

Brazzaville Beach by William Boyd
Notes from the FMS Book Club Discussion
Monday 23/6/14, Bremen

Group members present: Carmelita Görg, Heather Johnstone, Beatriz Noriega, Stefan Bornholdt, Jana Stone, Uwe Schimank, Susan Gaines

These notes were generated by circulating a list of points discussed, which we all added to, with the following directions:

First, a personal statement can be made. Then we can add anything we think is missing from the list of points made: either elaborate on a given point, or add to the list. If there are conflicting opinions that are missing on a given point, be sure to add them. There is no need to specify who exactly said what, but if it seems relevant and you want to add a name or perspective, that's also okay.

Personal statements:

Heather: I very much enjoyed this book and found it an excellent choice for the book club.

Carmelita: I also enjoyed reading the book and to get into the story and discussing it by doing this in the context of the book club.

Betty: I enjoyed the book very much. I also enjoyed meeting all of you and discussing interesting points. It was my first time in a book club and I think when I start reading the next book I will question more things and look at it in a different way.

Uwe: While reading the book I became somewhat disappointed because it seemed to me just to reproduce certain stereotypes and cliches about science well known by now from many books or films. However, thinking about it afterwards and discussing it in our group I realized that it is much more interesting than I thought although I still think that, from a literary point of view, it is no "great literature".

Jana: My view of this book was oscillating while reading it: First I was irritated by the parallel story telling, but once I was in the stories it was really exciting (looking forward to not only one ending!). Picking up pieces from the different stories brought me closer and closer to Hope, but in the end at Brazzaville Beach she departed abruptly – I really dislike the ending!

Points noted:

There are 3 stories about a scientist in the book:

first and main story: Hope Clearwater, second story: John Clearwater, third story: Eugene Mallabar. All three of these characters have very high ambitions although their characteristics are somewhat different and all three fail in different ways.

Two kinds of failures are well-known to non-scientists: the romantic hero who aims too much and is punished (by God) with madness, and the well-reputed scientist whose life-work becomes endangered by new findings and who cannot endure this refutation. The third kind of failure (Hope) shows a different side of modern science which is not so familiar to lay persons: the "normal science" of small-scale "puzzle-solving" (Thomas Kuhn). To a sociologist of science, it was very interesting that we disputed whether Hope really failed, or whether she just went along a quite common path from one project to the other. The critical question is: Does she have any "intrinsic" interest in particular research questions to be solved by her or not? And if not: Is she just drifting according to opportunities provided by others such as her PhD supervisor? And if that is the case: Does she lack the "true spirit" of science? Is she only a hard worker, but not creative (as the other two certainly are or were) and not "burning" to know the truth about certain questions?

Was Hope a good scientist? Yes, because she got stuck in and developed methods. Some said no, because she was not following a burning career path from the start (and at the end).

Can one be a good scientist without "burning"? As this discussion shows, the non-burning version of a scientist makes Hopes character so interesting – otherwise she just would be another cliché!

The book has 2 "scientific" topics: Biology/Ethology and Maths.

There is a clear analogy between the aggressive behavior of the chimpanzees, the group at Grosso Arvore, and the civil war in in the African country (Congo?).

With the chimpanzees there was at least a theory to explain their aggressiveness (access to females). The war in Africa seemed to have no such clear motivation (hence the discussion of chaos theory?). Which hominid aggressiveness/war would terrify an extraterrestrial ethologist more? ;)

Were the African scientific assistants drawn as fully as the scientists, or even the chimpanzees? Was Joel the perfect scientist? He kept copies of everything and seemed to have no personal ambition.

It was discussed at length that there are several aspects in the novel with respect to the question whether or not scientists should influence the system they are observing. The proposal to move one of the female chimps from one group to the other can be seen as a scientific experiment, but it can also be seen as interfering in the system for "peace" sake. Where is the border of good scientific practices? When does a scientist get involved and stops being objective? Isn't Mallabars banana machine already a kind of interfering in the system? Hope definitely interferes at the end when she kills Darius.

The parts of the book on mathematics were a bit odd, seems unlikely that Hope would know nothing about fractals, or calculus. Also her approach to the subject seems overawed and idealistic, which does not fit with the rest of her character which was curious and pragmatic.

Why is Maths so idealised in the book? Much more so than Science. (Maths is what men do, going out counting hedge species is something that even women can manage? Like the old distinction between Art and Craft?).

The notes on catastrophe theory did not fit easily into the structure of the book. There was some trend that as John's work became more concrete, game theory, turbulence topology, the italic notes on Maths ventured ever more abstract.

Good writing on mental illness. John's suicide seemed so inevitable. If he had not gotten treatment (ECT, Lithium) would he have managed to find success?

The scientist going mad seems to be a stereotype (also found in this book). Is John's madness something that was there before and caused his failure to solve the mathematical problems he tried to solve, or is the madness a consequence of his too high ambitions? The latter is the romantic view (romantic means: romanticism as a cultural set of ideas originating at the end of the 18. century) whereas the former is banal.

Mallabar was a flawed scientist because he could not see outside his original theory. From whence doth come his grant money, and his fame.

Is it believable that Mallabar would burn Hope's tent to destroy her data? (consensus opinion was yes on this one)

What a shame that Hope's nephew got sent away to boarding school age 8, no chimpanzee would do that.

It was not clear what the italic parts at the beginning of the chapters were (e.g. diary entries?), but it was agreed that after a short time into the story these interleaved time lines were easy enough to read.

It was agreed that the author was somewhat "sloppy", especially at the end where there seem to be some inadvertent loose ends.

Disappointing that we don't know what happened to Hope's paper and her eventual inclusion as a footnote in Mallabar's book. Presumably her paper was not published and she did not make her name as a researcher. Though different interpretations are possible here.

Why did Hope stay so long in Brazzaville Beach after everything? How could she bear to be still in touch with these people? In the end she isn't working as a scientist anymore. Is Brazzaville Beach only a kind of resting place before going back to science or is it the end of the line (for her scientific career) – after all it's the title of the book ...

Hope drinks a lot of alcohol (mind you, so does her father) [2].

John studying turbulence is a metaphor for his manic ambition.

Lack of an endnote/afterword to the book to say what the research behind this fictional story was.

The novel is written from the point of view of a woman (Hope). This was discussed and there is also information from the author on this in the interview [1]. He did not try mainly to portray her as "a" woman, but as the character "Hope".

The parts in italic were not consistent. Sometimes were written in first person, while others in third person. Not clear if they are part of Hope's diary. Although these parts are not essential to the story, most of us enjoyed them.

Hope made decisions for the wrong reasons. Although she performed very well her job (with both, hedges and chimpanzees) she did not seem to have dreams or passions.

References of interest:

[1] Interview with the author for the BBC World Book Club (audio):
http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/meta/dps/2006/11/nb/061128_wbc_boyd_au_nb.asx

[2] Review: June 23, 1991, The Fall of Chim, Blanche D'Alpuget, New York Times:
<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/22/specials/boyd-brazzaville.html>

Watch (and listen to!) the chimpanzee patrol video "War of the apes" (in German)
<http://youtu.be/e89s6iSp4jQ>

Find a very interesting interview with Jane Goodall in the ZEIT magazine (in German) here: <http://www.zeit.de/2011/34/Forschung-Jane-Goodall>