"BAMBI" IS EVEN BLEAKER THAN YOU THOUGHT

The original book is far more grisly than the beloved Disney classic—and has an unsettling message about humanity.

By Kathryn Schulz

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. . . this is one of the most famous murders in the history of cinema. A mother and her child are out for a walk, on the first warm day after a bitter winter. Beguiled by the changing weather, we do not see the danger coming. In fact, we never see it at all, because the man with the gun remains offscreen. We see only the mother's sudden alarm; her panicked attempt to get her child to safety; their separation in the chaos of the moment; and then the child, outside in the cold as snow once again begins to fall, alone and crying for his mother.

The film in question is, of course, the 1942 Walt Disney classic "Bambi." Perhaps more than any other movie made for children, it is remembered chiefly for its moments of terror: not only the killing of the hero's mother but the forest fire that threatens all the main characters with annihilation. Stephen King called "Bambi" the first horror movie he ever saw, and Pauline Kael, the longtime film critic for this magazine, claimed that she had never known children to be as frightened by supposedly scary grownup movies as they were by "Bambi."

Unlike many other Disney classics, from "Cinderella" to "Frozen," this fright fest is not based on a fairy tale. It was adapted from "Bambi: A Life in the Woods," a 1922 novel by the Austro-Hungarian writer and critic Felix Salten. The book rendered Salten famous; the movie, which altered and

overshadowed its source material, rendered him virtually unknown. And it rendered the original "Bambi" obscure, too, even though it had previously been both widely acclaimed and passionately reviled. The English-language version, as translated in 1928 by the soon to be Soviet spy Whittaker Chambers, was enormously popular, earning rave reviews and selling six hundred and fifty thousand copies in the dozen-plus years before the film came out. The original version, meanwhile, was banned and burned in Nazi Germany, where it was regarded as a parable about the treatment of Jews in Europe.

As that suggests, "Bambi" the book is even darker than "Bambi" the movie. Until now, English-language readers had to rely on the Chambers translation —which, thanks to a controversial copyright ruling, has been the only one available for almost a century. This year, however, "Bambi: A Life in the Woods" has entered the public domain, and the Chambers version has been joined by a new one: "The Original Bambi: The Story of a Life in the Forest" (Princeton), translated by Jack Zipes, with wonderful black-and-white illustrations by Alenka Sottler. Zipes, a professor emeritus of German and comparative literature at the University of Minnesota, who has also translated the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, maintains in his introduction that Chambers got "Bambi" almost as wrong as Disney did. Which raises two questions: How exactly did a tale about the life of a fawn become so contentious, and what is it really about?

Felix Salten was an unlikely figure to write "Bambi," since he was an ardent hunter who, by his own estimate, shot and killed more than two hundred deer. He was also an unlikely figure to write a parable about Jewish persecution, since, even after the book burnings, he promoted a policy of appeasement toward Nazi Germany. And he was an unlikely figure to write one of the most famous children's stories of the twentieth century, since he wrote one of its most infamous works of child pornography.

These contradictions are nicely encapsulated by Beverley Driver Eddy in her biography "Felix Salten: Man of Many Faces." Born Siegmund Salzmann, in Hungary in 1869, Salten was just three weeks old when his family moved to Vienna—a newly desirable destination for Jews, because Austria had lately granted them full citizenship. His father was a descendant of generations of rabbis who shook off his religious roots in favor of a broadminded humanism; he was also a hopelessly inept businessman who soon plunged the family into poverty. To help pay the bills, Salten started working for an insurance company in his teens, around the same time that he began submitting poetry and literary criticism to local newspapers and journals. Eventually, he began meeting other writers and creative types at a café called the Griensteidl, across the street from the national theatre. These were the fin-de-siècle artists collectively known as Young Vienna, whose members included Arthur Schnitzler, Arnold Schoenberg, Stefan Zweig, and a writer who later repudiated the group, Karl Kraus.

Salten was, in his youth, both literally and literarily promiscuous. He openly conducted many affairs—with chambermaids, operetta singers, actresses, a prominent socialist activist, and, serially or simultaneously, several women with whom other members of Young Vienna were having dalliances as well. In time, he married and settled down, but all his life he wrote anything he could get paid to write: book reviews, theatre reviews, art criticism, essays, plays, poems, novels, a book-length advertisement for a carpet company disguised as reportage, travel guides, librettos, forewords, afterwords, film scripts. His detractors regarded this torrent as evidence of hackery, but it was more straightforwardly evidence of necessity; almost alone among the members of Young Vienna, he was driven by the need to make a living.

Yet, like his father, Salten could be reckless with money. Anxious to seem like an insider, he insisted on eating, drinking, dressing, and travelling in the manner of his wealthier peers, with the result that he was constantly accruing debts, some of which he dispatched in dodgy ways—for instance, by "borrowing" and then selling a friend's expensive books. And he could be

reckless in other respects, too. Inclined to be touchy, either by temperament or because he felt the need to prove himself, he spent much of his young life fomenting disputes (he once walked into the Griensteidl and slapped Kraus in the face after the latter criticized him in print), then resolving them via lawsuits or duels. Both his personal judgment and his critical judgment could be impulsive and errant; in his thirties, he borrowed prodigiously to produce a modernist cabaret, of the kind that was all the rage in Berlin, only to see it become a critical and financial catastrophe.

The production that brought Salten the most infamy, however, did not bear his name: "Josefine Mutzenbacher; or, The Story of a Viennese Whore, as Told by Herself." Published anonymously in Vienna in 1906, it has been continuously in print since then, in both German and English, and has sold some three million copies. Despite the subtitle, no one ever seems to have entertained the possibility that it was written by a prostitute, or even by a woman. In Salten's lifetime, nearly everyone thought he wrote it, except for those who liked him too much to believe he could produce something so filthy and those who hated him too much to believe he could produce something so well written. Salten himself twice claimed not to have been responsible for it but otherwise was silent or coy on the subject. These days, everyone from academics to the Austrian government regards him as the undisputed author of the book.

Written in the tradition of the ribald female memoir, à la "Fanny Hill," "Josefine Mutzenbacher" recounts the sexual adventures of the title character beginning when she is five years old, and continuing after her turn to prostitution in her early teens, following the death of her mother. Today, what is most shocking about the book is Josefine's youth. At the time, however, most of the scandal concerned her unapologetic embrace of her career, which she both enjoyed and credited with lifting her out of poverty, educating her, and introducing her to a world far wider than the impoverished Vienna suburbs where she (like Salten) grew up.

Perhaps inevitably, scholars have tried to draw parallels between "Josefine Mutzenbacher" and "Bambi." Both title characters lose their mothers while still in their youth; both books introduce readers in detail to urban borderlands—the poor suburbs, the flophouses, the forests—about which most proper Viennese were largely ignorant. Still, for the most part, such comparisons seem strained. "Josefine Mutzenbacher" occupies much the same place in the Salten œuvre as his homage to carpets: the one that lies at the intersection of ambition, graphomania, and penury.

But the place of "Bambi" is different. If there is a through line to Salten's scattershot career, it is his interest in writing about animals, which was evident from his first published work of fiction: "The Vagabond," a short story about the adventures of a dachshund, written when he was twenty-one. Many other nonhuman protagonists followed, most of them ill-fated: a sparrow that dies in battle, a fly that hurls itself to death against a windowpane. Salten's novel "The Hound of Florence" concerns a young Austrian man destined to spend every other day of his life as the archduke's dog; in the end, he is stabbed to death, in his dog form, while trying to protect a courtesan he loves from assault. (In an even more drastic transformation than the one "Bambi" underwent, this story became, in Disney's hands, "The Shaggy Dog.") "Fifteen Rabbits" features, at first, fifteen rabbits, who debate the nature of God and the reason for their own persecution while their numbers gradually dwindle. "Renni the Rescuer," about a German shepherd trained as a combat animal, features a carrier pigeon traumatized by its wartime service. And then, of course, there is "Bambi"—which, like these other stories, was not particularly suitable for children, until Disney bowdlerized it to fit the bill.

If you haven't seen the Disney version of "Bambi" since you were eight, here is a quick refresher: The title character is born one spring to an unnamed mother and a distant but magnificently antlered father. He befriends an enthusiastic young rabbit, Thumper; a sweet-tempered skunk,

Flower; and a female fawn named Faline. After the death of his mother the following spring, he and Faline fall in love, but their relationship is tested by a rival deer, by a pack of hunting dogs, and, finally, by the forest fire. Having triumphed over all three, Bambi sires a pair of fawns; as the film concludes, the hero, like his father before him, is watching over his family from a faraway crag.

"Bambi" was not particularly successful when it was first released. It was hampered partly by audience turnout, which was down because of the Second World War, and partly by audience expectations, since, unlike earlier Disney productions, it featured no magic and no Mickey. In time, though, "Bambi," which was Walt's favorite among his films, became one of the most popular movies in the history of the industry. In the four decades following its release, it earned forty-seven million dollars—more than ten times the haul of "Casablanca," which came out the same year. Perhaps more notably, it also earned a dominant position in the canon of American nature tales. In the words of the environmental historian Ralph Lutts, "It is difficult to identify a film, story, or animal character that has had a greater influence on our vision of wildlife."

That vision is of an Eden marred only by the incursion of humankind. There is no native danger in Bambi's forest; with the exception of his brief clash with another male deer in mating season, and maybe that hardscrabble winter, the wilderness he inhabits is all natural beauty and interspecies amity. The truly grave threats he faces are always from hunters, who cause both the forest fire and the death of his mother, yet the movie seems less anti-hunting than simply anti-human. The implicit moral is not so much that killing animals is wicked as that people are wicked and wild animals are innocent. Some years ago, when the American Film Institute compiled a list of the fifty greatest movie villains of all time, it chose for slot No. 20—between Captain Bligh, of "Mutiny on the Bounty," and Mrs. John Iselin, of "The Manchurian Candidate"—the antagonist of "Bambi": "Man."

Unsurprisingly, “Bambi” has long been unpopular among hunters, one of whom sent a telegram to Walt Disney on the eve of the film’s release to inform him that it is illegal to shoot deer in the spring. Nor is the film a favorite among professional wilderness managers, who now routinely contend with what they call “the Bambi complex”: a dangerous desire to regard nature as benign and wild animals as adorable and tame, coupled with a corresponding resistance to crucial forest-management tools such as culling and controlled burns. Even some environmentalists object to its narrowness of vision—its failure to offer audiences a model of a healthy relationship between people and the rest of the natural world.

But perhaps the most vociferous if also the smallest group of critics consists of devotees of Salten, who recognize how drastically Disney distorted his source material. Although the animals in the novel do converse and in some cases befriend one another across species, their over-all relations are far from benign. In the course of just two pages, a fox tears apart a widely beloved pheasant, a ferret fatally wounds a squirrel, and a flock of crows attacks the young son of Friend Hare—the gentle, anxious figure who becomes Thumper in the movie—leaving him to die in excruciating pain. Later, Bambi himself nearly batters to death a rival who is begging for mercy, while Faline looks on, laughing. Far from being gratuitous, such scenes are, in the author’s telling, the whole point of the novel. Salten insisted that he wrote “Bambi” to educate naïve readers about nature as it really is: a place where life is always contingent on death, where starvation, competition, and predation are the norm.

That motive did not make Salten go easy on human beings. On the contrary: his depiction of our impact on nature is considerably more specific and violent than the one in the film, not to mention sadder. Consider the moment when Bambi, fleeing the hunting party that kills his mother and countless other creatures, comes across the wife of Friend Hare, in a scene that reads like something out of “Regeneration,” Pat Barker’s novel about the First World War:

“Can you help me a little?” she said. Bambi looked at her and shuddered. Her hind leg dangled lifelessly in the snow, dyeing it red and melting it with warm, oozing blood. “Can you help me a little?” she repeated. She spoke as if she were well and whole, almost as if she were happy. “I don’t know what can have happened to me,” she went on. “There’s really no sense to it, but I just can’t seem to walk. . . .”

In the middle of her words she rolled over on her side and died.

What purpose are scenes like that one serving in this book? Salten maintained that, despite his own affinity for hunting, he was trying to dissuade others from killing animals except when it was necessary for the health of a species or an ecosystem. (That was less hypocritical than it seems; Salten despised poachers and was horrified by the likes of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, who boasted of killing five thousand deer and was known to shoot them by the score as underlings drove them into his path.) But authors do not necessarily get the last word on the meaning of their work, and plenty of other people believe that “Bambi” is no more about animals than “Animal Farm” is. Instead, they see in it what the Nazis did: a reflection of the anti-Semitism that was on the rise all across Europe when Salten wrote it.

As a textual matter, the best evidence for this proposition comes from two parts of “Bambi” that never made it onto the screen. The first concerns Faline’s twin brother, Gobo, who was written out of the movie. A fragile and sickly fawn, Gobo cannot flee during the hunting rampage that kills Bambi’s mother and Friend Hare’s wife. For several months, he is presumed dead. Then one day Bambi and Faline spot a deer making its way across an open meadow with reckless nonchalance, as if oblivious to any possible peril.

This newcomer turns out to be the grownup Gobo, who, we learn, was rescued by a member of the hunting party, taken into his home, and nursed back to health. When Gobo returns, the other forest animals gather to hear him describe the kindness of the hunter and his family, the warmth of the

dwelling, and the meals that were brought to him every day. Most of them think that Gobo's time among humans has made him dangerously naïve, but he is convinced that it has made him wiser and more worldly. "You all think He's wicked," he tells them. (In Salten's books, humans are typographically styled the way God is: singular and capitalized.) "But He isn't wicked. If He loves anybody, or if anybody serves Him, He's good to him. Wonderfully good!"

Every subjugated minority is familiar with figures like Gobo—individuals who have assimilated into and become defenders of the culture of their subjugators, whether out of craven self-interest or because, like Gobo, they are sincerely enamored of it and convinced that their affection is reciprocated. Such figures often elicit the disdain or the wrath of their peers, and Salten leaves little doubt about how he feels: Bambi "was ashamed of Gobo without knowing why," and the half-tame deer soon pays the price for his beliefs. One day, ignoring the advice of other animals, Gobo strolls into the meadow even though the scent of humans fills the air. He is confident that they won't harm him, but he is shot in the flank while his love interest looks on. As she turns to flee, she sees the hunter bent over Gobo and hears his "wailing death shriek."

One understands why Disney left that part out. So, too, a scene in Salten's book where a dog kills a fox, which unfolds at a horrifyingly leisurely pace. The fox's paw is shattered and bleeding, and he knows he will die soon, but he pleads with the dog: "Let me die with my family at least. We're brothers almost, you and I." When that fails, he accuses the dog of being a turncoat and a spy. The dog works himself into a frenzy defending the virtue and the power of his master, then itemizes all the other animals who serve humankind:

"The horse, the cow, the sheep, the chickens, many, many of you and your kind are on His side and worship Him and serve Him."

"They're rabble!" snarled the fox, full of a boundless contempt.

It is easy, in light of these scenes, to see why some people interpret "Bambi" as a covert account of the crisis facing European Jews in the nineteen-twenties—a story about innocent creatures forced to remain constantly vigilant against danger, from would-be betrayers within and proto-Brown Shirts without. Some of Salten's biography supports that reading, starting with the fact that he knew a thing or two about assimilation. "I was not a Jew when I was a boy," he once wrote; raised in a household that prized European liberalism, and educated in part by pious Catholic teachers who praised him for his knowledge of the catechism, Salten only really began to identify as Jewish in his late twenties, when he grew close to Theodor Herzl, a fellow Austro-Hungarian writer and the father of the Zionist movement. He claimed that it was Herzl's pamphlet "The Jewish State" that made Salten, as he wrote, "willing to love my Jewishness."

If so, that love was, to say the least, complicated. On the one hand, Salten began writing a weekly column for Herzl's Jewish newspaper, in which he grew more and more critical of the assimilationist impulse that had shaped his childhood; on the other hand, he wrote it anonymously and refused to set foot in the newspaper's offices. In later years, his increasing willingness to embrace his Judaism corresponded, not coincidentally, with the increasing anti-Semitism in Vienna, which made it impossible for Jews to forget or deny their religious background.

In 1925, three years after "Bambi," Salten published "New People on Ancient Soil," the product of a visit to Palestine and a book-length tribute to his friend's dream of a Jewish state. A decade later, his books, together with countless others by Jewish authors, were burned by the Nazis, and two years after that, following Germany's annexation of Austria, he moved to Switzerland. Salten died in Zurich, at the age of seventy-six, four months after Hitler killed himself.

Does all this make "Bambi" a parable about Jewish persecution? The fact that the Nazis thought so is hardly dispositive—fascist regimes are not

known for their sophisticated literary criticism—and, for every passage that supports such a reading, numerous others complicate or contradict it. Many critics see in "Bambi" different or more diffuse political sentiments, from a generalized opposition to totalitarianism to a post-First World War commentary on the brutality of modern combat. All these readings are plausible, including the specifically Jewish one and Salten's own interpretation of his work as a plea for greater understanding of and greater care for the natural world. Yet the most striking and consistent message of the book is neither obliquely political nor urgently ecological; it is simply, grimly existential.

Whatever else "Bambi" may be, it is, at heart, a coming-of-age story, cervine kin to "Oliver Twist," "Little Women," and "Giovanni's Room." In the language in which it was written, however, it is often described not as a bildungsroman—a general novel of maturation—but more specifically as an *Erziehungsroman:* a novel of education and training.

The agent of that education is a character known as the old Prince, the oldest surviving stag in the forest, and the lessons he imparts are not subtle. When he first encounters Bambi, the latter is still a fawn, dismayed because his mother has lately grown distant—pushing him away when he tries to nurse, and walking off without caring whether he is following. Thus rebuffed, he is by himself in the middle of the forest bleating for her when the old Prince appears and scolds him. "Your mother has no time for you now," the old Prince says. "Can't you stay by yourself? Shame on you!"

That, in two sentences, is the ultimate message of "Bambi": anything short of extreme self-reliance is shameful; interdependence is unseemly, restrictive, and dangerous. "Of all his teachings," Salten writes, "this had been the most important: you must live alone. If you wanted to preserve yourself, if you understood existence, if you wanted to attain wisdom, you had to live alone." This is not "The Lorax" or "Maus." This is "The Fountainhead," with fawns.

Most panegyrics to the solitary life written by men have an element of misogyny in them, and "Bambi" is no exception. Seemingly brave and vivacious in her youth, Faline grows up to be timid and lachrymose; she "shrieked and shrieked," she "bleated," she is "the hysterical Faline." When she and Bambi are (for lack of a better word) dating, the old Prince teaches Bambi to ignore her calls, lest they come from a hunter imitating the sound. Like Gobo, the romance between the childhood friends is doomed by the logic of the book. "Do you love me still?" Faline asks one day, to which Bambi replies, "I don't know." She walks away, and "all at once, his spirit felt freer than for a long time." All other relationships with the female of the species have a similarly short life span; fatherly love is enduring and ennobling, motherly love juvenile and embarrassing. "Bambi" ends with its hero importuning two fawns, just as the old Prince had importuned him, to learn to live alone.

The curious thing about this insistence on solitude is that nothing in the book makes it seem appealing. The chief trajectory of Bambi's life is not from innocence to wisdom; it is from contentment and companionship—in his youth, he cavorts with Gobo and Faline, with magpies and Friend Hare, with screech owls and squirrels—to isolation and bare-bones survival. Stranger still, this valorization of loneliness seems unrelated to the book's second explicit moral, which concerns the relationship between human beings and other animals. In the final pages, the old Prince takes Bambi, himself now old and beginning to gray, to see something in the woods: a dead man, shot and killed by another hunter. (Amazingly, Walt Disney planned to include this scene in his film, excising it only after the sight of the corpse made an entire test audience leap out of their seats.) With the old Prince's prompting, Bambi concludes from this experience not that we humans are a danger even unto one another but, rather, that other animals are foolish for imagining that we are gods merely because we are powerful. "There is Another who is over us all," he realizes while contemplating the dead man, "over us and over Him." The old Prince, satisfied that his work is

done, goes off to die.

This vague gesture in the direction of deism has no antecedent in the book, no moral or theological trajectory to make Bambi's insight meaningful or satisfying. On the contrary, the book is at its best when it revels in rather than pretends to resolve the mystery of existence. At one point, Bambi passes by some midges who are discussing a June bug. "How long will he live?" the young ones ask. "Forever, almost," their elders answer. "They see the sun thirty or forty times." Elsewhere, a brief chapter records the final conversation of a pair of oak leaves clinging to a branch at the end of autumn. They gripe about the wind and the cold, mourn their fallen peers, and try to understand what is about to happen to them. "Why must we fall?" one asks. The other doesn't know, but has questions of its own: "Do we feel anything, do we know anything about ourselves when we're down there?" The conversation tacks back and forth from the intimate to the existential. The two leaves worry about which of them will fall first; one of them, gone "yellow and ugly," reassures the other that it has barely changed at all. The response, just before the inevitable end, is startlingly moving: "You've always been so kind to me. I'm just beginning to understand how kind you are." That is the opposite of a paean to individualism: a belated but tender recognition of how much we mean to one another.

What are we to make of this muddy, many-minded story? Zipes, in his introduction, blames some of the confusion on Chambers, contending that he mistranslated Salten, flattening both the political and the metaphysical dimensions of the work and paving the way for Disney to turn it into a children's story. But that claim is borne out neither by examples in the introduction nor by a comparison of the two English versions, which differ mainly on aesthetic grounds. Zipes is knowledgeable about his subject matter, but he is not a lucid thinker or a gifted writer (a representative sentence from the introduction: "Salten was able to capture this existential quandary through a compassionate yet objective lens, using an innovative

writing technique that few writers have ever been able to achieve"), and the Chambers translation, from which I have quoted here, is much the better one.

In both versions, the "Bambi" that emerges is a complex work, part nature writing, part allegory, part autobiography. What makes it such a startling source for a beloved children's classic is ultimately not its violence or its sadness but its bleakness. Perhaps the most telling exchange in the book occurs, during that difficult winter, between Bambi's mother and his aunt. "It's hard to believe that it will ever be better," his mother says. His aunt responds, "It's hard to believe that it was ever any better."

It's tempting to read those lines, too, as a commentary on the Jewish condition, if only because—to this Jew's ears, at least—they have the feel of classic Jewish dark humor: realistic, linguistically dexterous, and grim. Yet no one alive today can regard such a sentiment as exclusive to any subgroup. It is simply a way of seeing the world, one that can be produced by circumstance, temperament, or, as in Salten's case, both. Reading him, one suspects that the conventional interpretation of his most famous work is backward. "Bambi" is not a parable about the plight of the Jews, but Salten sometimes regards the plight of the Jews as a parable about the human condition. The omnipresence and inevitability of danger, the need to act for oneself and seize control of one's fate, the threat posed by intimates and strangers alike: this is Salten's assessment of our existence.

One of the forgotten novelist's most forgotten novels, "Friends from All Over the World," is set in a zoo that is maintained by an enlightened and humane zookeeper yet remains, intrinsically, a place of suffering and cruelty. The animals within it, Salten writes, "are all sentenced to life imprisonment and are all innocent." That is a lovely line, and one that seems to apply, in his moral universe, to all of us. In the forest—that is, in a state of nature—we are in constant danger; in society, tended and cared for but fundamentally compromised, we are still not out of the woods. ♦

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