

Newton, Michael. (2004). Savage Girls and Wild Boys: A History of Feral Children.
New York: Picador Publishing.

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Michael Newton's book, "Savage Girls and Wild Boys" is a collection of histories from the lives of children who grew up outside of the comfort of civilization; raised by animals including wolves, bears, wild dogs, monkeys, and even other malignant human beings. Each chapter of Newton's volume demonstrates people's often failed efforts to "civilize" or care for the children after having found them, all while studying them at the same time. In his book, Newton uses the stories of these children to highlight the importance of human contact on a child's development, he also questions psychologically and philosophically as to whether or not these children were truly human, or if they had souls. Newton brings to the surface anthropological views on the effects of civilization on human development and brings forth perspectives on feral children based on the observations of the people surrounding them throughout their lives. The stories about wild, untamed children that Newton has collected and analysed, from wolf-raised Romulus and Remus to the abused and isolated Genie, are archetypes about what it truly means to be human.

Legendary founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, are viewed by Newton as a representation of the mystery surrounding the stories of children who are claimed to have been raised by animals; the children are abandoned or treated poorly by their biological parents and left to the mercy of nature, only to be adopted and raised by wild animals until they are found by

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other humans, who attempt to bring them back into civilization, despite the children's lost abilities to communicate and bond with others. However, as Newton points out, not all stories of feral children follow this exact plot; children such as Susan, or better known as "Genie" of the 1970s, who was locked in a small room, tied to a chair, and beaten and screamed at for about 13 years since infancy, was also known as a feral child. In some of the cases the author delves into, the children discovered had never acquired the skill of language, and therefore could not speak; in others, their abilities of speech had remained in their minds from earlier childhood, thus causing doubt and accusations of fraud among observers of the child's situation, providing a whole other form of trauma. Each of the children described in the book suffers from similar struggles as the others; the inability to communicate with other people, express or comprehend their own emotions, and having to learn how to build relationships with others and participate in civilization. Whether the child had been forced into life outside the comfort of civilization before or after they were able to acquire basic emotional, physical, and linguistic human skills, Newton demonstrates that each of the children described in the chapters of his book has suffered a great deal more than any child should ever have to endure.

In some cases, the children weren't even viewed as human; in the case of Amala and Kamala, young girls found in a jungle in India who had been raised by wolves, Newton describes them as "half savage, more like beasts than humans, wildly showing their teeth to their captors" (p. 185). However, it was also possible for the children to form bonds and learn the skills they missed out on when they were abandoned or mistreated; once again the case of Kamala, her years in an orphanage, where she was taken care of and loved, allowed her to establish a relationship with her foster parents, and even allowed her to pick up some, albeit not very much, language. Newton points out that with each child, someone always wanted to offer them a home

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and proper care. In doing this, Newton emphasizes two wildly different types of people; the “guardians” of the children who force them into this feral state, and those who want to show the children what it is to be loved and acquire true human relationships. While each story depicted in the chapters of the book may be viewed by readers as tragic and pitiful, Newton makes an effort to ensure that individuals reading his book can also see the lighter, more hopeful side of each story; that with each child’s tragic upbringing, there was at least one person who desired to care for them, and offer “continuing love, support, and refuge” (p. 239). With each chapter presenting its own unique perspective on children without belonging, also presented is the hope there are always others who wish to heal and protect those who are in need.

Newton’s book presents strong arguments about what it truly means to be human through the example of these feral children, and how fragile humanity’s definition of ourselves as the most superior species is. With each chapter, Newton hoped to communicate to the reader’s that each of these children’s stories proves that, in disagreement with Francophone philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s theory, children are not born with innate knowledge of the world and must be nurtured in order to learn how to communicate and form relationships with others.

In addition to this philosophical view, Newton also desires to simply tell the stories of these children. Each of the children has suffered more than any child should ever have to go through in their lives; they had left the isolation of the woods or the abuse they suffered, only to enter a new form of isolation among their own kind, unable to understand or be understood. As well, the people in the lives of these children most often only took them in with some sort of vested interest; whether it was to study them, or take advantage of the child’s situation.

Newton hoped to demonstrate whether or not these children could truly be considered human, or if they had souls. And in the process, found that no matter how abused, isolated, or

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alienated these children had been, they were still children, and they in fact did have souls. They were the sons and daughters of people who didn't care for them enough to allow them to truly be involved with humanity, and simply needed help from others to push them in the right direction to help them rejoin civilization. Newton demonstrates this in part in his conclusion:

Some of the wild children escaped to a nature that appears unexpectedly merciful and kind. Some of them embody a passionate attentiveness; and some of them, though beginning in the most abject suffering, end by discovering in their lives something else – not necessarily transcendent, but nonetheless foolishly gentle, incompetently passionate, wrongheadedly thoughtful: in other words, something human (p. 240).

While Newton's book accomplishes his goals of demonstrating that humans are not as superior as a species as we assumed, and that humanity can be found even in children raised in the wild, it does present some errors. Much of the contents of his book is more about the lives of the people surrounding the children than the actual children themselves; for example, he dedicates twenty-eight pages to discuss the lives and findings of Johnathan Swift and Daniel Defoe, the men who wrote about Peter the Wild Boy, and only seven pages to focus on Peter the Wild Boy himself. He also begins the story of Genie by explaining the state of her family, the disabilities and mental instability of her mother and father in particular, then continues to focus most of Genie's story on the government workers surrounding her after her rescue. Another error presented by Newton's book is that the title is a tad misleading. Rather than explaining the history of feral children as said in the title, Newton uses his book mainly to present philosophical ideas about humanity through the use of the stories of feral children throughout history.

Newton's book presented both in-depth analysis of the stories of feral children and tentative answers to the questions many people ask themselves late at night when they are thinking about what it truly means to be human. Despite a few errors in his approach to writing, Newton delivers an effective observation and proposes many philosophical questions as to what

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effect civilization has on the human psyche. Disciplines that would find Newton's book enlightening include sociology, philosophy, psychology, existentialism, the study of development, and history, to name a few. In reading this book, I found "Savage Girls and Wild Boys" to be an inspiring, informative, and rich collection of tragic, but somehow simultaneously enlightening history. I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the topic of existentialism or development.