

Reviews

Boyd, Brian. *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009. xii, 540 pages: ISBN-10: 0674033574 ISBN-13: 978-0674033573.

One morning in late January this past winter of record snow and cold, I walked to work as usual, but I found the landscape of my ordinary route completely changed.

All the trees and bushes, every single branch down to the littlest twig were covered in frost. A soft white rime had descended in the night and settled everywhere.

The sun was coming down through a pale pink haze, striking in places the frost crystals which exploded in fireworks of colors. It was amazing.

Suddenly I heard the distant sound of singing, a high-pitched light tinkle. When I looked out on the frozen, snow-covered little river by the side of the foot-path, I saw a ring of creatures dancing—small, nimble, like children but no ordinary children.

They were hovering above the ground, weaving in and out of the ring, intensely interacting with each other in their singing, gesturing, and dancing.

At that instant I was looking around for someone to tell about it. I was desperate to tell somebody and share this bewildering experience; it was like the urgent call of the genes . . .

This urge to tell a story, whether it be true, untrue or—as in the case above—half-true, and our equally strong urge to listen to and read stories, is what Brian Boyd investigates in his work *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*. (Harvard University Press, 2009, 540 pages). Well-timed it appeared in the bicentenary year of the birth of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of his *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

Born in 1952 in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Brian Boyd emigrated with his family to New Zealand in 1957, where he is now a professor at the Department of English at the University of Auckland. He is best known for his wide

and deep research into the life and work of Vladimir Nabokov where especially his new reading of Nabokov's *Pale Fire* attracted attention (*Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, Princeton University Press, 1999).

Boyd's *On the Origin of Stories* sends a strong signal into the world of critical theory, because it is not only a research into the roots of fiction—and the arts in general—by evolutionary strains, but also criticism on the prevailing theory in academe, and however polite, not entirely devoid of mild malice.

Boyd is an adherent of Darwinian literary studies. This is a way of critical reading that emanates from research in other academic disciplines that do not normally fall under evolutionary biology, but which in the last twenty years have become reshaped by an evolutionary understanding of human nature: psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, economics. In his Introduction Boyd asks whether it could not also “help explain even art, even human minds at their freest and most inventive.”

He prefers the term “evocriticism” to “literary Darwinism” in order to distinguish this critical perspective from established ones, traditionally built around individual theorists into systems in the light of which literature is read. Also, leaving out the word “Darwinism” serves to distance evocriticism from a founding father that has been overtaken by the fertility and potential of his original creation to live on in what Boyd calls “a live and empirically accountable research program.”

And he has hopes for this. In his Conclusion, under an epigraph from Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Boyd develops his hopes for evocriticism. In the quoted passage Frye claims that “criticism seems to be badly in need of a coordinating principle, ... which, ... will see the phenomena it deals with as parts of a whole.”

I would say that Brian Boyd offers precisely such a “coordinating principle” in his inclusive and extremely well researched work. Any Darwinian term that you would expect to find is introduced and inserted into his discussion, scrutinized and thoroughly born out by references to experiments and research within the biocultural area—convincingly showing how the “phenomena [he] deals with” are “parts of a whole.”

So, what does he say? He proposes that art—and by extension fiction, which is a later step in the evolutionary chain of man's mind—has developed from play and our immense interest in discovering patterns, paying attention to that which stimulates us most and so bestowing status on the artist/storyteller that can do that best; also, in this adaptation of art we gain

benefits in the form of shared pleasure which in turn refines modes of sociality to improve cooperation, etc.; all in a manner that builds from the ground up, evolution-wise.

In order to test his theses developed in Book I, Boyd performs in Book II an evocritical analysis of two works that he finds outstanding in the history of literature and which allow him to get near to narrative's phylogenic (historical) and ontogenic (individual) origins.

Under the punning title "From Zeus to Seuss," we can enjoy his evocritical readings of the *Odyssey* by Homer, and *Horton Hears a Who!* (1954), a children's picture-story book by Dr. Seuss (pen name for the American Theodor Seuss Geisel).

Boyd chooses the *Odyssey* because of its historical origin—phylogenic—which is a biological term denoting the entire sequence of events involved in the development of an individual organism. Applied to literature (the *Odyssey*) it would discuss the "whence?" which is one of the four questions that biologists deal with in order to explain behavior; the other three being "why", "how?" and "when?". Boyd declares that it is important to focus on all four questions and this is what he "hope[s] to do in accounting for storytelling."

In the six chapters that discuss the *Odyssey* he focuses on the evolution of attention, intelligence and cooperation, in the light of which we may see things afresh even in this story that has been translated, analyzed and retold for two and a half thousand years.

Whereas the *Odyssey* rises out of historical origins closely linked to tradition and religion, *Horton Hears a Who!* hit the American scene at a clearly defined time—"when?" (ontogenic origin; another biological term denoting when adaptation develops and changes in the individual) and by a clearly defined author whose methods and aims are next to transparent.

Horton Hears a Who! is a formidably successful children's story that has sold millions of copies over many generations. It features the elephant Horton who champions the little Whos, a whole population that live on a peck of dust and whose existence is threatened by—among others—the Wickenham brothers and the rest of their clan. In contrast to the *Odyssey* which invites explorations of character, plot, structure, dramatic irony, and theme in a context that sees fiction as a human activity arising naturally out of other human and animal behavior, *Horton Hears a Who!* provides opportunities to explore different levels of reading or literary explanation—universal, local, individual, and particular.

In his book, Brian Boyd builds a convincing case; his account offers a pedagogical and repeated exposition of chapters and subchapters; repetition is unavoidable but mostly oh, so welcome in keeping up with the reading. His text is also heavily footnoted with references to scholars in various fields of evolutionary and biocultural sciences: Richard Dawkins, Frans de Waal, and Steven Pinker are renowned examples and the principal contributors to a bibliography that covers fifty pages.

Besides the didactic clarity another ingredient facilitates the reading and renews interest by foreshadowing what is to come as one goes along, namely the well-chosen epigraphs among others Charles Darwin (of course, 1859), Appiah (2006), Lewis Carroll (1893), Ian McEwan (1999), G.B. Shaw (the sceptic, 1921) and the one already mentioned by Northrop Frye (1957). But the most entertaining and telling one—I find—is Dr. Seuss, from *The Cat in the Hat* (1957).

I know it is wet
 And the sun is not sunny.
 But we can have
 Lots of good fun that is funny!

Brian Boyd takes his leave of the reader by pointing out yet again how the author—also he himself in this case—constantly competes for the attention of potential audiences—in this case us—that will find it cost-beneficial to listen to a particular author at a particular time.

The question is what artist or author is powerful enough to compete with the attraction of the spring sun that now finally floods my once so frosty route to work.

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Studies and interdisciplinary handbooks of collective memories and cultures of memory illustrate the conceptual richness and methodological di-