

Welcome to the New Books Network.

Marshall Poe

Hello, everybody. This is Marshall Poe, and you're listening to an episode of the Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast, which is brought to you by our friends at Princeton University Press and the New Books Network. And today, I'm very pleased to say we have Jack Zipes on the show, and we'll be talking about a book that he translated and introduced by Felix Salten, called *The Original Bambi: The Story of a Life in the Forest*. I should tell you before we begin the interview that I grew up in the American Midwest, and I did a lot of hunting when I was young, and I didn't really ever look at things from the animals' point of view before, I read this book. And I don't think I've ever seen the 1942 movie *Bambi*, which I don't understand how I got through American youth without never seeing *Bambi*, but I don't think I ever did. Anyway, Jack, welcome to the show.

Jack Zipes

Thank you very much for inviting me, Marshall.

Marshall Poe

Certainly. Could you begin the interview by telling us a little bit about yourself?

Jack Zipes

Yes. Well, I'm a professor—or was a professor—of German at the University of Minnesota. Before I came to the University of Minnesota, I taught in Munich, Germany. All of this was in the 1960s and 1970s. And after teaching there for about five years, I returned to New York and taught at NYU from 1978 to—excuse me, from 1968 to 1972.

And then from New York, I went to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, taught there for about 14 years. Went finally to Florida and taught there for at the University of Florida for about three years, and that was a time when I had married in Milwaukee a young woman originally from Minneapolis, Minnesota, and she loved the Midwest. I, as a New Yorker, had a lot of troubles living in the Midwest and was very happy to go down to the University of Florida.

But my wife experienced several, let's say, encounters with rednecks in Gainesville, Florida. One of them threatened her with a gun, and we received all sorts of phone calls that made life there rather difficult. And she more or less pointed a gun to my head and said, 'We are going north. I don't care where we go, but we're going north.' And I said, okay, I'll go to a Modern Language Association conference and seek a job.

And lo and behold, I got a very good offer to go back to the Midwest, even though I did have at the same time an offer to go to Boston to MIT. But my wife again overruled that and said, 'Yes, we are going back to my home state.' And so from approximately 1980 until I retired in 2008, I've taught German and cultural studies at the University of Minnesota. I also directed a storytelling program at the Children's Theater Company of Minneapolis. I did a great deal of writing and speaking about folklore but also about critical theory. I'm not really even a folklorist, though people think I am.

And I have a great interest in children's and their socialization, what types of books children read, how children can become storytellers of their own lives. So, that's basically what I've been doing in the last, say, from 2008 to the present. I've been publishing. I also began publishing books in my own small, tiny publishing house called Little Mole & Honey Bear. And I direct a series at Princeton University Press called—what is it called again? I'm forgetting... *Oddly Modern Fairy Tales*. And I have had wonderful editors and myself editing these books that people don't know about, these authors who wrote the modern fairy tales at the beginning of the 20th century.

Marshall Poe

I think many—most—of the listeners to this podcast and other podcasts on the New Books Network don't know how peripatetic the lives of most academics are. I mean, people ask me, where have you taught? And I say, where haven't I taught?

Jack Zipes

Exactly, exactly. Particularly in the 50s 60s, and 70s, really the academics had generally come from wealthy, wealthy families, and for instance when I studied at Dartmouth College, most of my professors had not published much. They were from the sort of genteel class and didn't have to worry about money or anything, and it wasn't really until the 60s that first of all, the humanities at universities were recognized, or given more recognition. And superb scholars developed during the 60s and 70s.

Marshall Poe

Sure. Well, and you're one of them. So, could you tell us how this book came about?

Jack Zipes

Yeah. It was all serendipity. Most of a good deal of my work is serendipity, that something happens that I didn't expect, and I'm somewhat opportunistic and then grab hold of this opportunity.

Well, this was a strange sort of, let us say, encounter with a publisher at one of the MLA conferences who came up to me and said, 'You know, in 2021, it will be the 100th anniversary—or 2022, actually—will be the anniversary of Felix Salten's *Bambi*, and would you like to do a new translation and look into this? And I said to him, what? *Bambi*? That's not even a fairy tale. I don't want to really waste my time doing this. And he said, please. And I said, no, not going to do it. So, I went home and at one point I said, 'Why did he ask me to do this? I should look into this.' I had really no knowledge of *Bambi*—this is about 45 years ago—and so I decided in my spare time to look into *Bambi*. And first of all, I discovered that Disney was not the writer of *Bambi*.

Felix Salten, right, you know, an Austrian Jew, who really had quite an interesting biography. And I also learned that Whittaker Chambers, a communist—American Communist—did the first translation in 1928. And I began looking into Salten, and I bought a biography about him, I looked at the translation and saw that it was sloppy and really did not capture the original German. And I decided that this is going to be a really important contribution to literature, to the history of literature, particularly the history of so-called children's literature. So, I then approached my editor at Princeton, who is really great, a really great editor, and she said, 'Oh, *Bambi*. Yes, do it!' I said, 'Are you sure?' And she said, 'Yes, go ahead, go ahead. You have my blessing.'

And so that's how it started. And the more I investigated—I spent a good year or more doing research and the translation and realized that Whittaker Chambers had no idea of the way Austrian German is much different than high German from Germany. And so it was not a terrible translation, and it came out in 1928, and he was lucky because of the book-of-the-month club decided that they would publish *Bambi*. And that's how it became fairly famous in America. But immediately after the Whittaker translation and later on the Disney film, Salten's name and intention in writing the book were sort of erased from history.

So, it became more and more important for me to really write a good essay at the beginning of the book, pointing out how Salten, who had experienced tremendous anti-Semitism in Austria, how that was totally omitted from any histories or anybody writing about *Bambi* in America. And really, the book is a serious analysis, a prefiguring of the Holocaust in a very unusual way.

Marshall Poe

Well, anybody who reads anything—and I hadn't before I read this book—about Felix Salten, it would get their attention. Because he was a very unusual person. You don't meet people like this. So, let's talk a little about Felix Salten. You know, he has this hybrid identity, he's Austrian and Hungarian and Jewish and Viennese, and he wants to be an aristocrat, and very unusual guy. Can you kind of tell us a little bit about him and his background?

Jack Zipes

Yeah. Yeah. His family came from Hungary originally, and when he was about three or four—he had, by the way, three brothers and a sister, so fairly large family. Family was not a religious Jewish family, even though that they came from a long history of rabbinic families, but the father was more or less an engineer and businessman, and they moved to Vienna. This was actually a good time for Jews in most of Central Europe. A lot of restrictions were lifted, so that there was a huge sort of migration of Jews to the large cities, like Vienna, but other central European cities.

So, they settled there, but the father lost a good deal of his money soon, and they had to move to a proletarian section of Vienna, where Jews were sort of abated and sort of denigrated by, there were fights, or even the teachers, sort of treated Jews in a bad way. So that, by the time he turned 15 or 16, that was a time that Salten—who had changed his name, by the way. His, their original name was Sigismund. So, Salten, in order to sort of fit in had changed when he became interested in literature and began writing at the end of the 19th century. He then learned what went to a café, which was a center of European—well, Viennese Jewish writers, a lot of them extremely like [inaudible] style. Some of them weren't even Jewish, but they went. This was the cafe where you could learn anything and everything.

Karl Kraus was there also. Arthur Schnitzler, a playwright, and so on and so forth. He was an amazingly bright young boy at that time, and he became self-educated, worked for an insurance company, and eventually began writing for newspapers and became one of the foremost journalists by the beginning of the 20th century and wrote essays books, plays, you name it. He also wrote an erotic novel, or one could say pornographic novel. He was interested in making money. He became very interested in—he admired these very cultured, wealthy bourgeois writers and artists and wanted to fit in, and he also wanted to fit in with the Gentile class.

And you could understand coming from the really, one could say, deprived. He had a deprived childhood and wanted to fit in and be accepted in Austria. He married a wonderful actress in 1902. Her name was Ottilie, changed her last name to Salten as well. And he made a great deal of money before World War One and used to like to go hunting. He loved animals, and even though he loved animals—he always had dogs—he also loved hunting, killin deer and other animals at the same time. So, he was a contradiction. He's a man with tremendous contradictions. And during World War One, he actually at the beginning was behind the German and Austrian troops, and then eventually was introduced to Marxism, and then became an admirer of Lenin and the communists in Russia.

So by 1919, when the war ended, he was somewhat of a liberal. He took a trip to America. He took a trip to—he was publishing all over the place, a lot of stories. And finally, in about 1920, because it took him about a year or so to write *Bambi*. It came out in 1921 in a newspaper and was quite a very serious philosophical novel of—there's a chapter in *Bambi* about leaves talking to one another about existence and why they were alive, what happened to them after they fell from a tree. It was a brilliant novel that he wrote that was clearly a novel about minority groups, and particularly Jews, and the way they were born to be killed. And particularly, one could say, that was fairly true during the pogroms that were going on at the beginning of the 20th century, or at the end of the 19th, beginning of the 20th century.

And in general, it's clearly a novel, a serious novel, about how lonely, how the solitude of I would say Jews, but not only Jews, but other—depending on how you want to interpret the novel—about other groups. And it came out and was a very big success in 1923. A huge success in Germany—not only in Austria, but in Germany. And in 1928, Whittaker Chambers then did his translation, and that created a certain amount of fame for Salten. But not really for Salten—for Bambi.

And in 1930, an MGM director, by the name of Sidney Franklin cheated, I would say, Salten. At that time, he wasn't worried about money too much, and he sold the rights to Bambi for a thousand dollars. This is the rights that enabled Disney to make millions or billions of dollars, you know, by the end of the 20th century. So, Bambi then left his hand, so to speak, and Salten's dream of becoming an Austrian, or part of the nobility, or at least treated like a nobleman, went down the drain because of the annexation of Austria by Hitler in 1938.

At which time he used his connections—he was definitely going to be sent to a concentration camp—but he used his connections to get him into Switzerland with his wife. And so, from 1938 until his death, he lived there. And in 1942, he was fairly—it was a bad year for him because his wife died, and he was very devoted to her. And it was the year that Bambi was shown in Switzerland in a cinema, and he went there, and at the end of the film, people clapped. He was old before his times; he wasn't in good health, and he appreciated that, but he always said to people privately that this is a cloud over my name, and he didn't really appreciate the film for making huge changes. Huge changes that, of course, he couldn't write too much about it. At any rate, it was his last years in Switzerland. He died a very lonely man in 1945. So, that's sort of the background. I mean, the Disney Corporation did go on to make millions, if not billions, of dollars because of the big campaign, the money that Disney had. It was a very sweet, terrible sweet, pervertedly sweet, film that people rejoiced in seeing, and it was very optimistic. Whereas in Salten's novel, Bambi is very lonely at the very end. He doesn't marry Faline. Faline may have been shot to death in the forest, nobody knows. But it's a film, or really, a book, also about loneliness, about how isolated one is in a world when one is born to be shot, born to be murdered, born to be hunted. So, that's sort of the background.

Marshall Poe

Thank you for that. Yes, let's talk a little bit about the book itself because, not to put too fine a point on it, it's a strange book. Animals talk to one another; leaves meditate. I can't recall reading anything like it. I'm a European historian myself, and I was trying to think of analogs. I don't know, *Animal Farm*, that's later and a very different tone. But how did he get the idea to create this kind of allegorical—is that the right word? Yeah, is it, metaphorical novel. How did he get the idea of like animals should talk to one another and stand in the place of humans?

Jack Zipes

Yeah. Yeah, there are—at least in Europe—there is a novel that came out in English at the end of the 19th century called *The Red Deer*, and I'm pretty sure he must have—I mean he read English and spoke English—he may have known that. But at any rate, there were a lot of writers also in England who had these allegorical—wrote fables, so to speak, in which animals talk. I mean, we have a tradition anyway in fairy tales where animals always talk. And of course, everybody is sort of conned into, you know, or enjoying, the fact that these animals talk. But we do also have a sensibility, we're not dumb ourselves, dumb creatures. And so we know that these animals stand for something else, right? And so, it wasn't strange for him to have—he wrote about 10 books. Even before Bambi, he had written already written two or three books, but after Bambi also he continued writing animal stories. So, I think that readers—at least in the 20th and 21st centuries—now expect animals to talk.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, I think we do.

Jack Zipes

So, there's been a change, and so it's accepted. But I also think that, if you read the novel and see the film, you see the contrast that the animals are sort of like Viennese chatters. I mean, Viennese German and the Viennese themselves are ultra-polite and yet will send daggers at you at the same time in the language that they use.

I lived, you know, for 5 years in Munich and spent a lot of time in Austria. And the same is true with Southern Munich and Vienna, is that the language is ultra or exaggerated, wonderful because it's sort of like sitting in a cafe and listening to these chattering peep animals are chattering Viennese. And so, I think, there's some difficulty in really grasping what he was at. And I think there's no doubt in my mind, at least, that his intention was to reveal the loneliness of people who are ostracized and people who are hunted down.

Marshall Poe

Let's talk a little bit about its reception in Austria and Germany. Did people get that, did they see the allegorical heart of it? I mean, I'm sure there were reviews that said look, this is about Jews.

Jack Zipes

Well, I must say to be honest, I haven't read the reviews from that period, but I would say that it's quite clear that—first of all, the Viennese, in looking at the German of Salten, would immediately recognize themselves. I mean, the magpie at the very beginning, who is such a chatterbox, and Bambi's mother is trying to get her away. And finally, the magpie says, I'm going to leave. And it's that type of German situation—or I would say, Austrian situation—and there is no—like in the film, there's a sweet, all the animals come and they're rejoicing, and he's called a prince from the very beginning. It's so stupid, the beginning of Disney's film. You know, it's like embarrassing. It's really embarrassing if you do a comparison to the beginning of Disney's film and what Salten was trying to do. He was trying to show, that here is a mother who's just by herself, given birth, and doesn't want anyone really to come. And basically she begins his education, which is an education in, watch out. You know, don't go to, you know, these certain areas.

Marshall Poe

Yeah. So, I did some research, as one does, very internety, and I read that some people call this one of the first environmental novels. That's not the sense that I got at all. So, can you talk a little bit about how it's tagged that way?

Jack Zipes

Yeah. Yeah, not at all. It's not an environmental novel, nor is it an animal rights a novel.

Marshall Poe

No, it's not.

Jack Zipes

Like I said, basically I think it's a, you could say it's a bildungsroman—

Marshall Poe

Yeah, we'll talk about that in a second, yeah.

Jack Zipes

Yeah.

Marshall Poe

Well, I can just jump in right there. It is a little bit like a bildungsroman, but it's a really rough bildungsroman. I mean, it is not pleasant growing up as Bambi.

Jack Zipes

Right. That's why this novel was so important because Salten does show how children, okay, have a rough—and putting the children from, you know, who were Jews or children from a minority group—have a hugely difficult time in their lives, in a forest or wherever they are. The forest, can stand for a city as well. And this is, you know, typical of some of the great bildungsromane in Germany. I think that, in one sense, I won't call it a great bildungsroman, but it definitely is one of the significant bildungsromane in Austrian German literature. It's written extremely well and clear, so articulate that children or young people would have no difficulty recognizing what a difficult time poor Bambi had, and that he ends just by himself. He's become like the father, so-called father that he had. A man who has really understood what life is about and how difficult life is.

Marshall Poe

And Bambi internalizes, really, the lessons from the very first moments of the novel and especially when his mother is killed. And that is what life is about: watchfulness.

Jack Zipes

Yes, that's it.

Marshall Poe

You just have to watch out all the time, and Bambi says yeah, this is what you have to do. This is your life.

Jack Zipes

Yeah. And there's that horrible episode with his cousin being captured, you know, by the hunters. And then later let go, and he believes that his masters, his former masters, are wonderful people, and of course, he gets shot.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's a sober story is what it is, not like the Disney film. The Disney film is not a sober story.

Jack Zipes

Yeah, great way to call it: a sober story.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, it really is. So, let's talk a little bit about some of the—I found it bizarre that Whittaker Chambers translated it. Do you know why Whitaker—I mean, what made him think this would be good for the—why?

Jack Zipes

I have no idea. I did a little research on him, and basically he had, in the 20s, translated some other, was an apprentice of some kind in publishing houses, in New York and that it spent some time in Europe. But I really have not done as much research as I should have done on him, but I don't want me to make him the focus of—

Marshall Poe

Right, of course not. I just found it so strange to see. I mean, I was reading through the book and there's Whittaker Chambers' name, like, wow how did that get there. You just don't expect to see Whittaker Chambers in a book like this, but there he is.

Jack Zipes

Yeah, there are ironies of—I don't know how he came across, you know, the Bambi German. He did spend some time in Germany, but not a lot. Not a lot to really—he did very good job. It's not a terrible translation, but it is faulty.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, well, you know, you do the best you can. And you know, the fact that he did it at all is something that I will file away in my mental index card of just bizarre facts about Whittaker Chambers. Um, so in the making of the movie itself, Salten had nothing to do at all. I mean, he just sold the script and that was it.

Jack Zipes

Right.

Marshall Poe

And then it was Americanized.

Jack Zipes

Right. He had no idea—I don't even know whether he had any idea that the novel was, you know, even being made. Disney was very occupied in 1937, when the Seven Dwarfs came out. So, that was his first major animated film. And evidently, Disney was charmed by the translation and Sidney Franklin, and so, then he turned, at 39, he began working on—or assigned, artists began giving him drafts of how they would interpret this novel. He was somewhat of a, I wouldn't say animal rights person. Some people have written about Bambi as animal rights, but there's nothing show that this novel is an animal rights novel.

Marshall Poe

No, there isn't anything in it like that. That's why when I read that it was an environmental novel, I was like I don't get that at all. I get the bildungsroman part, and I get the kind of School of Hard Knocks part.

Jack Zipes

Yes

Marshall Poe

And there's a long tradition of that.

Jack Zipes

Yes.

Marshall Poe

But not the environmental part. Now, I was interested to read that the book was, if I remember correctly, banned by the Nazis.

Jack Zipes

Yes.

Marshall Poe

Why?

Jack Zipes

He was Jewish, they knew he was Jewish. They had the big book burning in 1932. They had several big book burnings—I think it was in '33, as soon as Hitler assumed power. Stores were stoned and windows broken. Books, also—any author who was Jewish, the books were piled up and burned in various towns in Germany and later Austria.

Marshall Poe

Which is just bizarre because by this time, you know, it had been a very popular well selling novel in Germany, and it was probably beloved by lots of Germans. And it was, let me just make this clear, it was not thought of as children's literature at the time there.

Jack Zipes

No, not at all.

Marshall Poe

Not the way we think about it in any way. This is not for kids. It's funny because my 14-year-old daughter just said she read *Animal Farm*, and I'm like really? You read *Animal Farm*? That's not for 14-year-olds. That's amazing, like I really thought this is not for kids, why are you reading this?

Jack Zipes

Yeah, right.

Marshall Poe

So, it's been lovely talking to you about the book. We have a traditional final question on the New Books Network, and that is, what are you working on now?

Jack Zipes

I'm working on quite a few things. As I said at the beginning, I founded my own publishing house about two years ago, and I've already published about five books that are similar, in a sense, to *Bambi* in that they're really not for children. They're really for children and for adults. And these are books mainly from the interwar years that I'm republishing, and they deal—for instance, one of the books is called *Yussuf the Ostrich* by Emery Kelen. Who, by the way, is a Hungarian Jew who fled the Nazis, came to America, and is one of the great artists, or actually he did political characterizations that were world renowned. He wrote a couple of novels that deal with fascism, and I've published one called, *Keedle*, or *All You've Ever Wanted to Know about Fascism*.

I'm working now with Ralph Bronte, a great surrealist artist who did illustrations for several books, fairy tales, in the 1940s. That book should come out next year. And I'm also doing a whole series of books by a woman by the name of Roma Wilson, who did three collections, sort of like Andrew Lang, in 1929 to 1930. One called *Red Magic, Silver Magic, and Green Magic*, filled with amazing tales. So, all of these are in the works right now, and I'm hoping that these books that I just mentioned will be out by June. And as I said, I've already done about four or five books. Like one is called *The Magic Herb*, another is called *Teddy the Refugee Mouse*. It's a wonderful story about a mouse who, during the bombing in London in the 1940s, his family—he lives in London very happily and gets a lot of cheese and things there—but the family decides to move away from the bombing, go to the country. So, he jumps in and has to sort of, he's a refugee. He's sort of like an immigrant who has to make a place for himself in the country. So, all of these books have a, I would say, a political, let us say,

signification. And that's what I'm doing now, happily editing. And then with Princeton, I'm publishing a book of my essays, which will come out in the fall, I hope, fall of 2022.

Marshall Poe

Well, you'll have to come back and talk to us about that.

Jack Zipes

I'd love to do that.

Marshall Poe

Great. Well, Jack it's really been lovely, talking to you about this book, and thank you very much for being on the show.

Jack Zipes

Right, thank you very much for inviting me.