

developing better exhibitions for everyone? This tension comes out in two excellent essays by Judy Rand and John Russick on writing labels and developing interactive exhibits respectively. Rand presents illustrative examples and research findings demonstrating that short, narrative, first-person labels are particularly effective for children and families. She suggests that exhibition developers need to “form new habits” (p. 269) in their label writing so they can develop wall texts that serve as the basis for family conversations rather than as authoritative treatises on a topic.

Rand is an early pioneer for audience-centered exhibition design; Russick is a newer convert. In a well-written, honest essay about developing interactive exhibition elements, the Chicago History Museum curator recalls a visit to the Field Museum in which his children entreated him to help push a giant block of limestone, and in doing so, imagine what it must have taken to build the pyramids. Russick was a young exhibit preparator at the Field Museum when the block was installed, and at that time, he was confused about its utility in an exhibition about ancient Egypt. It took him “twenty years and two kids” (p. 235) to understand the value of a basic interactive element to making history come alive for young audiences. It simply was not part of what he had been trained to include or expect in a history exhibition. Similarly, he had to learn to become comfortable with the noisy, active way that children learn in museums and to see childrens’ play as a positive addition to his exhibitions.

Ultimately, this book is for people like Russick who are ready to retrain themselves in exhibition design. Interactive exhibits, short labels, contextualized stories, and multisensory experiences are not

exclusively for children. But in developing them, curators are pushed to work in new ways, to stretch beyond what Elizabeth Rawson calls the “book on the walls” (p. 50) approach to exhibitions. The challenge is not only to understand children and take their needs seriously, but to do so for all visitors. When museums present dull history exhibitions for adults, visitors politely read the labels, look at the objects, and say, “well—that’s what the history museum is for.” Thank goodness we have children to demand something more active, more relevant, and more valuable for everyone.

—Nina Simon, *Museum 2.0*, Santa Cruz, CA

On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction

Brian Boyd

Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009. References, index. 560 pp. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780674033573

Brian Boyd’s *On the Origin of Stories* is consilience at its best. Boyd eschews both critical theory and the grinning gargoyles of many contemporary evolutionary psychologies. For too long, readers have squirmed as theory and cultural critique made a shambles of literary analysis. Rather, Boyd sees science and the humanities as equally orthodox and as mutually supportive. An acknowledged authority on Vladimir Nabokov’s life and work, Boyd is well qualified to take a Nabokovian approach to literature. Biological and cultural insights find common ground in this perspective. Like mind and nature in the

work of Gregory Bateson, they amount to “a necessary unity.”

Boyd’s fundamental thesis presents art and story as adaptive outcomes of play. By doing so, Boyd seeks to reshape a vast landscape that encloses much of the arts and the humanities. He explores this landscape and makes it strange and new with the aid of particular views drawn from evolutionary biology. He seeks to understand art, story, creativity, innovation, and play in evolutionary terms. In this landscape, his role is that of an intellectual naturalist-explorer in the tradition of Humboldt, Thoreau, Grum-Grzhimailo, and E. O. Wilson. Very firmly and most forcibly, Boyd eschews both psychoanalysis and more recent psychological approaches. (Nabokov sneered at Freud as that “Viennese quack.”) Instead, he trusts to what he hopes will be a scientifically mature biology and natural history of play behavior. His coverage of the nonhuman and human play literature has its ups and downs, but he still manages to get it right most of the time, due largely, I suggest, to his studies of Nabokov. Nabokov the biologist was an evolutionary thinker in the Russian Darwinist tradition. This rich, prolific, scientific perspective emerged from the data and insights of Russian biogeography and theoretical biology. It differs fundamentally from the rigid, politicized Darwinism of the West. Nabokov’s philosophy of play, evolution, and creation is not only good biology but good cosmology. Boyd has built well on this rock-solid foundation. No previous treatment of play, art, and literature has hit so many important nails so solidly on their heads.

Boyd has little patience for fools and less for the past four decades of literary scholarship. Ignoring high academic literary criticism, he takes the novel by its claws

and wings, the Irish elk by its horns. He summarizes selected evolutionary findings, then applies these principles to art and to literature (Homer’s *Odyssey*, Dr. Seuss’s *Horton Hears a Who*). Boyd’s skilled readings display his keen eye and ear for literature, his Nabokovian attention to detail. Some of his unique insights demonstrably benefit from evolutionary perspectives. For example, Boyd’s discussion of deception in the *Odyssey* (pp. 274–75) draws fruitfully on the biology of deception. How could a good Nabokovian do otherwise?

Boyd has necessarily built his argument on specific evolutionary assumptions. He opts for theories of kin selection and reciprocal altruism and cites the Prisoner’s Dilemma game model of cooperation, even as these sacred cows continue to receive sound drubbings from E. O. Wilson, David Sloan Wilson, and other well-respected biologists like Cambridge University’s Tim Clutton-Brock. Boyd’s intelligent treatment of cooperation and competition in the *Odyssey* and his appropriate invocation of reciprocal altruism in interpreting the text would not convince those who now seek to eliminate kin selection, reciprocal altruism, and the Prisoner’s Dilemma from the biological study of social behavior. Needless to say, the jury is still out.

Boyd’s hopeful application of concepts like adaptation and his discussion of evolutionary “problems” and “solutions” would no doubt draw questions from many working biologists and particularly from developmental systems theorists such as Richard Lewontin and Susan Oyama. I also miss any discussion of the sort of nonadaptive evolutionary aesthetics to which Darwin referred in his epochal treatment of sensory-cognitive preferences of unknown origin. These phenomena remain under active investigation

by evolutionary biologists under rubrics like “intrinsic bias,” “sensory drive,” and “hidden preferences.” They remain a dilemma for any attempt we might make to interpret animal play behavior as evolved adaptation.

I also question Boyd’s adoption of the social brain (theory of mind) hypothesis of encephalization (brain to body-mass ratio) and his implied acceptance of the paralyzing social-ecological dichotomy. In coevolved relationships between distantly related species, what is social and what is ecological? Each individual’s ecology constitutes rhythms of integrated relationships in space and time. Play between human infants and adults, rightly spotlighted by Boyd as the cradle of human nature—whose unity transcends simple dichotomies of organism and environment, nature and culture, social and nonsocial—is the source of these lived rhythms of time and space beyond construction and beyond preexistence, a developmental scaffold that recycles as social, as locomotor, and as object play in later ontogeny, as communicative musicality, and as children’s geographies (and, ultimately, as art and much, much more).

On the Origin of Stories is a novel look at literature as reflected in the funhouse mirrors of biology, a refraction of human nature as seen by a credentialed humanist who dared exercise the free spirit of natural history as if fiction were simply one more research protocol of human ethology. Human souls are an endangered species. For Boyd, art’s richness, order, and purpose are life’s last safe refuge, the only immortality that souls may share.

—Robert Fagen, *University of Alaska Fairbanks, retired*

Contemporary Athletics and Ancient Greek Ideals

Daniel A. Dombrowski

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Are the ideals of ancient Greece still pertinent to the lives of modern people? Philosopher Daniel Dombrowski argues that concepts from Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and others continue to be important tools for analyzing one of most prominent obsessions of contemporary societies—athletics. A sports fan himself, Dombrowski is aware of the potential benefits of sports to participants and spectators (aesthetic realization, moral tutelage, physical development, community identity, and the like). But he also recognizes the dangers of highly organized, commercially developed sports (excessive preoccupation with victory, cheating, boorish behavior, the idolization of the athlete, and so forth). In this context, his book attempts to reimagine some moral and aesthetic possibilities for modern sport and for sports people like players, coaches, and fans.

Dombrowski’s list of useful Greek concepts includes the following: *arete* (the pursuit of excellence), *sophrosyne* (the path of moderation), *dynamis* (the power to deal with both bodily limitation and bodily possibility), *askesis* (the practice of athletic discipline), *paidia* (joyful play), and *kalokagathia* (the integration of moral and physical being). Although he argues that many contemporary beliefs about sport (and especially the Olympic movement) derive from the Greeks, he does not pretend that one can simply lift ideas from a faraway context and apply them to contemporary life. Nor does he