



Nigel Rothfels. *Savages and beasts: the birth of the modern zoo* (Revised Edition). 2025. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore

Heather Browning¹ · Walter Veit²

Accepted: 18 July 2025 / Published online: 6 August 2025

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2025

The title of Rothfels' book *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo* emphasises how zoos have historically been viewed: as places where the wild, dangerous, and exotic (human and nonhuman) have been trapped and displayed for public spectacle. While he acknowledges the problematic nature of the terms in modern times, he has retained them to emphasise the context of the time period he's analysing, when colonialism was at its peak. This book seeks to examine how the ways in which we understand ourselves and other animals are inexplicably shaped by the ways they are presented by those who display or write about them. In an intricately detailed work of historical analysis, Rothfels views the history of zoos through the lens of the work of Carl Hagenbeck, a 19th century German animal dealer and zoo director who is often considered to be the father of modern zoo design through his pioneering use of open 'panoramic' displays that mimicked animals' natural habitats. However, in contrast with the usual congratulatory picture, this book also examines the darker history of Hagenbeck's work: the colonial nature of animal collection, the theatrical nature of his exhibit design, and his now highly controversial 'ethnographic exhibitions' that displayed groups of humans from outside Europe. He uses history to try and understand the present state of zoological institutions and the human-animal relationships they instantiate. It is a welcome revision of his earlier 2002 book of the same title (Rothfels, 2002), offering many more historical details and deepening the argumentation on some key themes.

The book consists of six chapters: an introduction, four detailed historical chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter 1, "Gardens of History," examines the early history

✉ Heather Browning
drheatherbrowning@gmail.com

Walter Veit
wrvveit@gmail.com

¹ Department of Philosophy, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

² Department of Philosophy, University of Reading, Reading, UK

of animal collections, menageries, and the origins of zoological gardens. Rothfels challenges the common myth of a clean transition from the royal menageries used to display wealth and power, to the zoological gardens designed for the public and scientific research, showing that early menageries also aimed at education and learning, while the imperialist leanings could be seen in the larger zoos that stood as monuments of success for the major cities they were found in. He examines the different narratives on zoo history written by those situated within the industry versus those who observe from outside through a more cultural lens, demonstrating how zoos (and the ways we describe them) are spaces that tell narratives about how we see humans, animals, and human-animal relationships.

Chapter 2, “Catching Animals,” turns to the history of Hagenbeck’s collection, looking at how he came into his family animal trading business and built it up into arguably the largest and most powerful in the world at the time. It details the business of wild animal capture, a practice that started out as an intrepid adventure for individuals looking for a thrill, such as Hermann Schomburg, and became increasingly professionalised and colonialized (for instance, in the shift from trading with native people to using them as forced labour). It serves as a reminder of the troubling history of wild animal capture and trade. Although most zoos now breed their (terrestrial) animal stock (though Rothfels is correct in pointing out we should still be asking “where do the fish come from?” (p. 198)), these were originally acquired with great harm including maternal killing, collection of young, and high mortality rates along the way. The contrast between Hagenbeck’s reputation as an animal lover, and the undoubtedly poor treatment that his collecting entailed, highlights the complexity of casting someone in only a single light. While even at the time there was a rising objection to this treatment, it was typically justified as a greater good, with an animal on display considered to do far more ‘for the world’ than one remaining in the wild—another example of the use of a narrative to guide public perception.

Chapter 3, “Ethnographic Exhibitions,” turns away from animals and examines the history of humans in zoos and public shows—bringing for instance Sámi and Sundanese people to Germany, to live their lives on public display, supposedly as they would do at home. Though Hagenbeck was not the first to run these, he was arguably the one who popularised them, bringing in huge numbers of people who wanted to see something of what the world was like beyond Europe and scientists who thought to study them with the aim of understanding human evolution and diversity. Even then, some visitors found these exhibits unsettling, and they have a complex relationship to the history of racism, sexism, and colonialism. Again, here Rothfels highlights the way in which preconceived ideas and public expectations helped construct the narratives that framed the exhibitions.

Chapter 4, “Paradise,” challenges the dominant narratives that represent Hagenbeck’s motivation to provide a new kind of authentic and natural exhibit that differed from the more sterile concrete and bars commonly used. Rothfels describes the emergence of Hagenbeck’s open-air ‘panorama’ exhibits, which were (and still are) publicised mainly as an advance in animal care, but were actually primarily carefully constructed displays for representing what the public wanted to see, and his zoological park mainly a holding area for trades. At a time where people were becoming concerned about the ethics of animal captivity, Hagenbeck ingeniously presented an

image of freedom. His designs are still the most popular forms of exhibit used today. This chapter also looks at Hagenbeck's circus and his claims about novel positive reinforcement training methods. It also shows that he was not the first to do most of these things—again, was just successful in popularising them: “The thread that ties all the Hagenbeck ventures was a keen awareness of what the public wanted—of what *entertained* the public” (p.166). Here we also see the emergence of the conservation ethos, with zoos adopting the ‘Ark’ framing to claim they were providing safe harbour for animals, away from the dangerous environments they otherwise lived in (facing threats such as the very human hunters collecting for Hagenbeck’s zoos!).

All this is intended to ultimately show that Hagenbeck’s legacy isn’t just one of improving zoos for the better. While Rothfels wants to let the historical evidence speak for itself as far as possible, his negative views of zoos sometimes slip through. Zoos, Rothfels thinks, are engaged in a kind of magician’s trick: they provide illusions of freedom, naturalism, and authenticity, while maintaining animals in captivity for human ends. This is in stark contrast to the arguments we’ve made in our book *What Are Zoos For?* (Browning & Veit, 2024), which made the opposite claim that modern zoos are (or should be) primarily for the animals, a perspective which many top zoos have already partially adopted as one of their goals. We should also not overlook the ways in which Hagenbeck’s efforts really did change things for the better for animals—even if his motives were primarily profit-driven, this doesn’t erase the fact that his exhibit designs are typically more animal-friendly, and the professionalisation of the animal trade decreased stress and mortality. While there were all the problems described, this is still a good and perhaps necessary part of the shift to modern zoo practices. Without denying the importance of history, one must be wary of taking an ‘original sin’ view that taints all modern zoos with the worst parts of their history, which does not seem appropriate or helpful.

This history of zoos since Hagenbeck is a long and complex one, as Rothfels admits. However, we think it was a missed opportunity not to add a new chapter to the book that examines the changes in zoos since Hagenbeck’s time, and over the two decades since the first edition of his book was released. The increasing emphasis on animal welfare, enrichment, positive husbandry training, and animal agency, all indicate a shift from a human-centred to an animal-centred institutional model. Zoo visitors hold zoos accountable through their concerns about animal welfare, and in this regard zoos do a better job at educating the public. While undeniably bad zoos continue to exist—and can legitimately be called out for propagating the kind of myths and illusions Rothfels unveils—we are skeptical that this is an inherent feature of zoos, one that modern good zoos can’t overcome. Zoos do not have to be defined by their past, but we can use that past to hold them to higher standards than we may otherwise have. It is for this reason that books like these remain invaluable in providing a roadmap to show where zoos have come from, and where they need to go to achieve the aim of being truly institutions for animals.

References

Browning, H., & Veit, W. (2024). *What are zoos for?* Bristol University.

Rothfels, N. (2002). *Savages and beasts: The birth of the modern zoo*. Johns Hopkins University.

Rothfels, N. (2025). *Savages and beasts: The birth of the modern zoo* (2nd ed.). Johns Hopkins University.

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.