

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

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In his book, “Savage Girls and Wilds Boys: A History of Feral Children”, Michael Newton engages in an analysis of historical instances of wild children. He reaches as far back as the eighteenth century to start his exploration and his hunt continues to the twenty-first century. Newton catches the mythical feeling these tales of feral children may elicit, yet still manages to touch on the unchanging reality that haunts humanity. This humanity is found not only in the wild children discovered, but in the caretakers who take it upon themselves to nurture or even experiment on the solitary youth. Perhaps the lack of humanity displayed in “Savage Girls and Wild Boys” is the most concerning area, for there seems to be question of how could something with such a lack of care happen to those most vulnerable in societies worldwide? Although he never claims to have an answer to that question, Michael Newton presents a detailed history of wild children exemplified through the stories of Peter the wild boy, Memmie Le Blanc, Victor, Kaspar Hauser, Kamala & Amala, and Susan (Genie). He sees these children as exemplars of the human essence, and while their backgrounds may suggest otherwise, they detail a history of love, compassion, and yearning.

Throughout the book, Newton defines wild children in many ways, which is accurate for historically they have had many different titles. They are often defined by their neglect, animal-like demeanor, social deficiencies, and as will be touched on later, almost complete lack of

language at time of discovery. Although these are just children, upon initially contact they are treated with absolute confusion, uneasiness, and often fear. The reason for this fear? Well as Michael Newton explains society used to have a much more mythical nature to it. We live in a world that has transitioned from “fantastic tales” to “engrained...scepticism (p. 17). When approaching these children many believed them to be ghosts haunting the area, half-creatures that escaped the claws of evolution, or even demons that are not explainable by human biology. The stories of these children and their unusual traits would spread to others, spreading the myth and eventually peaking curiosity. Academics and the purveyors of the unusual heard the stories of Mimmie and her club or the “famously stupid” Peter, and found themselves travelling to analyze and even mentor these wild children (p. 29). However, the characteristic that was most vexing and therefore intriguing to these professionals was the language problem. These wild children could not speak, and if they could not speak could they be taught to? Throughout Newton’s historical examples this question was tackled and the importance of language is propelled to the forefront.

These children have as many consistencies as they have inconsistencies, yet one thing that holds them all together is the lack of language. Michael Newton shows this time and time again, and while the children found continue not to speak any language fluently, the people caring for them found new ways to attempt to teach it to them. Newtons wild children were often only capable of communication through physical signals and occasionally more guttural sounds. As found with the case of Victor he was “more like a ten-month old infant than a twelve-year old boy” and this cognitive deficiency was heavily shown in his ability to speak. Even with the continuous education given by his main caretaker Jean Itard, Victor’s ability to speak was

limited to two phrases, however, he was able to write with a slightly larger vocabulary. Newton finds similar results with the sad story of Genie who once again reminds the audience of the significantly less romantic nature of the modern world. Genie was not a wild child like the others, for she was not left in nature to tend for herself. It was quite the opposite for she was locked and restrained in a room for the first thirteen years of her life. She was raised in an environment almost completely lacking any language, and although she would have minimal contact with her family that gave her just enough to live, the contact would never be supplemented with speech. Genie was not able to speak, yet she could communicate with physical signals like the others. Even more she was able to evoke a feeling in others that Newton describes as a “silent appeal” (p. 221). Newton considers the possibility that this appeal is the essence of language, and that although these children may not have the capability to speak, that does not mean they do not have the ability to communicate. One of the leading factors discovered in “Savage Girls and Wild Boys” is the fact that many of these children do not have a concept of other people, a critical concept to understand if one is to be able to speak, communicate, and understand others. One of the reasons they do not have this understanding of the people around them is because of the lack of socialization available in their various upbringings. This socialization for Newton is critical in them learning how to speak, care, and be reintegrated into society.

Michael Newton sees these wild children as youth who escaped the grasp of socialization. With this lack of family, or any other people for that matter, around them they failed to learn how to see themselves as beings of consequence, how to interact with others, or how to interact with the world as a whole. Their basis of understanding was with nature, and once Newtons wild

children were removed from that setting, they were removed from the only sphere of understanding that they had. With this lack of socialization came the attempt of others to surround these children with the social facts of life that they have all taken for granted. Newton sees a “quiet nobility” in this, for people who knew not what to do or who these children were showed care and love nonetheless (p. 239). Michael Newton takes interest not only in the socialization of these children, but the socialization of those around them. Although these wild kids were the ones who grew up in a solitary world, it was the rest of civilization that was obsessed and mystified by their existence. It was more than these kids not being what the world was used to, it was that they represent a part of society people have not had to address yet. Who were these kids if they are not the civilized people like the world wanted them to be?

Newton sees the constant acceptance and rejection of what the wild children are and could be. For him they could be an example of humanities personal feelings of isolation and loneliness. They are a physical representation of what it is like to be secluded and solitary. Yet Newton sees another feeling with that sense of seclusion. Content. These children often did not seek out society, excluding the cases of Kaspar Hauser and Genie, they were pursued and taken. They were not just brought into civilized society, they were taken away from what they considered to be home. The world of hunting, gathering, and living among animals was their life. Michael Newton saw this and realized there was a possibility that their caretakers were not always doing the right thing. Although once found it could be considered irresponsible to not care for the child, the children often faced a challenging period where they suffered and struggled to live the life the world wanted of them. They knew the life that they knew, and their human potential was based on this fact. Their soul was not a collection of societies goals and

values. It was an ever-present representation of them, a soul that lives free of the burden of morality, mortality, and misunderstanding.

Michael Newton takes the often heartbreaking stories of these children and exposes the raw humanity experienced by both sides of the relationship. He tells the tale of Itard desperately desiring the loving relationship with Victor and Kaspar with his childhood being considered royalty, yet livelihood becoming expendable. Newton wanted his audience to see the humanity that was exemplified by these cases. His wild children “embody our desire for escape, freedom and wonder; yet they also provoke the disgust felt for the merely corporeal, the wholly physical” (p. 237). These two sides of humanity, the wild and the civilized, crashed towards each other and neither side came out quite the same. The savage child found a world of care and nurture, yet lost their solitary life that was simpler and in many ways, more human. The civilized world, as explained by Newton, gained knowledge on what it meant to be human and the development of cognitive abilities, however, they also lost the ignorance obtained by living in a world with soft corners and strict rules. However, when reading “Savage Girls and Wild Boys”, one must wonder the validity of the stories. The mystical reality that humanity once lived in created folktales and rumours spread by everyone who heard them. Were these wild children’s lives exaggerated by the fantastic? One must also consider the people finding these wild children and their exposure to other cultures. If a child came from a culture that they were not used to would they be labelled as savage and in need of saving? These are questions Michael Newton touches on but cannot himself answer. Those who have an anthropological specialty would find many questions and hopefully even more answers when reading or investigating this book. That being said, I believe the field that would engage in the most with Michael Newtons book would be the

Odera

social work field. The children in Newtons stories are in a position that may need rehabilitative care and a deeper understanding of who they are as people, a process that social work academics would be able to reflect on in a meaningful way. The nature of Newtons wild children leaves a world of exploration in its trail, and although they are considered wild, they must be understood as human.