

## No Monkey Business: *The Evolution of Bruno Littlemore*

It's pretty hard for us Homo sapiens (Latin for 'wise' or 'knowing' man) not to be fascinated by the prospect of our pan troglodyte cousins acquiring human language. Some, such as budgie and parrot enthusiasts, have already witnessed their tetrapods speaking and blaspheming. Bruno's a little different: not only has he learned to mimic the sounds us humans make, he's developed the ability— so we're told — that sets us apart from all other sentient beings: the ability to look into the mirror and say "I". Just in case the greatest evolutionary leap to confront humanity wasn't enough, *Bruno* has interspecies sex, religious fundamentalism, forced abortion and murder.

Bruno is a resident at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago when he is taken to the University's Behavioural Biology Laboratory. Here, the department's primatologists attempt to teach him human language. He meets a young researcher called Lydia Littlemore. Soon Bruno moves into Lydia's apartment where they continue their research. One night, giving in to his animal urges, he rapes Lydia as she sleeps. She recovers from their human-chimp lovemaking and the two begin a covert relationship. Only under Lydia's tuition and with her love does Bruno leave his beastly silence behind: he speaks.

Lydia finds that she has two things evolving inside her: Bruno's child and an incurable brain tumour. Tal, a friend of Lydia's with whom she had a brief lesbian affair and whose finger Bruno has previously bitten off, moves in to care for Lydia. Bruno and Lydia's love affair becomes public knowledge and the religious fundamentalists make camp on their lawn. One day whilst Bruno and Tal are working at the primatology lab, someone breaks into the apartment and carries out a forced abortion on Lydia's foetus. Bruno is taken back into captivity but manages to escape and ends up in NYC. Here he meets Leon, a subway busker, and after becoming friends they set up a theatre company and hold a single performance of *The Tempest*. Returning once again to Chicago he finds that Lydia has died. In a fit of rage he goes back to the primatology department and finds the scientist Dr. Plumlee artificially inseminating one of Bruno's old chimp girlfriends (aided by a copy of *Hustler*). He kills him. Bruno is hunted down and incarcerated in a research centre. It is here that he dictates his memoirs to a lady called Gwen.

Bruno is expelled from his Edenic innocence and just like us fallen humans, he sins. He becomes self-realising (what could be worse!), addicted to alcohol, falls in love, makes friends, suffers grief and experiences death. Bruno strives to be a fully functioning human being, but soon realises that the hard work isn't achieving such an evolutionary leap, instead it's surviving the flux and fragility of human nature that's the real challenge. Data from *Star Trek* knew this, as did the puppet in Bruno's favourite film, *Pinocchio*. A very human characteristic that Bruno portrays is want. He not only wants to conquer human speech but also the human form. He is desperate for a human nose to cure his body dysmorphia, thinking it will help his assimilation into the human race. His nasal dreams come true when a backstreet surgeon agrees to operate on him.

What actually makes Bruno human isn't his ability to articulate by words, it is to experience human emotion. Bruno regards vanity to be one of the greatest human traits ('Vanity of vanities...all is vanity' that's the Bible, not Bruno). Bruno laments: '...I was disgusted with myself. Humans: I wanted to be one of them and I simultaneously hated myself for this dirty disgusting perverted desire.' And like a contestant on a makeover show: 'I hated my face. I hated my nose. I hated my fingers. I hated my toes. I hated my long arms. I hated my stubby, ridiculous legs. I hated my grotesque feet...' What could be more human than hating one's own humanity? Driven by self-consciousness, he shaves off what is left of his fur and then masturbates at his own image in the bathroom mirror.

Bruno recognises, as we all do, that the image in the mirror is both a gift and a curse.

*The Evolution of Bruno Littlemore* by Benjamin Hale is out now in paperback (Atlantic Books, £14.99)