

Tigers Above, Tigers Below is a book about extraordinary wisdom in ordinary places. Drawing on major themes from religion, philosophy and psychology, it transforms our everyday experiences into powerful lessons. The spiritual reward is a reconnection with humanity.

Tigers above, Tigers below: How to live in a chaotic world despite yourself

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TIGERS ABOVE, TIGERS BELOW

How to Live in a Chaotic World Despite Yourself

By

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	VII
VELVETEEN RABBITS	1
THE PINK PURSE	5
AT THE GAS PUMP.....	9
TIGERS ABOVE, TIGERS BELOW	13
ALL SHE NEEDED WAS RAIN.....	17
THE JOURNEY IS THE DESTINATION.....	21
THE LOST PATH	23
THE DESERT FATHERS	27
THE ETHICAL THIEF	31
ACCEPTANCE IS NOT DEFEAT	37
FIRST PRISON, FIRST LOVE	41
THE ROCK IN MY SHOE.....	43
CAUGHT YOU BEING GOOD.....	47
EVERYDAY DEATH	51
DOING NOTHING THE RIGHT WAY	53
FEAR AND TERROR	57
IDIOT COMPASSION	61
COOL LONELINESS.....	65
THE MOMENT BEFORE.....	69
HE SQUEEZED HIS PAW	73
YOU ARE IT AND THAT IS THAT	77
ENDNOTES.....	81
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	97
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....	99

VELVETEEN RABBITS

Ok, I admit it. I like children's books. One of my fond childhood experiences was reading *Charlotte's Web*. Its story of friendship, loss, and renewal continues to make it much loved by children of all ages. I also happen to like Dr. Seuss.¹ When I was little, I loved his books for their colorful pictures, whimsical creatures, and nonsensical rhymes. When I was older, I loved them for their moral and political commentary. I *knew* there was something about that guy.

Every once in a while I happen to discover, or re-discover, a story that is particularly poignant; one that is especially uplifting. Many stories today seem to lack the singular quality of timelessness. For all their dirty rooms, trips to the dentist, and troubles with chores, I doubt if the Berenstain Bears can be said to possess that special heirloom quality. With their focus on correct behavior and friendly cooperation they seem to fail to help our children find themselves. They seem somehow to fail to inspire.

When I recently discovered the turn of the century children's book *The Velveteen Rabbit* I wondered how far we have come in shaping the worlds of our children and if we have traveled in the right direction.² I wondered at the sad commentary that our books should serve as parental substitutes, filled with advice and role models like adolescent counseling sessions. Where did the imagination go? Where is the magic? Perhaps there is no room left.

The long title of the Velveteen Rabbit hints at its deeper meaning. In its full length it is *The Velveteen Rabbit or How Toys Become Real*. How *do* toys become real? How *do* we become real? The Velveteen Rabbit sought the advice of his

playroom companion the Skin Horse. The advice is as fitting for people as it is for toys.

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn't how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don't mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn't happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.”

TIGERS ABOVE, TIGERS BELOW

We should all be so fortunate as to have a friend as wise as the Skin Horse. Real isn't what we are, tall, thin, short, or fat, with handles, or without. It is not an outward quality. Like the mechanical toys in the nursery our complicated props are destined to fail. They break and leave us to sit idly on shelves in disrepair in lonely living rooms and lonelier nursing homes. No, real is an inward quality. It is a quality that cannot be bought or made. It is a quality that can only be created through experience.

But it takes a special type of experience. It is not a mountain to be climbed, river swam, or accolade awarded. It is the experience of a meaningful relationship. And, it takes a long time. Longer, the Skin Horse warns us, if you are fragile, offensive, or demanding. It happens when life has worn us out, when our hair is gone along with our waistlines. It happens when we become what we are inside.

Passionate love is the love of youth.³ It is the love of physical attraction, self-absorption, and impulse. It is the love of new toys. Companionate love is the love of old age. It is the love of affection, commitment, and attachment. Companionate love is the love of shabby toys with hair rubbed off and loose joints. It is the love of toys scooped off playroom floors and placed next to pillows and tightly held security blankets.

Sometimes we feel like the Velveteen Rabbit who, being made of sawdust, felt quite out of date. But, if we are fortunate, one day we realize that somehow our sawdust and patches do not matter. We realize that, somewhere or somehow, we have either loved or been loved, and that has made all the difference.

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