

The Survival of the Unfit

Wai Chee Dimock

*Is there room for weaklings in Darwin's theory of evolution? The "survival of the fittest" – that muscular phrase taken from Herbert Spencer – would seem to suggest not. A more nuanced and counterintuitive picture emerges, however, when fitness is remapped: as a form of mutuality between the human and the nonhuman, rather than an exclusively human attribute vested in a single individual. I explore that possibility in the contemporary novel, a genre evolving steadily away from its Victorian antecedent, and circling back to the epic to reclaim an elemental realism, alert to the reparative as well as destructive forces of the nonhuman world. In Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* and Richard Powers's *The Overstory*, these non-human forces turn the novel into a shelter for disabled characters, granting them a testing ground and a future all the more vital for being uncertain.*

In the fifth (1869) edition of *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin added a subtitle, "The Survival of the Fittest," to his pivotal Chapter 4, "Natural Selection." Taken from Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Biology* (1864), this muscular phrase gives the impression that evolution is also a muscular reflex, a straight path from effortless strength to effortless victory. Featuring sure winners chasing superlatives, there is no surprise in its outcome. Those who are the fittest – most equipped to survive – survive.

It is a ringing tautology, but there would have been no need for *Origin* if things were that simple. Complications arise right away, for evolution does not seem to be a straight path for anyone, not even those who win out. Survival is chancy, circuitous, the effect of complex adaptation, and by no means guaranteed. It does not seem to be an autonomous process, and it is never without its ugly twin. Darwin insists there can be no survivals without a matching number of extinctions, a volatile endgame making evolution not the self-evident triumph of those destined to come out on top, but endlessly fluctuating, with winners and losers continually recalibrated, their fates tangled up to the end.

That tangled fate is clearly at play in a section of Chapter 4 titled "Extinction Caused by Natural Selection." Here Darwin says: "as new forms are produced, unless we admit that specific forms can go on indefinitely increasing in number, many old forms must become extinct."¹ Extinction is a correlated development, the system-wide housekeeping done by a planet with finite resources. It is integral

to the workings of any ecosystem, indeed the only thing we can count on. Darwin returns to it, with great eloquence, in the penultimate paragraph of *On the Origin of Species*:

Judging from the past, we may safely infer that not one living species will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity. And of the species now living very few will transmit progeny of any kind to a far distant futurity; for the manner in which all organic beings are grouped, show that the greater number of species in each genus, and all species in many genera, have left no descendants, but have become utterly extinct.²

In this and scores of other similarly haunting passages, Darwin depicts the future as a closed door to most of Earth's inhabitants. He could not have known about the mass extinctions of the twenty-first century, but he would have been unsurprised – if also horrified – by the May 2019 UN report predicting that one million species will go extinct within the next decades.³ Writing before the impact of human behavior on the climate was understood, Darwin seems nonetheless to have anticipated its stark reality. So he is with us again today, speaking with eerie prescience not of the fossil records from the distant past, but the daily headlines from our immediate present. Still, things are not altogether hopeless. What Darwin says, after all, is that “not one living species will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity.” *Unaltered likeness*, it seems, is the problem. It is going nowhere. For those that manage to evolve and adapt, a path to the future is not out of the question.

What might this stern but sometimes forgiving prophet have to tell us about the fate of the novel, looking ahead to a century of great turmoil, with outsized unknowns greeting us at every turn? Literary scholars Gillian Beer and George Levine have alerted us to the many overlaps between Darwinian evolution and narrative fiction.⁴ Adam Gopnik points out that this naturalist writes like a novelist, raising the possibility that literary observations about humans might have something in common with scientific observations about the nonhuman world.⁵ I will be exploring the contemporary novel through this lens, drawing especially on Darwin's insight that survivals and extinctions are correlated and continually evolving, system-wide events with cascading effects. These cascading effects cast an interesting light on the past and future forms of the novel as it takes note of the fate of adjacent forms and adapts accordingly, with not always predictable outcomes.

In an unintentionally prescient moment in *Origin*, Darwin writes: in “the case of a country undergoing some slight physical change, for instance, of climate, some species will probably become extinct” right away. But “from what we have seen of the intimate and complex manner in which” all life is “bound together,” we may predict that “any change in the numerical proportions of the in-

habitants, independently of the change of climate itself, would seriously affect the others.”⁶

Darwin is speaking, of course, only of biological species. However, biology for him is also a conceptual template, a way to think about evolving forms. Languages, for instance, are much like biological species in their nested classifications, their correlated flourishing and decline, as he takes pains to emphasize in *The Descent of Man* (1871):

Languages, like organic beings, can be classed in groups under groups, and they can be classed either naturally by descent, or artificially by other characters. Dominant languages and dialects spread widely, and lead to the gradual extinction of other tongues. A language, like a species, once extinct, never, as Sir. C. Lyell remarks, reappears. The same language never has two birth-places.⁷

So far, a strict zero-sum game is in play in both the biological and linguistic realms. Yet, while the extinction of languages is well-known and well-documented, the extinction (or not) of other classes of linguistic objects – for instance, the “artificial” class called the novel, or the epic – is not so clear-cut. How fixed and long-lasting are these genres? Are they here for good, or are they mutable, ephemeral? And is there a built-in end date to these narrative forms, making extinction inevitable at some point? By his own example, Darwin seems to suggest that there is considerable fluidity here, evidenced by the low-probability survival of certain linguistic objects that, on the face of it, might not seem the fittest.

Darwin’s own “Abstract” (his name for *On the Origin of Species*) is an example of such a low-probability survivor. He had not meant to publish it in this guise. But as the full treatise “will take me many more years to complete,” and as “my health is far from strong,” he had been urged by geologist Charles Lyell and botanist Joseph Hooker to get it out even in an “imperfect” form, especially since another naturalist, Alfred Russel Wallace, “who is now studying the natural history of the Malay archipelago, has arrived at almost exactly the same general conclusions that I have on the origin of species.”⁸

Published under duress, the resulting volume is hardly optimized for survival. Fortunately, unlike languages that go extinct thanks to a strict zero-sum game, his own linguistic creation seems subject to a different calculus. Darwin is not without hope that it would have a future, though arrived at through a peculiar process: “I can here give only the general conclusions at which I have arrived, with a few facts in illustration, but which, I hope, in most cases will suffice. No one can feel more sensible than I do of the necessity of hereafter publishing in detail all the facts, with references, on which my conclusions have been grounded; and I hope in a future work to do this.”⁹

The existing weakness of *Origin* turns out to justify its bid for a future. Rushed into print by the actions of others – including the unwelcome but crucial input of

Wallace – it adapts by claiming time as a medium of remediation. Not entirely fit at the moment, it promises to do better the next time around. Second try is an evolutionary necessity. Variants are a must, since the only way *Origin* could survive is as a long-term project, a work-in-progress kept afloat by future editions, with gaps to be filled, new information to be added, and shaky points to be shored up. The survivors here do not have to be the fittest, for the unfit, with ongoing help, can sometimes beat the odds and gain traction over time. Such assisted outcomes turn the zero-sum game into a statistical unknown, with the future anyone's guess.

It is this statistical unknown that I would like to bring to bear on Mikhail Bakhtin's account of the rise of the novel, a zero-sum game correlated with the demise of the epic. We come upon the epic "when it's already completely finished, a congealed and half-moribund genre," Bakhtin says. Because "it is walled off from all subsequent times, the epic past is absolute and complete. It is as closed as a circle. Inside it everything is finished, already over. There is no place in the epic world for any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy. There are no glimpses in it through which we glimpse the future."¹⁰

Fans of "epic" science-fiction novels, movies, TV shows, and video games would have no idea what Bakhtin is talking about. This supposedly extinct genre is not behaving like one. Morphing from noun to adjective, it is everywhere, showing up on every platform and in every shape and size, a variant-rich survivor with a future stretching far into the distance. Taken apart and repurposed in countless ways, it is versatile and tenacious, responsive to crises thanks to its continual updating. At once the most ancient and most recent, it is able to offer glimpses of monstrous futures, elided or censored in other genres but given an airing here, as befits an old-timer schooled by nonhuman catastrophes from the first.

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Amitav Ghosh pays tribute to the "awareness of nonhuman agency" in ancient epics, even as he takes a swipe at what he imagines to be the dominant form of the contemporary novel.¹¹ According to him, elemental forces and off-scale events have no place in this hidebound genre, an absence especially noticeable in the "serious fiction" featured in *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New York Review of Books*. Unchanged since Victorian times, these literary dinosaurs continue to assert the stability of the human world even when that stability is no longer tenable, banning anything cataclysmic:

To introduce such happenings into a novel is in fact to court eviction from the mansion in which serious fiction has long been in residence; it is to risk banishment to the humbler dwellings that surround the manor house – those generic outhouses that were once known by names such as the gothic, the romance or the melodrama, and have now come to be called fantasy, horror, and science fiction.¹²

Like Bakhtin, Ghosh seems to be describing an object deliberately ossified for the sake of argument. This disaster-averse form of the novel has ceased to be the dominant form some time ago, as writers as different as Norman Mailer, Toni Morrison, and Don DeLillo could have attested. More recently, the novels of Margaret Atwood, Ian McEwan, and Cormac McCarthy show just how far catastrophes have been integrated into our experience of the everyday: as a realism rendered epic by the Anthropocene, a realism of the nonhuman returning with a vengeance as the superhuman.

In a recent interview with David Wallace-Wells, author of *The Uninhabitable Earth*, Ghosh conceded that “the ground had shifted,” that the hidebound novel was finally changing, citing Richard Powers’s *The Overstory* (2018) as a “major turning point – not just because it is a great book, which it is, but because it was taken seriously by the literary mainstream.”¹³ The house of fiction is a different house when a novel about trees can win the Pulitzer Prize. Lest we forget the bad old days, Ghosh offered Barbara Kingsolver as a cautionary tale, an author whose reputation had suffered because her nonhuman subjects – say, monarch butterflies in *Flight Behavior* – had always been dismissed as a fringe concern.

Kingsolver herself, in her *New York Times* review of *The Overstory*, seems to echo this point. Titled “The Heroes of This Novel Are Centuries Old and 300 Feet Tall,” the review begins with a taunt to the reader:

Trees do most of the things you do, just more slowly. They compete for their livelihoods and take care of their families, sometimes making huge sacrifices for their children. They breathe, eat and have sex. They give gifts, communicate, learn, remember and record the important events of their lives. With relatives and non-kin alike they cooperate, forming neighborhood watch committees. . . . Some of this might take centuries, but for a creature with a life span of hundreds or thousands of years, time must surely have a different feel about it.¹⁴

All interesting to Kingsolver herself, but not necessarily to the general public. “People will only read stories about people,” she observes. Knowing this all too well, Powers has come up with a “delightfully choreographed, ultimately breathtaking hoodwink,” fooling us into thinking that the novel is about humans, when it is gradually revealed that these are just the “shrubby understory.” In time, these shrubby characters will become ecoterrorists, tree defenders, necessary to the fleshing out of the plot, but the animating core of the novel belongs to the trees towering above them. It is these trees that give the novel its experimental form, a web of connectivity initially unemphatic but eventually inexorable, making it possible for Powers to tell a converging tale about a cast of mostly strangers.

Powers is the “winner of a genius grant,” Kingsolver reminds us, known for his brainy creations. Given that he has “swept the literary-prize Olympics, he should be a household name, but isn’t quite. Critics have sometimes blamed a certain

bleakness of outlook, or a deficit of warmth in his characters.” It is an odd moment in the review, a sly jab at an author she otherwise admires. Powers is not quite a household name when the standard is set by Kingsolver herself, whose books since 1993 have all been *New York Times* bestsellers. And that 1993 novel that set her on this path, *The Poisonwood Bible* – an Oprah’s Book Club selection and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize – in fact has more than a little in common with *The Overstory*. From the tree-centric title to the cast of characters revolving around it, this novel, written at the end of the last century, has already decided that business as usual would not do, that a new literary form is needed to tell a different story about the world: who inhabits it, what disasters look like, and what it takes to keep going.

The poisonwood makes its appearance almost as soon as the novel begins. The year was 1959. Nathan Price, Baptist missionary newly arrived in the Belgian Congo with his wife and four daughters, is alerted by Mama Tataba, his housekeeper: “‘That one, brother, he bite,’ she said, pointing her knuckly hand at a small tree he was wresting from his garden plot.”¹⁵ And sure enough, when Nathan wakes up the next morning, his arms and hands are covered with rashes. “Even his good right eye was swollen shut, from where he’d wiped his brow. Yellow pus ran like sap from his welted flesh.” As his daughter Leah observes, “Among all of Africa’s mysteries, here were the few that revealed themselves in no time flat.”¹⁶

Initiation into the mysteries of Africa begins with bodily mortification. On this continent, the nonhuman bites. It has no trouble fighting back when an intruder tries to impose his will on a native habitat. With pus running down his good right eye, Nathan has been taught a lesson in local knowledge, one that also teaches him something about himself. Shining a light on his preexisting condition (his left eye was injured in the war), it reveals just how invisible many disabilities are, how less than fully intact many functional humans prove to be. His appearance as well as his vision now compromised, Nathan looks not unlike Mama Tataba, who has a “blind eye. It looked like an egg whose yolk had been broken and stirred just once.”¹⁷

The deformity is hard to miss, but nobody pays it any mind around here, for in this community as in many others in Africa, “they’ve all got their own handicap children or a mama with no feet.” Another neighbor, Mama Mwanza, was even more seriously disfigured when her house burned down. Her “legs didn’t burn all the way off but it looks like a pillow or just something down there wrapped up in a cloth sack. She has to scoot around on her hands.” Not having the use of her legs, however, is not necessarily disabling. She carries all her laundry in a big basket on her head, and “when she scoots down the road, not a one of them of them falls out. All the other ladies have big baskets on their heads too, so nobody stares at Mama Mwanza one way or another.”¹⁸

Is “disability” even the right word here? Mama Mwanza is able-bodied, though not by a standard yardstick. Literary scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson

refers to these nonstandard characters as “extraordinary bodies.”¹⁹ In her fire-ravaged form as in her off-the-charts performance, Mama Mwanza is far outside the bounds of normalcy. She would have been stared at anywhere else but not here, a fact hugely gratifying to Adah Price, no standard character herself:

My right side drags. I was born with half my brain dried up like a prune, deprived of blood by an unfortunate fetal mishap . . . we were inside the womb together dum-de-dum when Leah suddenly turned and declared, Adah, you are just too slow. I am taking all the nourishment here and going on ahead. She grew strong and I grew weak. (Yes, Jesus loves me!) And so it came to pass, in the Eden of our mother’s womb, I was cannibalized by my sister.²⁰

Disability is not an African problem, symptomatic of a backward continent. It is everywhere, back home in Georgia, inside the Eden of the womb, shorthand for a kind of congenital imbalance plaguing the world, a root inequity with no obvious solution. Pieties such as “Jesus loves me!” can only be a sick joke here, for this Eden is Hobbesian rather than Christian, a state of nature in which life is “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.”²¹ Here humans will cannibalize one another, showing that we are matter after all, edible morsels that can be gobbled up. Bodily harm is simply something that happens, as it happens to other embodied creatures, a random and not infrequent fact of life. Our vulnerability speaks to our kinship with the nonhuman world.

That certainly seems to be the case with Adah. But it is not the whole story either, for as we have seen, the nonhuman world, vulnerable as it is, is not altogether helpless, not without means of self-affirmation. So too with Adah. Her disabled right side has not stopped her from quoting poetry (Emily Dickinson and William Carlos Williams are her favorites) or learning the Kikongo tongue. It is she, knowing that tongue, who gives us an inside view of what happens to Christianity when, like Nathan, it too comes into contact with the poisonwood tree, in this case, linguistic contact: “‘Tata Jesus is Bangala!’ declares the Reverend every Sunday at the end of his sermon,” Adah reports, and she adds: “*Bangala* means something precious and dear. But the way he pronounces it, it means the poisonwood tree. Praise the Lord, Hallelujah, my friends! For Jesus will make you itch like nobody’s business.”²²

It is not for nothing that the novel is titled *The Poisonwood Bible*, for the scripture being disseminated here is indeed a sharply local variant, touched by the Kikongo tongue and the vengeful tree that bears its signature. This is a bible founded not on a special dispensation for humans, but the impartial matter-of-factness of elemental forces, giving Homo sapiens no special status, treating our physical bodies as just that, physical bodies. What Kingsolver is offering here is not a novel speaking to one particular catastrophe, but rather the generalized coordinates of a newly chastised realism, no longer insulated or human-centric, and not looking

away from any unthinkable future it might bring. This elemental realism will have tremendous consequences for how twenty-first-century disasters are perceived and responded to.

The power of this new realism is fully on display in the novel's climactic scene, featuring the African equivalent of "the Hand of God," the arrival of the flesh-eating *nsongonya*, the army ants. These ants feel like "burning liquid that had flooded our house . . . that had flooded the world," Leah says. "Every surface was covered and boiling," like "black flowing lava in the moonlight." Adah, so often aligned with the nonhuman world, is trapped for once in her inadequate humanness. *Help me*. This cry of desperation sums her up and holds her prisoner. Endlessly playful and expansive on other occasions, she is reduced to just these two words now, unadorned and involuntary. They come out of her mouth almost to spite her, for they will be in vain. Her mother, already carrying her younger sister, Ruth May, will ignore these words. "She studied me for a moment, weighing my life. Then nodded, shifted the load in her arms, turned away."²³

Adah goes under almost instantly and is trampled upon, but regains her wits at just this moment, getting from anonymous strangers the help she fails to get from her own mother, a means of locomotion that propels her forward:

I found my way to my elbows and raised myself up, grabbing with my strong left hand at legs that dragged me forward. Ants on my earlobes, my tongue, my eyelids. I heard myself crying out loud – such a strange noise, as if it came from my hair and fingernails, and again and again I came up. Once I looked for my mother and saw her, far ahead. I followed, bent on my own rhythm. Curved into the permanent song of my body: *left . . . behind*.

I did not know who it was that lifted me over the crowd and set me down into the canoe with my mother. I had to turn quickly to see him as he retreated. It was Anatole. We crossed the river together, mother and daughter, facing each other, low in the boat's quiet center. She tried to hold my hands but could not. For the breath of a river we stared without speaking.²⁴

In that unworded and unforgiving stare between mother and daughter, Kingsolver translates her new realism into terms no one can fail to understand. Proud monuments of civilization – the human language, for instance, or the human family – can look very different when tested by catastrophes. They are less than what we think. Kingsolver is not waving any flags here, not even going out on a limb. Still, it is the case that one of the best known topoi of the epic genre – Aeneas fleeing Troy with his father Anchises on his back and his son Ascanius by his side – is being turned upside down to yield a modern variant, a novel grappling with large-scale calamities like the epic, but doing so on a new terrain and yielding almost the opposite outcome.

In the *Aeneid*, it is the iconic trio of Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius that saves the day.

This beacon of hope, shining through the convulsions of a sacked city, speaks to the integrity of the family and the sanctity of the civilized tongue: “Then come, dear father. Arms around my neck: / I’ll take you on my shoulders, no great weight. / Whatever happens, both will face one danger, / Find one safety. Iulus will come with me / My wife at a good interval behind.”²⁵ Anchises’s bodily frailty is not a problem here. If anything, it is that frailty that anchors this timeless tableau, this charmed circle of filial piety and generational continuity.

The only thing that mars it is Aeneas’s inexplicable decision to have his wife, Creusa, follow at a distance. Not surprisingly, she soon gets separated and is never seen or heard from again:

Creusa, taken away from us by grim fate, did she / Linger, or stray, or sink in weariness? / There is no telling. Never would she be / Restored to us. Never did I look back / Or think to look for her, lost as she was, / Until we reached the funeral mound and shrine / Of venerable Ceres. Here at last / All came together, but she was not there; / She alone failed her friends, her child, her husband.²⁶

In Aeneas’s telling, it is Creusa’s fault that there is now this gaping hole within the family. Still, even he admits he never once looked back to make sure she was keeping up. Even more tellingly, when he goes down to the underworld, in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, the entire episode is dominated by his meeting with Anchises and the latter’s prophesy about the future glories of Rome. There is no mention of Creusa, no attempt to find her and hear from her lips what happened that fateful night.

There is a flinty core to epic, unyielding and untender. This is a pre-Christian genre, after all; salvation is not part of the script, not a legitimate hope with theological backing. Humans here are mortals and never more than mortals, finite through and through, distinct from nonhumans only for a brief spell of time. The unceremonious dispatch of Creusa, like the unforgiving slaying of Turnus at the end of the *Aeneid*, or the indiscriminate massacre of the suitors at the end of the *Odyssey*, is simply the intensified form of a finitude that will sooner or later overtake all humans. Epic realism is without illusion from the first about who we are, how we die, and how we are forgotten. This realism Kingsolver takes to heart. For her, though, human finitude is not necessarily fatal, for it is above all a form of life, clear-eyed about what it can and cannot do, pivoted on limits and energized by limits, not a lack but a need-based perseverance, a form of life daily lived by the disabled.

Adah is exemplary for that reason. Her ordeal might not be a minority report after all, but a general portrait of humanity. Being overwhelmed is nothing special in a century of floods and wildfires and pandemics. Cognitive disabilities unite us as calamities spiral beyond our control. A planet-wide need for help puts all of

us on the same footing. But then again, needing help does not have to mean helplessness either. Adah is once again exemplary here: she might not be able to move fast on her own, but her quick-thinking brain and her “strong left hand” turn the heels of others into an effective means of locomotion. Disability here goes hand in hand with an ability to use help in whatever form it comes, an inventiveness crucial to the survival of the unfit, and to the novel itself as it looks ahead to a future in which characters like Adah are probably closer to reality than characters living unhandicapped and unimpaired lives.

Some such thought seems to have been percolating in the Richard Powers corpus for the past twenty-five years. From *Galatea 2.2* (1995) to *The Echo Maker* (2006), disabled characters have always had a nontrivial presence in his fiction. *The Overstory* outdoes all of them. Best known as a novel about trees, it is more remarkable still in its cast of nonstandard characters, each disabled in a unique way. Patricia Westerford, eventually the celebrated author of *The Secret Forest*, was a “thing only borderline human” as a little girl, born with a “deformation of the inner ear” that makes her face “sloped and ursine,” and her speech a “slurry hard for the uninitiated to comprehend.”²⁷ Douglas Pavlicek, ejected from an exploding plane, his tibia shattered by a misfiring sidearm, and saved from death only by a gigantic banyan, ends up with “one and a half good legs.” And Ray Brinkman, once an articulate property lawyer, can only speak “one syllable at a time,” each syllable “mangled and worthless,” after a stroke.²⁸

Among these, none is more striking than Neelay Mehta. Falling from an oak tree when he was eleven, Neelay will henceforth be “fused to his wheelchair,” his legs “shriveled to thick twigs.” While remaining conscious for a minute after the fall, though, he has a chance to see the tree as it is rarely seen:

stacks of spreading metropolis, networks of conjoined cells pulsing with energy and liquid sun, water rising through long thin reeds, rings of them banded together into pipes that draw dissolved minerals up through the narrowing tunnels of transparent twig and out through their waving tips, while sun-made sustenance drops down in tunes just inside them. A colossal, rising, reaching, stretching space elevator of a billion independent parts, shuttering the air into the sky and storing the sky deep underground, sorting possibility from out of nothing; the most perfect piece of self-writing code that his eyes could hope to see. Then his eyes close in shock and Neelay shuts down.²⁹

Nothing can be further apart from the boiling lava of the *nsongonya*. This pulsing, swaying, photosynthesizing apparition, a miracle of sky, sun, and earth, is nature as we would like to imagine it. Yet the damage done to Neelay is tenfold greater than the damage done to Adah by the ants, even though the tree does not set out to cripple and maim. It is just an oak tree observing the law of gravity, enacting the consequences of its own height. From *The Poisonwood Bible* to *The Overstory*, the

nonhuman world has evolved still further. It is on its own now, a primary reality, densely and superabundantly inhabited, and no more solicitous of humans than nonhumans. Epic realism here is the realism of elemental forces, impartial in their power to nourish and their power to destroy.

For Neelay, the run-in with these forces is life-changing, and not necessarily for the worse. Sure, he looks helpless, but his disability, like Adah's, has turned him into something almost like a force of nature, with not a little in common with the nonhuman world. At the novel's end, his mind is once again on fire, his "heart is beating too hard for what little meat is left on his skeleton, and his vision pulses" as he thinks of the next installment of the game that already has millions and millions on the planet hooked. An even more memorable scene, though, is probably an earlier one, the epic undertaking of lifting himself from his bed into his wheelchair. This requires, first, grabbing the overhead bar, "reaching out to one of the many hanging hooks filled with gear," snagging "the U-shaped canvas sling and, in a hundred small increments," spreading "it out in the bed around his body's upright stem." Next,

He stabs out again and spears the head of the winch, drags it across its horizontal brace beam until it's positioned directly above. All four sling loops go over the winch's latches, two per side. He pops the remote in his mouth and, holding the straps in place, bites down on the power button until the winch lifts him upright. He affixes the remote to the sling and detaches the catheter's urine sack from the side of the bed. Holding the hose in his teeth to free both hands, he attaches the bag to the satchel he has wrapped himself in. Then he presses the winch button again, holds on, and goes airborne.³⁰

Powers's description goes on for two pages. This spare-no-details account of Neelay and his wheelchair is not exactly fun to read. But it is a full-throated variant on Homer's full-throated account of Odysseus, "master shipwright," painstakingly building his ship in Book V of the *Odyssey*.³¹ That ship will take him to what he yearns for day and night: "my quiet Penelope," who, he tells Kalypso, "would seem a shade before your majesty, / death and old age being unknown to you / while she must die."³² For Odysseus as for Neelay, mortality is the beginning of life rather than its terminus. And for both, that beginning can have a future only if the nonhuman world is on board as friend and foe, a means of locomotion and a projectile into the unknown. Assisted survival is multiform and endlessly inventive. Darwin has already intuited it, but it is the twenty-first-century novel that will give it its fullest expression, claiming it as the still serviceable home of the unfit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wai Chee Dimock teaches at Yale University. Her new book *Weak Planet: Literature and Assisted Survival* (2020) has just been published by the University of Chicago Press.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species: By Means of Natural Selection of the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle of Life* (New York: Signet, 2003 [1859]), 326.
- ² *Ibid.*, 459.
- ³ Stephen Leahy, “One Million Species at Risk of Extinction, UN Report Warns,” *National Geographic*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/05/ipbes-un-biodiversity-report-warns-one-million-species-at-risk/>.
- ⁴ Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983); George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Adam Gopnik, “Rewriting Nature: Charles Darwin, Natural Novelist,” *The New Yorker*, October 23, 2006, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/10/23/rewriting-nature>.
- ⁵ Gopnik, “Rewriting Nature.”
- ⁶ Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, 90.
- ⁷ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2004 [1871]), 111.
- ⁸ Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, 27.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ¹⁰ M. M. Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 14, 16.
- ¹¹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 64. Other references to this edition will be included in the text.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 24.
- ¹³ David Wallace-Wells, “Amitav Ghosh: ‘We Are Living in a Reality that is Fundamentally Uncanny,’” *New York Magazine*, September 30, 2019, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/09/amitav-ghosh-on-our-failure-to-face-up-to-the-climate-crisis.html>.
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- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40–41, 40.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 52–53, 51, 52.

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- ²² Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*, 276.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 299, 306.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 306.
- ²⁵ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage, 1990), Book II, 921–925.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, Book II, 960–968.
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- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 88, 497.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 105, 103.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 496, 194.
- ³¹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1998), Book V, 243–270.
- ³² *Ibid.*, Book V, 225–229.