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Bring 'em Back Alive: Two Popular Narratives of Wildlife Capture

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Abstract

In the mid-twentieth century, when the United States and Britain were building up their public zoos, they sent collectors to capture wild animals in the Global South. These collectors' narratives included both the thrill of the chase and the challenges facing animal caretakers, and became source material for popular books, television programs and films. American Frank Buck and Englishman Gerald Durrell achieved exceptional local and international success, first through their written memoirs of animal capture, later in visual media, and finally through the establishment of their own zoos. While both Buck and Durrell featured their personal relationships with animals, their individual narratives exemplified contrasts between British and American humor and wildlife programing styles, as well as reflecting shifting attitudes toward wild animal captivity before and after World War II. This essay

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analyzes what their capture narratives meant during their lifetimes, and how they continue to impact two different strains of popular representations of human-wildlife relations—the threat of violence and the desire for friendly kinship.

Key Words: zoos, wildlife films, nature broadcasting, Gerald Durrell, animal capture