

I bet most of you have never really thought about where your own personal images of nature have come from. The fascinating article that appears below explores this topic with specific reference to the classic Walt Disney movie Bambi. When you are done you should take a look at Charles E. Little's short article about Smokey the Bear.

The Trouble with Bambi: Walt Disney's Bambi and the American Vision of Nature

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Published in Forest and Conservation History 36 (October 1992): 160-171.

Walt Disney's influence is so pervasive in American culture that it often goes unrecognized. It is easy to overlook the obvious. "All the world is watching the United States," proclaimed a bumper sticker, "and all the United States is watching Walt Disney." A pop-psychologist put it another way. "After all," she wrote, "Disney cartoons are a shared cultural heritage that predate Beaver Cleaver and Howdy Doody. They are the beginning of our global media village.... For better or worse, Uncle Walt pioneered the notion of a standard-issue childhood memory." Disney's animal characters, in particular, are truly "a part of our cultural DNA."⁽¹⁾

One of these characters, Bambi, has played and continues to play a key role in shaping American attitudes about and understanding of deer and woodland life. It is difficult to identify a film, story, or animal character that has had a greater influence on our vision of wildlife than the hero of Walt Disney's 1942 animated feature, Bambi. It has become perhaps the single most successful and enduring statement in American popular culture against hunting. An examination of this cinematic statement will reveal some of the ideas underlying the present debate between those who support sport hunting and those who seek its end. The film was based on Bambi: A Life in the Woods, written in 1926 by Felix Salten (pen name of the Austrian novelist, journalist, and theater critic, Siegmund Salzmann), and published in the United States in 1928. Whittaker Chambers' superb English translation reflected his own deep, aesthetic love of nature.⁽²⁾ The film's success was built on the foundation of a fine book, on superb animation that was scripted and designed by people who knew how to appeal to the interests of the viewing public, and on Disney's extraordinary marketing machine that has promoted Bambi for the past fifty years. In the process, Disney's Bambi acquired a content and character that are distinctly its own, despite its many similarities to Salten's original novel.

The Disney Version of Bambi

Walt Disney's version of Bambi opens with a long scene panning through the forest that establishes its mysterious and lyrical beauty. Then birds announce the birth of the fawn, Bambi. Woodland animals, including Friend Owl and Thumper, gather around to observe the "Young Prince" and his first stumbling effort to stand up. A buck, his father, watches

from a distant rock ledge. ("Dad isn't around much," noted a People Weekly reviewer. "He strikes macho poses on mountaintops, part of his job as great prince of the forest." [3]) Later, Bambi sets off for his first walk during which he meets new friends including Thumper, the rabbit, and Flower, the skunk, and learns to talk. (4) He and his mother return to the thicket when it begins to rain, which leads into a musical segment about April showers.

The next day, Bambi's mother takes him to visit the meadow. She cautions that although it is a wonderful place, it also can be a very dangerous place. He must always be careful when he approaches the meadow. In the meadow he meets and plays with another fawn, his cousin Faline. (5) Soon a large herd of bucks arrives. The greatest of them all, his father, stops to look at Bambi and then walks away. He returns quickly though, to warn that Man is nearby, and the deer race off to the sound of a gunshot. (6)

Autumn arrives, symbolized by two lone leaves remaining on a tree, which are pulled off by the wind and float to the ground. Time passes and Bambi wakes to discover snow on the ground. Thumper appears and introduces Bambi to ice skating, but Bambi can do little but fall. This happy segment is followed by scenes of winter's harshness as the deer must strip bark from high in the trees to stave off starvation. Eventually there is none within reach. "I'm awfully hungry," Bambi tells his mother. "Yes," she replies, "I know." Then she finds the first sign of spring, new grass sprouting amidst the melting snow. Suddenly, as they are eating, his mother senses that Man is near and warns Bambi to run and not to look back. A shot rings out. Bambi reaches safety, but cannot find his mother and wanders off in a snowstorm looking for her. His father appears and tells him, "Your mother can't be with you anymore."

The next scene is an upbeat counterpoint to the death of his mother. Bambi has grown and proudly sports a rack of antlers. All the forest creatures are in love, but Bambi, Thumper, and Flower are determined to have nothing to do with females. Their resolve is short-lived as each finds a mate, including Bambi who falls in love with the beautiful Faline. He wins her, however, only after fighting with another stag, Ronno. Some time later, Bambi's father appears to announce the arrival of Man and warns him to seek safety deep in the forest. But Bambi must first find Faline who is being chased by a pack of hunting dogs. He saves her, but as he leaps to safety Bambi is shot. Meanwhile, the hunters' campfire escapes and quickly becomes a major forest fire. The Great Prince of the Forest appears beside the fallen Bambi and urges him to get up, despite his wound. After a great effort Bambi rises and they flee to safety on an island, where Bambi and Faline are reunited.

In the concluding segment, life returns to the scorched forest and Faline gives birth to twins. Bambi and his father watch together from a height. His father then walks off, leaving Bambi the new Great Prince of the Forest. The cycle is complete.

The Death of Bambi's Mother

The scene with the single greatest impact on the public was the death of Bambi's mother, an impact compounded by Bambi's vulnerability and dependence upon her. It followed the

scene in which Bambi and his mother found the new spring grass, giving the impression that the winter's danger was over. Walt Disney proposed that the mother be the one who finds the grass rather than Bambi, because it would make the audience "feel he's more helpless and everything." Initially, Disney had considered showing the mother's death on screen, with Bambi later returning to find her impression in the snow where the hunters had dragged away her carcass. He finally decided that this would be too much for the viewer. The mother's death happens completely offscreen. Nevertheless, its impact is so great that many people will swear that they actually saw her shot. It was an emotionally compelling scene and even one of Disney's daughters chastised him for allowing Bambi's mother to be killed. (7)

Critics agreed that the scene was powerful. "It is one of the paradoxes of movie business," wrote film critic Pauline Kael, "that the movies designed expressly for children are generally the ones that frighten them the most. I have never heard children screaming in fear at any of those movies we're always told they should be protected from as they screamed at Bambi and Dumbo. Bambi's mother is murdered, Dumbo's mother is goaded to madness and separated from Dumbo; those movies really hit children where it counts." Another critic called the death "surely one of the most devastating moments in any movie." Even horror novelist Stephen King wrote that it was the Disney cartoons, including Bambi, that frightened him most as a child. (8)

Each time the film is rereleased parents worry about the impact of the death scene on their children. In the summer of 1988, for example, a psychologist told USA Today that the film "feeds into a young child's worst fear, that of losing a parent," and advised that children under the age of seven should not be allowed to see the movie. However, many parents found that their children handled the film well, especially if they prepared their children in advance for the death scene. One parent remarked, "I wonder if it was my own anxiety that played into what I'd heard about the movie. I'm a working mother and I'm loaded with guilt." Another commentator suggested that, "if parents want to use this movie for lessons, they might emphasize how Bambi learns to survive with his friends despite the terrible loss of a parent." (Good advice at a time when single parent households are increasingly common.) A Chicago Tribune editorial argued that it is really the parents who are most frightened by the scene. "What has made 'Bambi' arguably the most memorable of the Disney animated movies," the editorial continued, "was that it did touch some real human emotions.... Besides, how are [children] going to know what to worry about when it's their kids' turn to see 'Bambi,' if they don't get to cry at the movie now?" (9)

This death scene is central to the film's antihunting message. The dog pack chasing Faline, the shooting of Bambi, and the general panic among and killing of the wild animals during the hunt certainly contribute to this message. It is, however, the death of Bambi's mother that people remember. Disney spent nearly three-quarters of the film building sympathy for Bambi as a cute, lovable, vulnerable child. His mother nurtured and cared for him, and then, just as they had come through winter's hardships, she was killed. Bambi was left a virtual orphan, without his principal caregiver, alone until his loving but aloof and uncommunicative father appeared. The film never voiced a word against hunting. The

antihunting message was conveyed on a completely emotional level through sympathy with its characters. It was targeted at children in their most impressionable, formative years. The memory of the incident remains with them even into adulthood.

The film's immediate impact was not limited to children. It also shaped the opinions of many adults. For example, one man told how his grandfather, an avid hunter, had taken him to the theater to see Bambi when he was a child. When the film was over and they were walking out into the sunlight, his grandfather said, "I'll never hunt again." He disposed of his hunting paraphernalia and never did hunt again."(10)

The "Bambi Factor" and the Anti-Bambi Backlash

Hunter opposition to Bambi began even before the film was released. Following a preview of the film, Raymond J. Brown, editor of Outdoor Life, sent Walt Disney a telegram pointing out that it was illegal to shoot deer in the spring. The film, he argued, unfairly implied that the nation's law-abiding hunters were "vicious destroyers of game and natural resources." He asked Disney to add a foreword to the film explaining that it is a fantasy and is not representative of American sportsmen. Receiving no satisfaction, he tried to have the film's distributor force Disney's company to attach a foreword to the film. When this failed, he condemned the film as an insult to American sportsmen and called upon the nation's hunters to rally to their own defense, confident that they would have the last laugh. Commenting on the flap, the managing editor of Nature Magazine wrote that "few rod and gun editors who have rushed into print on Mr. Brown's say-so" had probably even seen the film. For his part, though, he could not "believe that any real sportsman or conservationist will regard himself as the prototype of the invisible man in Bambi. As for the rest, we do not care what they think."(11)

It is not surprising that some hunters viewed the film as a threat. Public opposition to hunting did not originate with Bambi. Even before the twentieth century many people, particularly those who were economically comfortable, appreciated the grace and beauty of deer and regretted seeing them killed. This attitude became increasingly widespread in the late nineteenth century. An 1887 primary school reading lesson, for example, told of a child's delightful encounter with deer and ended with the hope that "the hunters will not find those deer." Disney provided a morality play and a national symbol that became touchstones for opposition to hunting. For example, although public outcries against killing does were not new, Bambi fueled the fire. In 1943, the year after the film was released, Aldo Leopold pressed for an antlerless deer season to control an overpopulated Wisconsin herd by reducing both its size and its rate of reproduction. Public opposition killed the proposal. Both Susan Flader and Curt Meine have suggested that Bambi played a role in shaping public opinion on the issue. (12)

"Take Bambi's mom. Please ...," recently urged a columnist addressing similar issues in Sports Afield. He complained that, whether from a misplaced sense of sportsmanship and sentimental reluctance to kill females or a fixation on antlered trophies, hunters are themselves responsible for much of the opposition to policies that encourage shooting does.

Some of these hunters, he suggested a bit facetiously, "still felt responsible for Bambi's losing his mom."(13)

Over the years, "Bambi" has become almost synonymous with opposition to hunting. "Naturally," wrote Field & Stream columnist George Reiger, "once Bambi is raised in status from mere deer to Jesus Whitetail Superstar, man's hunting of deer becomes a crime comparable to the persecution of Christ." The San Francisco Chronicle recently reported that, "A poll taken by supporters of a June ballot measure that banned mountain lion hunting in California found that people reacted more negatively to the lions when told that they regularly kill deer than when informed that lions had mauled a couple of children." Although the public may have responded to the mauling as little more than isolated incidents, the executive director of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy concluded that "there was a real Bambi constituency out there." "After seeing 'Bambi,' nobody wants to kill a deer," commented an Institute for Advanced Study scholar regarding efforts to reduce the size of the deer herd on the institute's New Jersey grounds. On the same issue, Peter Benchley, author of *Jaws*, called the deer "wretched, sickly creatures starving to death" and lamented, "If only they didn't have those saucer eyes and Walt Disney behind them. The Bambi complex seems to have taken over around here."(14)

The "Bambi complex," "Bambi factor," and "Bambi syndrome" are three terms used interchangeably for sentimental, sympathetic attitudes toward wildlife, especially deer. They are usually used derogatorily and reflect a backlash against the humane, antihunting, and preservationist values, and the excessive sentimentality that Bambi has often come to symbolize. Anthropologist Elizabeth Lawrence found that, "Ranchers invariably 'love deer,' both by their own admission and the observations of wildlife personnel, who call this mystique 'the Bambi complex.'... Cattlemen are very proud of the fact that in winter they willingly let deer eat from their haystacks, 'even with the high price of hay.'" National Park rangers also refer to visitors' willingness to treat wild bears as if they are tame storybook animals, or to oppose the use of controlled fires as a management tool because they may injure some animals, as manifestations of the Bambi complex. People who oppose hunting have been diagnosed by those who support hunting as suffering from the Bambi complex. "They anthropomorphize these animals and exhibit the brightness akin to a 10 watt lightbulb," wrote one such diagnostician."(15)

The anti-Bambi backlash is generally associated with people who support hunting or who view the issue as more complex than do those "suffering" from the Bambi factor/complex/syndrome. It can also be seen in the black humor voiced by the owner of a herd of fifteen hundred deer on his New York venison farm. He worried that the "Bambi syndrome" might cut into his market, but "[w]hen asked how he can possibly kill such beautiful animals, his response was: 'They're much easier to eat when dead.'" The backlash is perhaps best symbolized in the film *Bambi Meets Godzilla*, which makes no reference to hunting.(17) This short bit of animation consists of little more than an idyllic, cute image of Bambi grazing peacefully in the meadow until suddenly and without warning a gigantic reptilian foot descends from the sky, squashing the fawn. End of film.

There have been many satirical jabs at people suffering from the Bambi syndrome. A magazine article titled "Should They Shoot Bambi" began with a full page illustration of Bambi standing in the sights of a hunter's rifle, with Thumper watching aghast. "Whether or not starving deer feel pain," wrote the author Ted Williams, "will likely be debated until one of them, other than Bambi, speaks." Williams was writing about animal rights activists who had argued that starvation is painless. This was part of a controversy over the use of hunting to reduce an overpopulated herd of white-tailed deer on the Crane Memorial Reservation in Ipswich, Massachusetts. The controversy led to a number of tongue-in-cheek articles using and abusing Bambi. The Boston Globe published a hypothetical conversation among Bambi, Thumper, and Flower in response to an opponent of the hunt who proclaimed, "I'd rather see [the deer] starve to death than shot." An emaciated Bambi explained to his friends that he was starving because there were too many deer and the population had grown beyond the reservation's carrying capacity. His mother was already dead, not by hunters' guns, but killed by pet dogs when she was too weak from starvation to run. "Why are you sitting?" Flower asked, "Fawns don't sit." "I'm too weak to stand," said Bambi. "I think I'll just sit here for a few days until I fall over and die." And he did."(17)

Another, more lighthearted contribution was a response to the proposal that the problem be solved by administering contraceptives to the deer herd. Science writer Chet Raymo concocted a conversation between Bambi and his father. "Bambi," the Old Stag said, "It's time we talked about the birds and the bees." "The birds and the bees," Bambi responded, "I often talk to Magpie, Jay and Owl. They tell me lots of things. I know all about the birds and the bees." "Hmm," muttered the Old Stag, "That's not what I had in mind."(18)

In some cases, the backlash against Bambi has even grown to encompass the whole environmental movement. A strongly negative review of Bill McKibben's The End of Nature, for example, appeared in Forbes. The reviewer wrote that McKibben "yearns to return to a nature 'independent' of mankind." But, he argued, independent nature produced the bubonic plague and "bound most of mankind to stoop labor. But never mind: People like McKibben and his admirers weren't raised on history but on a Walt Disney view of nature. For McKibben, nature is solely a 'sweet and wild garden.' Hi there, Bambi."(19)

What Disney did to Bambi

What is the "Disney view of nature?" Does Bambi actually present a terribly distorted view of animal behavior and woodland ecology? Walt Disney and his staff went to great lengths to present an accurate representation of deer and other wild animals in Bambi. In an effort to ensure accuracy in the film's backgrounds, he had an artist spend six months sketching forest scenes in Maine's Baxter State Park. A pair of fawns, named Bambi and Faline of course, was shipped from Maine to Disney's California studios where they became models for his artists, who underwent special training in drawing wildlife. Bambi, a Black Forest roe deer in Salten's book, thus became a white-tailed deer in Disney's film. The task of animating accurately the movements of four-legged deer as they walk, lie down, and get up, and of maintaining correct perspective for a rotating rack of antlers as a buck moves his head was daunting. The film set a new standard for naturalistic realism in animated films.(20) The

"April Showers" segment, for example, ends with an image of ripples radiating from the last raindrops to fall on a pool of water. The splash of the raindrops is accurate even to the momentary central pillar that rises when the drop hits the water, although viewers must slowly advance their Bambi video frame by frame to notice it.

Disney, like Salten, tried to establish a relationship between Bambi and his father while respecting the biological fact that male deer do not form a lasting bond with females and do not participate in rearing the young. This is why the Great Prince remains a loner, aloof and uncommunicative. Bambi's father stands on the distant rock ledge because a buck would not be present at the birth of his offspring. In Salten's Bambi even Bambi and Faline are only temporary mates. Although Disney's version does not progress beyond their first mating season, Bambi joins his father on the ledge when Faline gives birth. Nevertheless, for the sake of the story both Salten and Disney set a limit to authenticity and anthropomorphize deer by establishing a caring relationship between father and son.

Disney, however, changed the nature of this relationship. The ability of Bambi's father to live a solitary life, to appear without warning, and then to vanish into the forest, are keys to his survival. To be visible is to be vulnerable. Bambi's maturation in Salten's story is a process of learning the lessons of survival. "If you live, my son," his mother explains, "if you are cunning and don't run into danger, you'll be as strong and handsome as your father is sometime, and you'll have antlers like his, too." Bambi's father, the Great Prince, achieved his stature by surviving to become the oldest and wisest of the deer. In Salten's book, the Great Prince is a teacher who passes his survival wisdom on to Bambi. He teaches mostly by example, but also with words. His first words to Bambi come at a time when the fawn is alone, crying for his mother. The stag suddenly appears and scolds, "Can't you stay by yourself? Shame on you!" Bambi learns his lessons well and eventually becomes as skillful and solitary as his father; he learns "the most vital lesson of the woods: 'Be alone'." These lessons in survival come full cycle years later when, at the very end of the book, old Prince Bambi comes across a pair of fawns crying for their mother. "Can't you stay by yourselves?" he scolds.(21)

In his effort to wrest a coherent plot out of Salten's episodic novel, Disney did away with the cycle of survival lessons and replaced it with the cycle from Bambi's birth to the birth of his own children. In the process, Disney made Bambi's father primarily a protector rather than a teacher and turned Bambi and Faline's love story into the film's central plot. It is a story of childhood's end as Bambi matures from an awkward child, who continually falls down, into a buck who must learn to stand up for himself and for his mate. This is best symbolized when he lies shot and in the path of the forest fire and his father appears and urges, "Get up, Bambi. Get up. You must get up."(22)

"All too often, animal books are highly emotional, over-sentimental stories of creatures who act amazingly like humans," pointed out the teacher's guide accompanying a Walt Disney Educational Products record album of Bambi. "Although the animals in Bambi speak, they still retain their animal characters, and the portrayal of their way of life is scientifically true. From Bambi, children learn accurate information as well as feel deep concern and

tenderness for the characters." However, the same teacher's guide included an absurd picture of Bambi staring at a family of opossums hanging by their tails from a tree limb." In the film, Bambi meets these improbable opossums during his first walk. The forest fire segment even shows an opossum finding safety on the island, with her children hanging by their tails from her tail! Although opossums are capable of hanging by their tails, this is not a preferred behavior and they certainly do not sleep hanging by their tails.(24) Nevertheless, this bit of nature fakery appears again and again in children's books based on Bambi, even in spin-off books minimally connected with the movie.(25) The film and books have done more than anything else to perpetuate this folklore. The Disney Stores are even selling coffee mugs emblazoned with this scene.

The film is an extraordinary work of animation artistry. On another level, it is an odd mixture of beautiful, impressionistic backgrounds, naturalistic forest and wildlife images, and classic Disney cartoon characters. Virtually all of the film's birds are cartoon fantasies. Friend Owl can even turn his head completely around two or more times without choking to death or breaking his neck. The artists give Bambi antlers in springtime; fanciful appendages necessary to help the viewer distinguish his sex from Faline's. Bambi's touted authenticity is severely limited. The film is faithful to visual, artistic accuracy in the general appearance and movements of many of its animals, not to a scientific or ecological accuracy. Even the visual accuracy is compromised for the sake of cuteness: for example, the more traditional cartoony cuteness of Thumper and Flower, and the tail-hanging opossums.

In short, despite their efforts to be accurate, Salten's original version of Bambi underwent a transformation as Disney and his staff reshaped it to fit a different medium, their own sensibilities, and a mass market. In the process much of Salten's ecological and moral subtlety were winnowed away. From the start, what attracted Disney to Bambi was its potentially interesting cast of characters. It was the director/producer Sidney Franklin and the artist Tyrus Wong who managed to educate Disney and his staff to appreciate the artistic and poetic potential of the story. Nevertheless, Disney realized that to win the viewing public's attention he had to provide an upbeat story with sympathetic animal characters. The spotted fawn has long been recognized as a particularly cute and attractive image. This image of cuteness has become so popular that even adult deer are sometimes mistakenly shown with spots.(26) Disney, however, had a well-tested technique for carrying cuteness to an extreme.

Both Salten and Disney gave their characters distinctive personalities. However, Disney's medium required that he accomplish this quickly and visually, and the film lost much of the subtlety of Salten's novel. His artists habitually exaggerated the size of their cartoon characters' heads and eyes and reduced their muzzles, thus giving them the proportions of human infants. Initially, Disney's staff had tremendous difficulty rendering the deer in Bambi as sympathetic personalities capable of dramatic expression because they were trying to draw them too realistically. They finally solved the problem by reverting to some of their standard cartoon techniques. "A smaller muzzle and much larger cranium," wrote two of the supervising animators, "finally created the new design and made all of the expressions available to the animators." Note the difference between the preceding description and the

photograph accompanying this article. Young Bambi's head became almost as large as the rest of his body. (One of Disney's artists called him "little pumpkin-head.") Disney's artists also added exceptionally large white eye patches surrounding and exaggerating his enormous eyes. "With a huge head dwarfing its trunk and a pair of oversized eyes with pupils and lashes," writes anthropologist Elizabeth A. Lawrence, "Disney's Bambi arouses sympathy and nurturance and a sense of parenthood toward this relatively sociable species that sometimes responds to human attention." (27) This technique of manipulating the viewer's emotions is also used in "motel art" paintings of sad-eyed puppies, kittens, and human waifs. Similarly, the large eyed, anthropomorphic face of baby harp seals help to motivate efforts to prevent their slaughter.

No wonder that Bambi, Thumper, and Flower win our sympathy; they display the features that elicit our nurturing sympathy for human children. Disney's Bambi relies on the child Bambi to win viewer sympathy. Although Bambi was an antlered buck through half of Salten's book, he remains a fawn through three quarters of the film. It is not surprising that most people picture only a cute, vulnerable fawn when they think of Bambi. (28) On a subliminal level, the Disney version of Bambi motivates opposition to hunting, in part, by representing deer visually as surrogate human children.

Disney also presents a distorted image of woodland ecology, one in which all animals live at peace. For example, Friend Owl, who appears to be a great horned owl, is Thumper's and Flower's friend. Apparently great horned owls do not consume their normal quota of rabbits and skunks in Disney's forest because Disney's world is a world without predation. In the world of Disney's Bambi, all wild creatures are friends. Children's books based on the film, including spin offs only loosely tied to the film, perpetuate this image of nature. For example, a recent children's activity book shows all creatures, predators and prey alike, in happy proximity. It even has Bambi and Thumper asking a friendly fox for travel directions. Predation does appear in one spin-off book when a fox tries to make a meal of Thumper. Bambi and his father save the day. This rare appearance of predation is placed within a very clear moral framework, however. Flower describes it as "a very mean fox," and it is obvious that the fox is morally flawed. But what alternative has the fox? Predation must be akin to original sin in this moral universe. (29)

The Disney version of life in the woods stands in sharp contrast with that of Felix Salten, which presents a far more ecologically and philosophically complex vision of nature. Although Salten's vision has its own limitations, comparing the two underscores the trouble with Disney's. Salten's Bambi found a very different world when, during his first walk in the forest, the fawn heard something rustle in the foliage. "A thread-like, little cry shrilled out piteously; then all was still.... A ferret had caught a mouse. He came slinking by, slid sideways, and prepared to enjoy his meal." Bambi asked, "What was that?" but his mother answered only, "Nothing." "But," Bambi trembled, "but I saw it." "Yes, yes," answered his mother. "Don't be frightened. The ferret has killed a mouse." When Bambi asked, "Shall we kill a mouse, too, sometimes?" "No," his mother reassured him, "Because we never kill anything." George Reiger has argued that this conversation underscores the book's failure as a life history, because the mother avoided the whole issue of death by saying deer "never kill

anything." Also, she did not explain that ferrets must kill to live. She implied, he wrote, "that such creatures have a choice--like man." It seems more reasonable, however, to interpret her response to Bambi's questions as an effort to calm her very young child, who will soon learn more about such things. Reiger also noted that, "because even foliage talks to itself in Bambi and apparently has a soul, if not an afterlife, Bambi does 'kill things' by eating grasses and later destroying shrubs while thrashing the velvet from his antlers."(30)

Nevertheless, Salten's Bambi lives in a world in which the food web is a very active presence. The mouse's death was not an isolated incident. During a winter that produced far more suffering than Disney's, "the crows fell upon Friend Hare's [the original model for Thumper's] small son who was lying sick, and killed him in a cruel way. He could be heard moaning pitifully for a long while." In other incidents a fox killed a pheasant, a fox killed a duck, an owl killed a mouse, and a squirrel (that Bambi mistook for its father) explained that its grandmother was killed by a ferret and its father by an owl. These incidents are all presented in almost a casual manner. They are normal occurrences that may cause momentary pain and consternation ("You never know who's going to go next," one autumn leaf said to another as they debated the nature of death), but they are neither out of the ordinary nor evil.(31) Predation and death are ever present, independent of Man's presence, in Salten's woodland drama.

The process of creating the Disney version of Bambi was a process of erosion as the normal and pervasive, although uncomfortable, presence of predation and death emphasized in Salten's version was omitted or blunted. This process continues in the children's book spin-offs based on the film. They tend further to reduce the severity of winter starvation. They also have difficulty acknowledging that Bambi's mother was actually killed. In two coloring books, for example, Bambi says, "My mother's gone!" and his father says only, "You'll live with me now, son." Another book reports only that "The hunters had caught her," thus suggesting that she was still alive. A read-along booklet accompanying a Bambi audio tape omits any reference to the incident. As another example of this process, one children's book ends with a picture of Bambi in an anthropomorphic family setting with Faline and their fawns, rather than off on the distant hill.(32) As a result, Salten's sharp, naturalistic vision of woodland life is degraded into a fantasy of nature cleansed of the traumas and difficulties that may trouble children and that adults prefer to avoid.

One wildlife biologist has argued that despite its shortcomings Disney's film is really quite accurate in its representation of deer ecology, and that it presents a strong argument in favor of using hunting as a tool to manage deer herds.(33) In the film neither Bambi nor Faline has brothers or sisters. This presents a problem, since deer usually give birth to more than one fawn. Their mothers must have been under some sort of stress that caused them to produce only single births. The evidence, he argues, was in the meadow. On Bambi's first visit he saw a great many stags in the meadow, evidence of an overpopulated deer herd. Malnourishment must have led to the single births. During the winter, Bambi and his mother could find food only by stripping bark from high in the trees. This is a sure indication that the size of the herd had exceeded the carrying capacity of its range. Although the film blunted the severity of the winter's hardships, many deer in that overpopulated herd must

have starved. However, starvation and the toll taken by hunters must have brought the herd back down to a reasonable size, thus reducing the stress on individual deer. The evidence? As the film ended Faline gave birth to twins.

This is an interesting argument that has biological merit, but Disney never intended the film to be open to this interpretation. Although this argument may tease animal rights activists, it is simply not apparent to the film's viewers. Disney's is a "Sunday school" vision of nature as a place without stress, conflict, or death. The sole exceptions are the difficulties of winter, which the film acknowledges but minimizes, and the short period of conflict between bucks during the mating season (they are friends at other times). The state of nature is a simple, uncomplicated, romantic state of happiness and virtue--an escapist fantasy. Disney did not create his audience's desire for such fantasies, but he did feed it. In short, he presented nature as an earthly Eden. There is, however, no place for humans in this garden.

Bambi and the Problem of "Man"

Humans, although never seen in the film, are the sole source of evil in the Disney view of nature. "'Bambi' does have a more vivid sense of evil than any other Disney film," wrote a movie reviewer, "perhaps because the evil isn't personified.... The warning issued by Bambi's mother--'Man is in the forest'-- has the compacting force of a phrase from Brecht." Another reviewer called this line memorable and intimidating, and recalled that it "still creates shudders." No wonder that People Weekly listed "Man" among the top movie "Hot Heavies" adding, "That's the hunter who kills the hero's mom--the ultimate in dastardly deeds." (34) Hunters not only kill Bambi's mother, they also kill the woodland creatures indiscriminately, their dogs attack Faline, and their fire ravages the forest. The fierce, hungry flames that devour the forest and its creatures become a surrogate for Man that continues and subliminally magnifies the hunters' destructive hunger for the lives of Bambi and his friends. (35) Hunters are represented virtually as a satanic force. Disney adds to this impression by using crows, circling and cawing ominously over the forest, as dark harbingers of Man.

Salten's version of Bambi also presents hunters as objects of fear, perhaps even more than did Disney. Salten's hunting scenes are far more terrifying. Disney protected his viewers from the full force of the horror of Salten's major hunting episode, transforming Salten's wave of panic into a forest fire that appears only in the film. However, Salten represents "Man" not as satanically evil, but as a powerful force of godlike proportion. "Man" is always capitalized, just as one capitalizes "God." In Salten's book, Man is both a force to be feared and a puzzle. In the children's books based on Disney's Bambi, Salten's "Man" becomes "MAN." The awesome word spoken both with wonder and fear in Salten's book thus becomes virtually a scream in Disney's.

Bambi and the other creatures try to understand the nature of Man. They watch, they speculate, and they fear. A crow observed that, although she often saw Man, "no one can explain Him." (36) The problem of Man is one of the book's central themes, a problem that Bambi must solve in his effort to learn the lessons of survival.

At one point, when the deer have gathered together during the long winter, they discuss the nature of Man. The aging deer, Old Nettla, hates Man, saying "He is loathsome!" But young Marena offers, "They say that sometime He'll come to live with us and be as gentle as we are. He'll play with us then and the whole forest will be happy, and we'll be friends with him." Old Nettla heatedly scoffs at such youthful idealism. "Friends with Him! He's murdered us ever since we can remember, every one of us, our sisters, our mothers, our brothers! Ever since we came into the world He's given us no peace.... And now we're going to be friends with Him. What nonsense!" Nevertheless Marena persists, "'Love is no nonsense,' she said. 'It has to Come.'"(37)

With this dialogue Felix Salten framed a critical question for his readers. Is human nature mutable or is it fixed? Can humans make peace with the deer? Salten does not present an easy answer. The reader could see that Faline's brother, the weakly fawn Gobo, was not able to survive the harsh winter, and his life appeared to be shortened only a little more quickly when he lost his strength and was unable to flee the hunters. But Gobo reappeared in the summer. He had been rescued by the hunters, nursed back to health, and released. He had, however, lost his fear of Man and trotted out to meet his human friends during the next hunt. It was a fatal mistake. "Gobo lay with his bloody entrails oozing from his torn flank," and when the hunters reached him the other deer "heard Gobo's wailing death shriek." The hunters could give both life and death, a power proclaimed by a hunting dog in his argument with a fox he was about to kill. "He's all-powerful," the dog shouted exultantly. "He's above all of you. Everything we have comes from Him. Everything that lives or grows comes from Him."(38)

The climax of Salten's novel comes when Bambi learns that what the dog had said was wrong. His father brought him to see the corpse of a poacher lying against a tree. The bullet wound in his neck "gaped like a small red mouth. Blood was oozing out slowly." "He isn't all-powerful as they say," his father explained. "Everything that lives and grows doesn't come from Him. He's just the same as we. He has the same fears, the same needs, and suffers in the same way. He can be killed like us, and then He lies helpless on the ground like all the rest of us, as you see Him now." Bambi pondered upon this lesson and concluded, "There is Another who is over us all, over us and over Him."(39) With this final lesson the old stag's work was done. His responsibility to Bambi was over, and he went off to die. The lesson, of course, was intended for Salten's readers. Humans and deer, he was arguing, are equal before the eyes of God.

Walt Disney intended to conclude his version of Bambi with this powerful scene and argument against hunting. It was to be the climax of the film. Bambi and his father were to find the corpse of a dead hunter amid the charred remains of the forest, killed by the fire caused by his own carelessness. But Disney's staff were unsure how to present a "real" death, rather than a fanciful or fairy tale cartoon death, in a way that was acceptable to the audience. They tried one version on a test audience and "four hundred people shot straight up into the air" when the corpse appeared. Thus ended Disney's efforts to bring a philosophical conclusion to the film. All that remains of Salten's powerful scene in the Disney version is the symbolic departure of the old stag, leaving Bambi on the mountain

side overlooking Faline and her fawns.(40)

The Trouble with Bambi

Both Felix Salten and Walt Disney represent humans as intruders whose presence disrupts the Edenic forest garden of nature. However, it is not a human nature-lover whose contemplation of the garden is disrupted by the intrusion of hunter and gun. Nor is the viewpoint that of a frontier father hunting to feed his family or a sportsman seeking a trophy. Instead, the reader and audience are shown nature as experienced by the forest dwellers, the objects of the hunt. It is not the presence of the machine that disrupts this garden, but the presence of the human.(41) Despite this similarity, Salten's and Disney's versions of Bambi differ in their treatment of this theme. Both versions appear to represent biocentric views of nature. The test of their biocentrism, however, lies in the faithfulness of their fictional animals to the reality of their biological counterparts. Disney's Bambi falls this test even when granted the wide latitude that is appropriate for children's fiction.

Salten's Bambi presents a poetic vision of woodland life and a powerful statement against hunting. Although he humanized his animal characters, they live in a world of complex ecological relationships that includes the ever present reality of death by predation and winter starvation, as well as by the hunter's gun. Humans often bring death, as do other creatures in the forest, but Salten presents humans as a problematic force, rather than as an unmitigated evil. His Bambi offers some hope, however remote, that we may be able to establish a more gentle relationship with nature. People may, depending on their own views, praise or condemn his position on hunting. Regardless, Felix Salten should be commended for conducting his morality play on a naturalistic stage.

Walt Disney's Bambi is an extraordinary work of cinematic art that also evokes a poetic vision of nature and makes a strong antihunting statement. It presents, however, an extraordinarily one-sided view of nature and of people. There is no predation in Disney's forest. With few exceptions--Bambi, his mother, a few birds, and the rabbits--the animals do not eat at all. Although winters may be harsh, death comes only by the hand of Man, an evil force in the world. Disney did not set out to present this as his philosophical view of nature. Instead, Salten's complexities were whittled away in the pragmatic process of shaping the story for a visual medium and a mass market. Financial problems also forced Disney to cut the length of the film by nearly a third.(42) As a result, the story lost its ecological and philosophical depth, but the film gained an aesthetic elegance and simplicity that have earned it a reputation as one of Disney's finest works of art.

Nevertheless, what gives the film artistic elegance also gives it ecological shallowness. Bambi is not unique in its lack of ecological sophistication, and despite its shortcomings it is a joy to watch. However, the film was praised for establishing a new standard of naturalistic realism for its medium, including scientific accuracy. Its problems are compounded by the film's enormous popularity and the Disney corporation's tremendous, sustained success in bringing it to a mass market. The marketing of Bambi has also been the dissemination of a vision of nature, and its success also marks the success of that vision.

Marketing Disney's Bambi

Bambi was not the first wild animal character to capture the attention of the American public. Naturalistic stories and books sympathetic to the perspective of wild animals were first published nearly fifty years before Bambi appeared in theaters. Jack London's dog, Buck, triumphed in winning freedom in the Alaskan wilderness and leadership of a wolf pack. Charles G. D. Roberts's Red Fox raised his family and learned how to avoid hunters and traps. Ernest Thompson Seton's wolf, Lobo, symbolized wild cunning and devotion to one's mate. Seton's stories, in particular, have been read, reread, and continue to be read by generations of children and adults. However, no other wild animal character achieved the stature of Walt Disney's lovable fawn. No others have been so carefully shaped to appeal to a mass market or so successful in capturing the hearts and wallets of the nation.

The film received its world premier at the Radio City Music Hall on 12 August 1942. The following week, on 21 August, Disney released it for distribution via RKO Radio Pictures. It was generally well received despite some reviewers' difficulty in adjusting to an animal cartoon without zany characters and slapstick humor. ("Mickey wouldn't be caught dead in this," complained one critic.) The film did not recover its production expenses, however, and was considered a financial failure. Nevertheless, subsequent releases following World War 11 made the film one of the industry's great money makers. Based on total rental fees paid to distributors through 1988, Bambi earned \$47,265,000. By comparison, Casablanca, also released in 1942, earned \$4,145,178 during the same period. Only two films released between 1939 and 1969 had accumulated more rental income by the end of 1988: Gone with the Wind (1939), and The Sound of Music (1965). Gross sales during this time, estimated by Disney at \$490 million, are even more impressive. In the last six months of 1988, the film's latest rerelease grossed \$38.1 million .(43)

These figures do not include income from the video version of Bambi. In 1989, Disney launched an aggressive marketing campaign for Bambi and Roger Rabbit videos at a combined cost of \$60 million. A senior Disney/Buena Vista executive called it "the largest [marketing] program ever in home video." The campaign included marketing tie-ins with Crest Toothpaste and M&M candies. Sixty percent of the initial release of ten million units of the Bambi video were shipped to mass outlets, such as K-Mart and Target. Finally, nearly fifty years after its premier, Bambi was first broadcast on television, via the Disney Channel, of course, on Sunday, 3 February 1991. The broadcast was repeated seven other times that month, and we are bound to see it on television again in the years to come.(44)

It is fair to say that Bambi has become an inevitable part of the childhood education of most people in America and in many other parts of the world. As a result of Disney's aggressive promotion, merchandising, and licensing enterprises, many children meet Bambi long before they see the film. Throughout the 1940s Disney used these mechanisms to bring Bambi to the public's attention and keep it there, and also to ensure a steady flow of collateral income. In

1941, the year before the film was released, a Bambi comic book giveaway was distributed through Horlick's Malted Milk and toy stores. A Bambi Sunday comic strip began running

in newspapers on 19 July 1942, a month before the film was released, and continued to 4 October. RCA Victor released a three record set based on the film. Dell Publishing Company released a Walt Disney Bambi comic book in the same year and another in 1948. A Thumper comic book also appeared, as did Bambi's Children, a comic book based on Felix Salten's sequel to Bambi. In addition, the 1940s saw the publication of at least nine other Bambi books based on the original Salten story, the Disney film, or characters from the film. At least three manufacturers produced a variety of ceramic figurines based on Bambi, Thumper, and Flower. One company produced a set of Bambi children's dinnerware (plate, bowl, mug, and pitcher), and Bambi lovers could purchase their own Ingersoll Bambi wristwatch. In 1947, the New York Graphic Society advertised full color prints of scenes from Bambi.(45)

More books and other products continued to appear as the years passed. From 1950 to the present dozens of books, not to mention such items as an alarm clock, a lamp, and stuffed toys, based on Disney's Bambi have appeared in addition to new editions of Salten's classic novel. These include coloring books, a "scratch-and-sniff" book, children's introductory "A-B-C" and counting books, new comic books, ViewMaster 3-D reels, and new stories based on the Disney Bambi characters. A video comprised of clips from various Disney films was released for the Christmas market. It included the Bambi segment with Bambi and Thumper playing on the ice, opportunistically called "Bambi's first Christmas Day." Recorded versions of the Disney story continually appear on records and tapes, a number of film strip versions have been produced for classroom use, and Disney now markets packages that include a Bambi audio cassette and "read along" books for elementary school reading programs. Disney Educational Products has mined Bambi for a variety of educational offerings, including a film and video based on Bambi's first, memorable walk. The advertisement promises, "An encouraging lesson for youngsters who must overcome embarrassment at failure or fear of trying is demonstrated as the newborn Bambi tries to walk and talk for the first time." In addition, new Bambi character ceramic figurines and stuffed dolls, posters, books, and other items are sold through a growing national chain of well over one hundred Disney stores.(46) The presence and influence of Disney's Bambi has been and remains pervasive.

The Impact of "Bambi" on American Culture

The name Bambi has become a part of our language and is often used as a synonym for "deer." Examples abound. "Look," a parent will tell his or her child on spotting a deer, "there's Bambi!" When an orphan fawn wandered into an Iowa barnyard, the family raised it and named it Bambi. A Los Angeles Times article about radio tagging deer was titled, "Now, Bambi has a Beeper." When a Virginia game warden placed a stuffed deer beside a road to catch hunters illegally shooting from their cars, newspapers dubbed the operation "Bambi scam." Esquire gave a "Dubious Achievement of 1990" award to the hunter whose shotgun fired, killing him, while he was clubbing a deer with it. The magazine announced this honor under the score, "Bambi 1, Asshole 0."(47)

Bambi has also become synonymous with something soft and sentimental, even wimpy. An

article in Art News told of a group of Native American artists who were "outspokenly opposed to the more lyrical, nostalgic and even, as they maintain, 'Bambi-like' traits of so much Indian arts around and before them." In a 1988 speech supporting the Dukakis/Bentsen presidential campaign, Senator John Glenn said, "Lloyd Bentsen believes that when other countries take advantage of us, you can't talk like Rambo and act like Bambi." Johnny Carson took advantage of the sharp contrast between the images of Bambi and Rambo. Disney was violent enough to kill Bambi's mother, the comedian offered, but he drew the line at creating "Bambo," and Carson displayed a drawing of an angry deer returning fire with an assault rifle.(48)

The film's influence has been far-reaching and sometimes quite surprising. Shortly after the film and its forest fire sequence appeared, the Wartime Council used Bambi and his friends in a national poster campaign to promote fire prevention. (Bambi was replaced a year later by the newly invented character Smokey Bear.) The Wall Street journal reported that former daredevil Evel Knievel had become an artist, selling inexpensive limited edition prints based on his paintings on various themes, including Bambi. A columnist spoofing the National Rifle Association reported seeing "ads for video tapes from the NRA, with the latest tips for Uzi-toting psychopaths. 'How to Shoot Bambi's Mother While Bambi's Watching.'" And, amazingly, actor Kiefer Sutherland told Playboy that Bambi was the first film he ever saw and, he said, "it's still the film with which I compare everything.... It taught me about--I guess on a broad scale--sexuality. I was in love with Thumper's girlfriend from the time I was seven until I was ten. She's got all that eye shadow on and she's looking real good."(49)

More important to the present study, Bambi has made an enduring mark on popular American ideas about the environment. One commentator recalled vividly remembering three things from her childhood viewing of the film: 1) "The extraordinary lyrical beauty of the forest setting;" 2) "The must-touch cuddliness of the major characters;" and 3) "The death of Bambi's mother." (50) Its powerful antihunting message, especially the death of Bambi's mother, left a lasting impression on the public. "Yes, it's sappy and sentimental," wrote a Sierra Club reviewer, but "this 45-year-old lawyer cries at every viewing." He added that the film promotes "at least a few wistful ecocentric thoughts." People Weekly, not known as an environmental publication, found that despite its anthropomorphism and "several too many shots of cute, twitching little tails... there is also what amounts to an early pro-environmental message about the havoc wrought in the forest by man's incursion." (51)

We are in the midst of a national debate over hunting and our proper role in the forest. It is a complex debate involving a tremendous diversity of perspectives and arguments. At one extreme are people who are defending an American tradition and a way of experiencing nature that is personally fulfilling. They argue that hunting is an essential and humane means of keeping game populations in balance with their environment. At another extreme are those who value the lives of individual wild animals and seek to prevent their destruction, arguing that hunting disrupts the balance of nature. Advocates on both sides profess a keen interest in wildlife protection. Effective action for the benefit of wildlife, however, requires a sound understanding of the natural history and ecology of wild animals, as well as humane values and a deep personal commitment to the cause.

It may be that more people have, consciously or unconsciously, based their understanding of deer and woodland life on Walt Disney's Bambi than on any other single source. Its images and concept of nature have been impressed on the American psyche and reinforced through decades of exposure to the film, its multitude of spin-offs, and Disney's marketing magic. Bambi has become one of our most widespread and emotionally powerful national symbols of nature, one that motivates deep concern, and dedicated action to protect wildlife. However, Disney's Bambi is an empty symbol, because the concept of nature that his fawn represents is impoverished. The film motivates, but does not educate. It may stimulate action, but not understanding. Instead of affirming nature, it represents a flight from the natural world into a comfortable nature fantasy. Ironically, it offers no hope for us poor humans to be anything other than destroyers of the natural world

Nature, symbolized by Disney's infant Bambi, an infant with endearing human qualities, becomes something fragile and vulnerable. It becomes something that we must nurture and protect. (52) This can be a useful metaphor, given our enormous technological abilities to destroy our environment. However, grave problems lie ahead if we confuse a fetching metaphor with the living reality of deer, other wildlife, or our environment. After all, the challenge we face is to protect real wildlife in a real environment, not the Disney version.

NOTES

