

## Literary Darwinism

William Fleisch

### ON THE ORIGIN OF STORIES: EVOLUTION, COGNITION, AND FICTION

Brian Boyd

The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press  
http://www.hup.harvard.edu  
540 pp; cloth, \$35.00

The last decade or so has seen the rise of an insurgent school of literary critics and theorists, loosely allied around the still inchoate idea of literary Darwinism. Brian Boyd (who doesn't like this term, which comes from Joseph Carroll, preferring the unlovely coinage "evocriticism") is a leading member of this group. Like most of its members, he is a polemicist. (Full disclosure: he has two mildly skeptical footnotes about me in the book.) He thinks that by explaining the evolutionary origins of fiction, one can determine and so delimit what it can mean. Literary analysis that interprets any story (from fairy tales to *Ulysses* [1922]) in ways incompatible with the presumed adaptive function of narrative, as established by science, would therefore be proved false. Our minds are constrained by our evolutionary origins, so a literary Darwinist can (as they believe) show the actual impossibility of any interpretation that runs counter to those constraints. In particular, literary Darwinism has been a brief against subtlety, more or less on the grounds that subtlety couldn't possibly thrive in the coarse rough and tumble competition to survive and reproduce imposed on our genes by the real world. Efficiency is all.

For some literary Darwinists, this means that fiction, because it is memorable, is a pretty good, but not necessarily unique, means to an end like conveying information, both specific (don't eat white berries) and general (enemies may be tricking you). Boyd rightly takes a stronger line, and sees fiction as an irreducible experience—for him because it is an adaptation for which there are no work-arounds. While Boyd unfortunately still sees fiction as an adaptation, the claim that there are no substitutes for fiction makes him a much better literary critic than the average literary Darwinist, as can be seen in his accounts of Homer's *Odyssey* and Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who!* (1954). These chapters offer sensitive observations, interesting background data, and helpful connections. Since the proof of any theory has to be in the insights it makes possible, this might seem to support his thinking about Darwinian theory. But really more or less every other sentence of this part of the book is expendable. The sentences about literature are worthwhile, the ones about animal behavior irrelevant. His bad sentences (and a lot of the evolutionary arguments) are bad because he is uncritically and tendentiously enthusiastic about gee-whiz scientific hypotheses that are highly controversial to say the least (as when he accepts speculative and controversial claims for the existence and function of mirror neurons in human beings), and of fairly minor moment anyhow, compared to the genuinely beautiful ideas that evolutionary theory can offer anyone interested in the nature of literature. Those

ideas could lead to genuine critical insights in the hands of a subtler thinker—the kind who might learn from rather than whackily condescend to Aristotle and Erich Auerbach, Bernard Williams and Ludwig Wittgenstein, as Boyd does in the service of an unconvincing and shallow adaptationist program.

Boyd wants to show that fiction is 1) an adaptation, because that would mean that 2) it must be adapted for something, so that 3) determining what it's adapted for shows what it can and cannot mean. Fiction (he thinks) is an adaptation because something so complex and yet universal couldn't survive evolutionary demands for efficiency of behavior and cerebral computation unless it was doing something important. We know the important things that humans need to do to survive, which include learning and practicing and exploring the varieties of social interaction in a wide variety of circumstances, and fiction allows us to simulate these interactions in a pretend setting. So it is designed (selected for) to create beneficial overtraining in social interactions and their possible consequences, good and bad. Any interpretations that cannot be mapped onto this function would be false or empty. The concatenation of these three claims is supposed to explain both the artistry and the emotional power of fiction: pattern and passion are incentives offered by nature so that we will engage in the social training that fiction offers.

### *The claim that there are no substitutes for fiction makes Boyd a much better literary critic than the average literary Darwinist.*

All three claims are problematic. 1) It's not at all obvious that there is a single such thing as fiction, less obvious still that there is a single thing called art, though Boyd claims there is, with fiction being one kind of art. Part of the task of evolutionary thinking is identifying what is a natural entity: it's easy (now) to say that genes and organisms are, but fiendishly more difficult to identify independent traits and behavior. Likewise early astronomers thought constellations were individual entities, but they turned out to comprise stars and even clusters that seem be close to each other only from our perspective, not in reality (the closest star in Orion is 26 light years away; the farthest is 2,600 light years away). Perhaps fiction is really a constellation of different and unconnected adaptations and practices that look good together, as "borrowed landscape" does in gardening. And 2) perhaps these practices are some of them adaptations, and some of them ways to relate those independent adaptations to each other, like the lines ancient astronomers drew between the stars to show the shape of the constellations: Orion's belt and sword, Castor (50 light years distant) and Pollux's (34 light years distant) twinned bodies in Gemini, etc. 3) Even if we

can identify some of the adaptations that happen to work together to produce our experience of fiction, that experience and practice might be (to alter the simile) like a species-wide analogue to the cultural

practice of baseball: a motley combination of different adaptive practices (throwing, catching, hitting, running, tagging, dodging, counting) held together by rules that develop only in order to hold them together (balls, strikes, balks, foul balls, tagging up, force-outs, permitted over-running of first base, overthrows, homeruns, ground-rule doubles, dropped third-strikes, infield flies). Baseball works beautifully when these elements are cobbled together, but no one would call baseball itself an adaptation, even if it juxtaposes a lot of adaptive behavior. The parts of baseball which do the juxtaposing are just as important as the adaptations they juxtapose. Baseball is not a

jigsaw puzzle where all the pieces fit together because they are evolutionarily connected, masonry, with a lot of different bits put where they are to make a superficially single surface out of a lot of randomly different pieces, inserted to fill gaps and further filled in with mortar. Out of this may arise fascinating individual baseball games—replete with loaded bases, suicide squeezes, runners going on 3-2 counts with two outs, etc.—none of whose specific interest or "meaning" is going to be explained through the methods and approaches that Boyd advocates.

Baseball is a helpful analogy just because it isn't a human universal, so we can see what's arbitrary about it; fiction may be like baseball up one level because emotional interest in telling and hearing stories known to be untrue does seem to be a human universal. Perhaps the analogy should be with sports in general—and perhaps it would be better to see fiction as a kind of sport, or both as aspects of the same human interaction, in which play provides one important avenue for iterated and important social interaction, cooperation, competition, and bonding. Both sports and fiction are about rooting for one side and disparaging the other. Both are examples of the interesting fact that (as we'll see of fiction) it's fun to compete for fun, against the other side but probably more importantly with and against our own teams teammates who represent, aid, and rival us. Spectators and players both root, for and against, and there's some element of both competition and cooperation in the relation between spectators and players as well. Sports and stories both offer us ways various and ever-varying ways to compete—as Homer knew in making sporting contests so central to both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in beginning the *Iliad* with a contest between Achilles and Agamemnon and then ending it with funeral games; in focusing in the *Odyssey* on Aias's killing himself over the loss of an athletic contest, and in making its climax begin



Detail from cover

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with the dead-serious bow-contest pitting the suitors against Odysseus and his son. At any rate, a sport like baseball is the soul of straightforwardness compared to fiction. (Or to sexuality: on Boyd's, and most of the literary Darwinists's, very straightforward account of adaptation, homosexuality should be impossible. But there are very good arguments, more complex than any they give about fiction, to show that human sexuality also comprises very complex relationships of competition and cooperation, relationships that make homosexuality as stable and efficient a pathway for genetic success for a certain percentage of the population, through collateral descent, as heterosexuality is through direct descent.)

Here's a brief example of what Boyd's tendency towards two-dimensional explanation misses. Odysseus is a greater hero, he says, than Telemachos because he is willing to bear the costs of revenge (objection: they work together to kill the suitors) and "never hesitates to pay the price" of going against the entire company, which "would exact too great a price for Telemachos acting alone, *even though at the bow-contest he proves mightier than any one of them.*" I've italicized Boyd's

misleading throwaway about a highly significant episode. Boyd makes it sound as though Telemachos has won the bow-contest (which all have agreed would require the suitors to give up their suit) but even so can't go against the suitors. But he hasn't. Odysseus doesn't let Telemachos win: "he would have strung it, / but Odysseus stopped him, though he was eager, making a signal with his head." Why not? In part because his teammate would steal his fire: disguised as a beggar he's arranging the *coup de theatre* of stringing the bow himself. Telemachos would upstage him. Instead, Telemachos has to appear to humiliate himself: "Shame on me. I must be then a coward and weakling." We know, and Odysseus does too, that Telemachos has the courage to appear weak, but this is a complex and differential display of his virtues, and makes us feel ambivalent about Odysseus for having done this to him, even as it ministers to Odysseus's own heroism. We anticipate with satisfaction (as Boyd stresses) the moments of Odysseus's triumph; but here our satisfaction is somewhat undercut. Telemachos is forced into our position, anticipating and rooting for Odysseus's triumph; and Odysseus, taking over the management of the plot, is rather like Homer arranging the whole thing (Homer explicitly compares the bow strings to those of his lyre). In this way, Homer explicitly raises a question that Boyd persistently begs: why do we look forward to the vengeance that *Odysseus* will take? What relation do we have to him that his triumph is our triumph? It barely is Telemachos's: why is it ours at all, when we are completely unrelated to Odysseus? The question isn't why we root for Odysseus and Telemachos, but why we root at all? First, we might need to decide which is primary: rooting for or against? Hero or villain? How much does one character's underestimation of another character (like the suitors' of Telemachos) make us

root for the latter, and why? Does his "shame," like Achilles's at the start of the *Iliad* inoculate him against our own potential rivalry with him, so that we can root more whole-heartedly? What does it get us to root for a winner? What about for someone who by rights should be a winner? What would those rights be? The central issue is or should be that of an audience's investment in narrative.

I go into a little detail here to indicate how the biggest advance in evolutionary psychology—one which Boyd mentions but has not adequately assimilated—is in what's called evolutionary game theory. Boyd rightly stresses that humans are ultrasocial beings, and he sees stories as reflecting that sociality while reinforcing it by teaching us to negotiate it. Our sociality, he notes, means that we sometimes cooperate, sometimes (like all evolutionary players) compete, and that we evaluate others in terms of their cooperative and competitive relations to us (and those we observe them having with respect to each other, though he doesn't stress that fact enough). These are the right terms for an account of social relations, but the problem with Boyd's analysis is

that he thinks cooperation and competition are easily distinguished kinds of behavior. They aren't—not in practice and not in theory either. Telemachos obviously has much invested in his family's victory, but even he is made to sacrifice some of the glory that victory wins in order to set things up for his father. His relation to his father is one where cooperation and competition are hard for him to distinguish, and perhaps there's no distinction at all between them for Odysseus. Such moments—call them moments of ambivalence—are what all great narratives explore in their characters. At random I cite Achilles, Orestes, Aeneas, Dante's pilgrim, Hamlet, Milton's Satan, Catherine and Heathcliff, Mrs. Dalloway, Sutphen. Ambivalence is what makes the conflict essential to narrative interesting, and you will find ambivalence on every level of an interesting narrative.

The crucial discovery of evolutionary game theory is that in many fundamental contexts, cooperation and competition may be two names for the same thing, that they may not differ from each other at all. Indeed, the solution to the evolutionary mystery of cooperation (since evolution is always about self-dealing) is that cooperation can emerge from competition as one of the pathways competition takes. Such cooperation doesn't arise out of an agreement to cooperate but as the concatenation of best strategies of all involved when each is playing his or her own best strategy. In humans, the evolution of cooperation seems to have occurred because of a kind of recursive moment in the history of our competitions with each other, when we started competing to be seen as the best cooperators (again think of the dynamics of team sports).

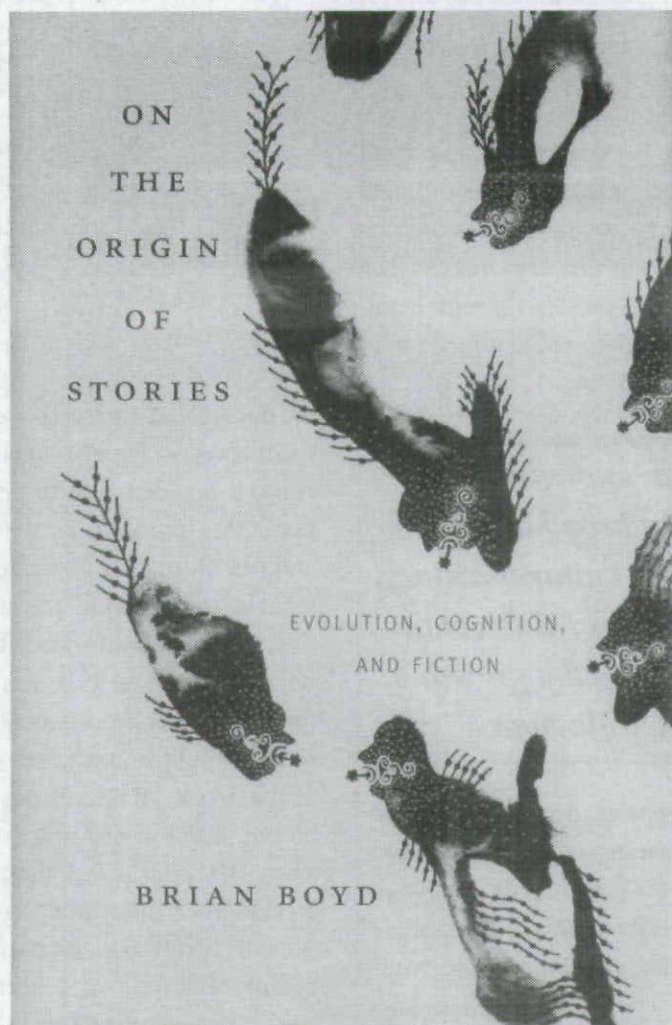
Boyd mentions without realizing its significance one example of the fact that storytellers compete with their audiences. Audiences are quick to catcall or dismiss a story, just as we're quick to

groan at a joke or withhold laughter. We try to beat the jokester to the punch-line and the storyteller to the plot twist, while the storyteller and her resourceful characters try to beat us. If telling a good story or a good joke provides pleasure to an audience, it is a pleasure (like being tickled) that the audience tries to dodge, by being better storytellers than the teller (as when we whisper to our neighbor our theory of who done it). Telling a story is a cooperative enterprise: it gives pleasure, probably because (as Boyd notices) it's important that we keep track of people, partly through the true or purportedly true stories that we tell each other about them. Fiction offers the same kind of pleasure as true stories, but not for the same obviously adaptive reasons, so it becomes a self-sustaining phenomenon predicated on two things: the storyteller's ability to give pleasure and her high status as a cooperative or prosocial member of the group conferred by this ability, which outweighs the fact that the story itself isn't keeping track of anything true. This status explains why we compete with the teller to be the better teller, and so we compete to cooperate. We may compete as well with other audience members for the teller's and their own confirmation that we've been fastest in guessing what will happen, so that we become part owners (as Telemachos does of Odysseus's unmasking: this also explains why Odysseus threatens to kill Euryklea when she recognizes him. He doesn't want her to assert ownership rights in the story he's preparing. Boyd skips this in his long account of her recognition of him). This central psychological fact about ownership of stories (and riddles) means that storytelling is not the benign adaptation that Boyd imagines it to be (though he does see that storytelling is status-conferring), but one of the self-sustaining ways that competition and cooperation are intertwined, sometimes to adaptive purposes, and sometimes just as epiphenomena of the larger game.

There is a recursive aspect to all of this. Good storytelling requires recognizably anthropomorphic characters: the kinds of characters who cooperate and compete the way we do, so stories will almost always be analogous to the storytelling situation (as with Homer's comparison of Odysseus's bow to his lyre.) The hero has to figure out what to do, and the storyteller has to figure out how to make the hero seem a hero to begin with, by stressing the cooperative aspects of his actions; and then she has to work out what to have the hero do, even as we wish to figure out what the hero will do before the hero or the storyteller shows us, and before any other audience member blurts out the answer. We frequently bask in the reflected glory of the story, of the teller and of the hero, when we whisper to other members of the audience that we see what's going on or how things will work out, so that we demonstrate our privileged position as an admired teller's or hero's favored or best or most insightful associates—Telemachos to their Odysseus. We're in a cooperative competition all around to work out what other cooperative competitors will do. How will heroes and tellers resolve the entanglements and paradoxes of cooperation and competition that are at the center of all stories of human interaction? Who of us in the audience will solve the riddle the story sets best? How much credit will we get for the partial solutions all good stories encourage?

A Darwinian literary theory that demonstrated the often considerable ambivalence to be found in our relationship to the characters of all successful stories (including the teller and the other audience members) and in their relationship to each other could shed light on Hegel's great formulation that tragedy isn't the struggle between right and wrong but the struggle between right and right, and could show

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how this insight applies to comedy as well. (Perhaps we might say that in tragedy right is always defeated even when victorious; in comedy, the clashing modes of being right may be resolved so that both sides win.) For its part, literary analysis could help provide evolutionary psychology important evidence about the nature of cooperation, and might make evolutionary theory itself more subtle and more able to bring out some unsuspected subtleties in literature, rather than simplistically applying crude formulations to claim that literature can't be as subtle and as deep as it seems.

The book's brief against critical subtlety can't be true, since the so-called impossible interpretations it seeks to rule out are right there, if not in the original work at least in the secondary works which themselves tell stories about the original story—stories that also count. The very existence of the interpretations that literary Darwinism as usually practiced argues against disproves those arguments. The real evolutionary puzzle is, or should be, not what interpretations of fiction could be invalidated from the start, but what the existence of fiction and of the various interpretations that it elicits says about how the mind evolved. But this, alas, is not a line that Boyd pursues in this graciously vacuous book.

William Flesch teaches English, film, and sometimes philosophy at Brandeis University. He is the author of *Comeuppance: Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological Components of Fiction* (2007) and, most recently, of the nineteenth century volume of *The Facts on File Companion to British Poetry*.

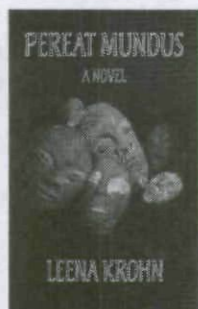


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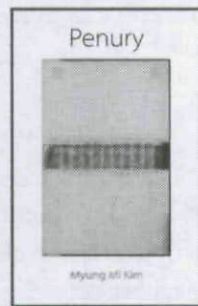
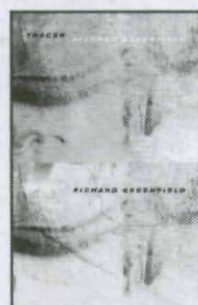
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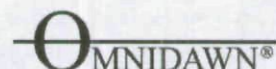
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