



BROWSE



## Why the Wolves Are Running

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## Why the Wolves Are Running

*Peter Hollindale (bio)*

A character in A. S. Byatt's novel *Possession*, writing about her childhood in nineteenth-century Brittany, recalls her fear of wolves:

I was afraid of wolves, day and night, and of werewolves too, though I cannot say I have ever seen a wolf, nor certainly heard one, though Gode has held up a finger on snowy nights when something has howled, and has said, "The wolves are coming closer; they are hungry." In this misty land the borderline between myth, legend and fact is not decisive, my father says, as a stone arch might be between this world and another, but more like a series of moving veils or woven webs between one room and another. Wolves come; and there are men as bad as wolves; and there are sorcerers who believe they control such powers, and there is the peasant's faith in wolves and in the need to put solid doors between the child and all such dangers.

(339).

There are certainly no wolves left now in the forests of Brittany, or indeed in most of mainland Europe. Small populations still exist in the high and remote districts of Spain, Italy, Romania, and possibly elsewhere, but most surviving wolves eke out their existence in the Arctic regions of northern Norway and Sweden. Wolves are natural wanderers, but if they wander far from their man-free strongholds, they are instantly in danger. A few years ago a solitary wolf roamed south into civilized Sweden. It caused a panic among the human population and was promptly shot. No wild creature is more self-destructively proficient than the wolf at creating irrational fear in human beings.

In North America the story is much the same. There are populations of wolves in the cold and inaccessible vastness of northern Canada and Alaska, and a few wolves still survive in Idaho, Michigan, and Minnesota, protected not only by thick forests and harsh climate but nowadays by the law. Yet unexpected incursions into what was once wolf territory are likely [End Page 97] to be met with fear and swift extinction. All over the world the wolf is an endangered species.

We frighten our children with wolves, as Byatt's character was frightened. Children in infancy hear the stories of *Little Red Riding Hood*

and the *Three Little Pigs*. Jack Zipes cites the German researcher Marianne Rumpf, who argues that the original villain of *Little Red Riding Hood* in French folklore was probably a werewolf, and that it was Perrault at the end of the seventeenth century who turned him into a “simple, but ferocious wolf” (Zipes 19). But to modern children he is still a wolf, and a warning to little girls that they should not stray from the straight and narrow path of obedience (and chastity). Not only in childhood story but in everyday English idiom we teach children to fear and demonize the wolf. Children learn the danger of crying wolf; the importance of keeping the wolf from the door; the risk of being thrown to the wolves; the threat of wolves in sheep’s clothing. They signal male aggression with a wolf whistle and are taught not to wolf down food when they are ravenous. Byatt’s character learned to fear both wolves and werewolves, and children still absorb a terror of both wolves and wolf-like human beings. The wolf is “carnivore incarnate” (Carter 110) and in the similitude of beast or male human, he has physical and sexual appetites. Clearly wolves need help with their public relations. The signs are that they are starting to get it.

In children’s literature, as in life, old fears stick deep. To the children’s writer wolves are a shorthand for menace. The most economical way to plant your hero in a dangerous wilderness is to let him hear the howl of wolves. So deep is the unreasoning, automatic fear released by the image of the wolf that it may take generations of informed biological reality to change it, and by then it may be too late. All the same, a start has been made in literature. As Zipes observes, “certain tales...



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