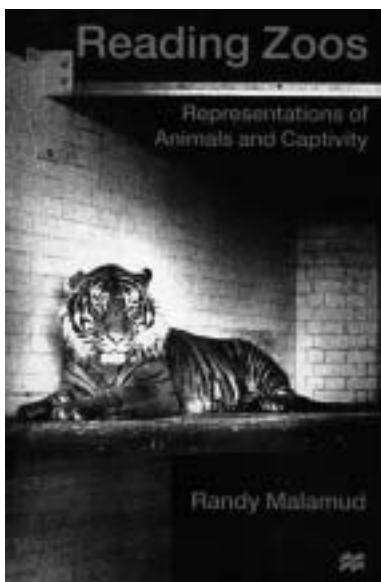
Book Review

- *The Welfare Ark* - - *Reading Zoos* -

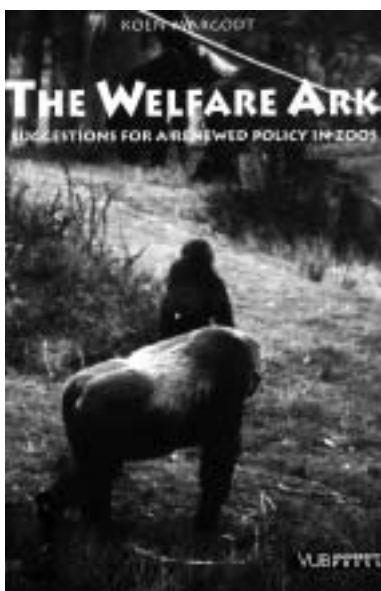
Reviewer: Stephen St C. Bostock

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Reading Zoos: Representations of Animals and Captivity, Randy Malamud
Macmillan, London, 1998



The Welfare Ark: Suggestions for a Renewed Policy in Zoos, Koen Margodt
VUB University Press, Brussels, 2000



If you tell me giraffes can't be appreciated properly in zoos, but only in the wild, I think you have a point. If you go further, as Randy Malamud does, to the point of telling me it's impossible to see a giraffe in zoo, a real giraffe, but only 'a (stinted) representation of a giraffe', then I think you're talking nonsense. Professor Malamud, who teaches literature at Georgia State University. may be only half serious about the giraffe, but he's a strangely extreme critic of zoos, for whom the horror of captivity allows no zoo any redeeming feature.

He calls his book Reading Zoos because he considers zoos carry sinister messages about domination and so on, but his book is also a study of the astonishing number of novels, plays and poems which refer to zoos.

But don't zoos help us to appreciate real, live animals? Not for Malamud. The giraffe comment comes in a partly humorous passage about how his young son is to be spared being misled about wildlife by visiting zoos but instead will be introduced to woodpeckers in the garden and cows at the farm. Fine, but how can cows possibly be real if zoo giraffes aren't? And come to that, if giraffes aren't real, presumably none of the other animals in the zoo are. Koen Margodt, whose book The Welfare Ark is also critical of zoos but otherwise utterly different from Malamud's, refutes Malamud's giraffe comment neatly by recalling a stick-throwing game he once had in a zoo with a sea-lion - obviously a sea-lion of character, not just a representation of one! Quite so.

As a source of reference on creative writers' reactions to zoos, Malamud's book is useful, reminding us just how many sensitive people don't like zoos. But it seems to me that Malamud's own hostility for zoos causes him sometimes to misread his authors - Virginia Woolf, for example, who seems to have been in the habit of characterising her human acquaintances in terms of animals she met in regular visits to London Zoo.

(Malamud calls Whipsnade a 'suburban zoo', by the way, and there are other odd slips, like calling the Zoological Society of London the 'Royal Zoological Society' or suggesting that Pooh was based on a tame polar bear.)

The messages Malamud reads in zoos are about their being demonstrations of human dominance over other animals, and of imperialism, this latter applying especially to London Zoo. Malamud is here reiterating the claims of previous writers such as Bob Mullan and Garry Marvin in *Zoo Culture* and Harriet Ritvo in *The Animal Estate*, all of whom in my view are blowing up a kernel of truth out of all proportion, as I tried to argue in a book of my own, *Zoos and Animal Rights*. Malamud adds extra doses of sociologico-literary theorising, with references to some odd new subjects, such as ecocriticism. I thought ecology was a science, and hardly likely to be most approachable (as Malamud suggests) by way of poetry.

Perhaps I should not decry what I do not understand. But certainly Margodt, especially after Malamud, is refreshingly clear and comprehensible, as well as fair and balanced, and aware of what zoos can be at their best. His book cover signals as much with its picture of gorillas in a splendid enclosure at Apenheul Primate Park in the Netherlands. And because of this, Margodt's criticisms carry almost infinitely more weight than do Malamud's. Margodt, a philosophy graduate, works with the Jane Goodall Institute.

Even where Margodt's information is familiar, he is good at asking straightforward but penetrating questions which may well stimulate new thinking where we thought we were clear on the issues. Margodt looks at the principles of good zoo-keeping in general, and also at well selected examples of particular animals which pose problems, such as bears, dolphins and gorillas. He has a firm grasp on such unfortunate realities as the poor survival rates of captive dolphins, and, having made many personal observations of certain zoos, good and bad, is well aware of how so-called surplus animals may find their way from admirable institutions to poor ones. (He is very strongly against any use by zoos of dealers.) Yet he is ready to praise struggling zoos and their staff for doing what they can in difficult circumstances to improve the quality of care of individual animals. Many of the institutions he discusses are named, so that he is in no way providing us with a merely theoretical discussion. (It's a great pity Margodt's book has no

index. Malamud's is excellent in this regard.)

Where Margodt accepts the conservational responsibilities of zoos (though he convincingly puts doubts in our minds as to whether these must always take precedence over respect for individual animals' own rights and welfare), Malamud regards zoos as wholly useless conservationally as in every other way. (I should add that he at least gives a reference to an alternative view, my own.) To me it's the risks we face of losing orangutans, and even gorillas and chimpanzees, bonobos particularly, in the wild which spells out most starkly the conservational duty of zoos. I am enormously impressed by the light the various great apes' very different social behaviour is already shedding on our own nature and origins. The stupidity of letting any of them become extinct seems to me too appalling to contemplate. Margodt appreciates this and indeed raises important conservational questions, such as why we are not already taking steps to maintain an ex situ population of mountain gorillas as a precaution (their numbers being already below the danger line for expected survival in the wild).

But Malamud's complete failure to appreciate the practicalities of the situation makes me impatient of his intellectual gyrations. Time is too short. If there's a chance of zoos being able to assist in saving orangs or gorillas, they must be supported, not dismissed out of hand by those, like Malamud, whose expertise lies elsewhere.