

Where the Wild Things Are – Rather, Where We Keep Them

A Review of Jon Mooallem's *Wild Ones*

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Earlier this year, Jon Mooallem published *Wild Ones: A Sometimes Dismaying, Weirdly Reassuring Story About Looking at People Looking at Animals in America*. The book has three purposes: the most surface-level is Mooallem's documentation of jetting around America to learn about three of our endangered species, polar bears, metalmark butterflies and whooping cranes, as well as sharing the stories of the people who diligently work to conserve their shrinking habitats. He also dives into America's history with animals (letting us in on tidbits of information we never knew about Teddy Roosevelt) and prods us to consider our turbulent romance with the idea of wilderness. Finally, at the core of the book is the hope of all environmentalists: that of inspiring readers to feel powerful and motivated enough to engender change.

Author Jon Mooallem is a journalist and a father. As a writer, he pierces the world around him with his gaze and then double- and triple-checks over, under, and through the minute details for further analysis, ultimately presenting his findings in a neat package of words. As a father, he embraces the fact that life can be quite messy. Taken together, these qualities mesh into one resourceful pair of eyes that we as readers rely on. Mooallem's style of writing is clear and honest, reflecting the confusion we often feel when standing before the looming problem of environmental disaster - but his voice is humorous as well. He almost sounds like a thirty-something museum guide leading us through a minefield strewn with our country's misguided ideas and decisions, pointing us towards certain facts and encouraging questions, all while joking about the disastrous morning he had. This is not a bad thing. In fact, his young voice paired with his honed craftsmanship of words maintains our easily distracted attention, increasing our trust in his opinions and waking us up to the ideas on every page. He makes it easier for us to understand these difficult concepts through his approachable style of writing. For example, consider this excerpt. "Zoom out and what you see is one species - us - struggling to keep all others in their appropriate places, or at least in the places we've decided they ought to stay..."

We are everywhere in the wilderness with white gloves on, directing traffic." It is an apt metaphor of the big picture. You can almost hear the chaos of human life and animal life coming this close to crashing into each other in a menagerie of squawking, honking, roaring, barking, shouting insanity. It is what we are headed towards. "The line between conservation and domestication has blurred," Mooallem tells us. Simply put, Mooallem is saying that we have come to a point of having to rig entire ecosystems in the favor of certain species in order to "save" them, a phenomenon known as conservation reliance. Can the human race be responsible for a species forever? How about five? How about a hundred? Or all?

Part of the problem of our snowballing environmental disaster, Mooallem explains, has to do with shifting baselines syndrome and environmental generational amnesia. Both of these ideas describe how each new generation has a lower "psychological baseline" or "expectation of how things should be" in the natural world. Every twenty or so years, we essentially start over, redefining what is normal and what needs priority now. You and I will remember the sandy beaches of Santa Barbara as normal and idyllic, despite the amount of tar that washes up, and our kids will only know beaches that are even worse - and they will still accept those beaches as normal, because that is the only reality they will experience. "Because of this [generational amnesia], a comprehensive picture of the changes happening across generations never truly comes into focus." At this point, hopelessness might overwhelm the reader. How are we supposed to solve this gigantic issue if we cannot even understand the situation from generation to generation? Fear not, dear reader. We have become the number one species on Earth, because we are the most intelligent. And the truly intelligent never lose sight of their emotions. It is the most irrational part of us that makes us human.

What is the opposite of love? Hate? No. Indifference. Indifference kills. With *Wild Ones*, Mooallem wants us as a species to engage our feelings: in other words, fight our indifference, because that is what could be our downfall. "Beginning to care about [these animals] sticking it out in these unspectacular niches can help us confront the world as it actually is, not how we'd still like to imagine it - to see nature in its modern context without bitterness and with a sense that *lots can still be done*" (emphasis mine). We need to direct our emotions and pull them together with that shining intellect to create a driving force of momentum. Sinking in lethargy is the easy way out. We are better than that, and capable of much more. We are human beings, thus, we are problem-

solvers. It is what we live for: we relish the opportunities to overcome challenges, real and make-believe.

Let us remember too, that we are wild ones.