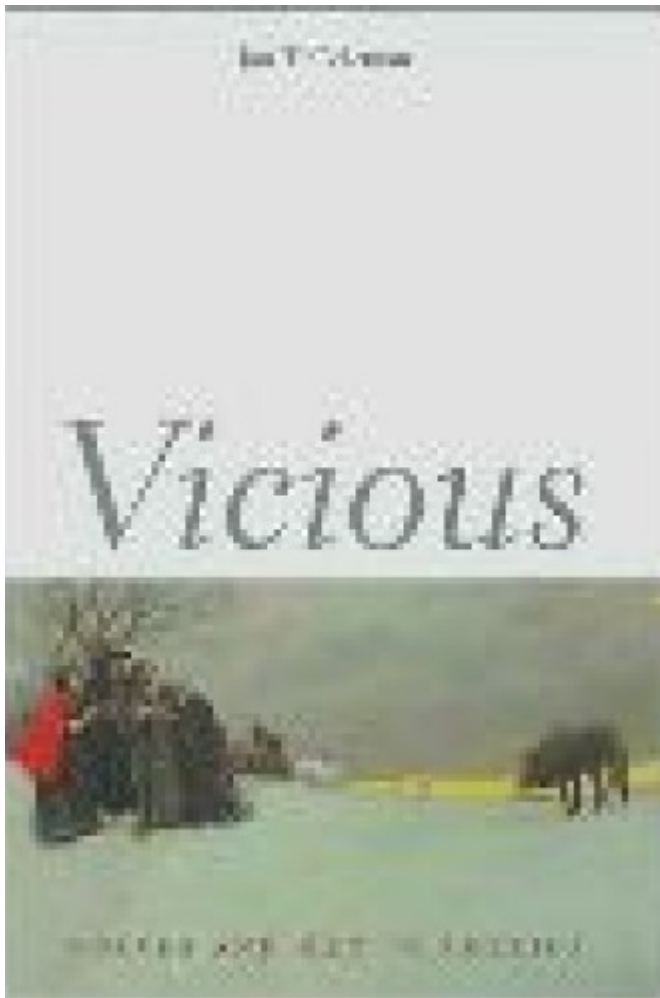# Wolf trap

By [Mark Ralls](#) in the [September 6, 2005](#) issue

In Review

Vicious: Wolves and Men in America

Jon T. Coleman
Yale University Press

When my wife and I returned home from vacation with a painting of a wolf, noble and forlorn in its expression, I had no idea how strange this purchase would have

seemed to our great-grandparents. As the preeminent symbol of disappearing wilderness, wolves inspire awe in my generation. Yet, as Notre Dame historian Jon Coleman reveals, it was not always this way.

Coleman chronicles the 300-year-old relationship between European Americans and their canid contemporaries. During most of this history Americans not only saw wolves as a menacing evil, but they exterminated them with sadistic passion. They engineered specially designed "wolf bullets" to ensure a slow, torturous death, and they concealed their mackerel hooks with balls of meat before leaving them near wolf dens for unsuspecting pups. When they captured wolves alive, they dragged them behind horses, set them on fire, or released them with their mouths and genitals wired shut.

Coleman deftly analyzes the complex cultural forces that led to such cruelty, though ultimately he is unable to answer the questions that ignited his curiosity: Why were humans unsatisfied with annihilation? Why did they insist on torture? "Why," he wonders, "was death not enough?"

Coleman's search for answers leads him to consider the power of narrative and ritual in shaping human assumptions. When European settlers arrived in the New World, they brought with them 1,000 years of accumulated wolf lore—stories, songs and legends about ravenous wolves and helpless maidens. American settlers adapted these tales to their new environment. One favorite adaptation was the popular bedtime story about the wolf and the wagon train. Laden with religious overtones, the story ends with the desperate mother appeasing a relentless wolf by throwing her baby into its salivating mouth—a sacrificial offering that saves the entire community.

Stories such as this were passed down through families despite the fact that there has not been a single documented case of a nonrabid wolf killing a human. "Why," Coleman asks, "did the colonists tell such outrageous lies about the danger wolves posed to them? Even more, why did they perpetrate these falsehoods on their sleepy grandchildren?"

As these stories came to be viewed as unquestioned reality, the wolf was codified in popular speech as a symbol of malevolence. People appropriated Jesus' imagery of wolves dressed in sheep's clothing. Teenage girls who surrendered their virginity were said to have "seen the wolf." Dangerous places were given names like Wolf-Pitt

Brook, Wolf Hole and Wolfe Trap Neck—the word *wolf* serving as a cautionary symbol for travelers. Certain misunderstandings about wolves were embedded in the American consciousness, fueling both fear and revulsion.

Euro-Americans dealt with these emotions through ritualized communal wolf killings. In the Great Hinkley Hunt of 1818 hundreds of residents of an Ohio village gathered on Christmas Eve to eradicate wolves from the nearby woods. Trapping seventeen wolves by a frozen creek bed, they attacked them with muskets, clubs and knives. After the killing, the villagers worked themselves into a frenzy, scalping the wolves and smearing the fat all over their own faces. Throughout the night, they danced around a huge bonfire. When the women and children joined them the next morning, "everyone enjoyed a 'jolly Christmas' in the shadow of the carcass pile."

Coleman contends that such events created the illusion of regeneration. Settlers assumed that establishing a civil society required acts of brutality. To conquer a savage wilderness, one must act savagely. Wolf narratives and rituals gave them permission to act as they felt they must. In their stories early Americans invented a vision of wolves as grave threats. Then through their communal wolf hunts, the natural order of human supremacy was restored. The wolf hunts, with their enthusiastic cruelty, were ritualized "expressions of revenge, anger and dominion" that brought order "to a rambunctious natural environment." According to Coleman, this explains how the human cruelty could endure even after the wolves were nearly extinct. "Americans embedded their hatred of wolves in stories, rituals and institutions built to withstand historical change."

While Coleman's analysis explains how a particular group of human beings reached astounding levels of cruelty, it does not tell why they did so. With this question, Coleman stumbles onto the problem of evil—an arena where historical-cultural analysis must finally throw up its hands in bewilderment. Historians can track how cruelty evolves, but they can never reveal its source. The originating impulse remains a mystery. Even God in the book of Genesis appears to be baffled by human evil. With the blood of Abel on the ground, God asks, "Cain, what have you done?" The message seems to be that the authors of such cruelty cannot be explained but only redeemed.

Throughout *Vicious*, it is possible to detect the tension between the human desire to explain and the fact that some things remain inexplicable. Coleman begins his book by confidently asserting that human cruelty can be analyzed because human beings

are "not intrinsically sinister." Yet his repeated litany of unanswered questions suggests a growing ambivalence. Near the end of the book he almost appears stumped. He begins making statements that would cause John Calvin to blush. Human beings, Coleman concludes, "may smile, hug, rescue kittens, . . . but people are vicious to the core. . . . Wolf killing confirms people's knack for generating pain and suffering."

By joining such honest wrestling with brilliant analysis, Coleman makes an unintended contribution to theological literature. His remarkable book reveals the limits of human rationality, its inability to penetrate a mystery as old as Genesis. Although his work will be catalogued as social history, it is also a remarkable breviary on the problem of evil.