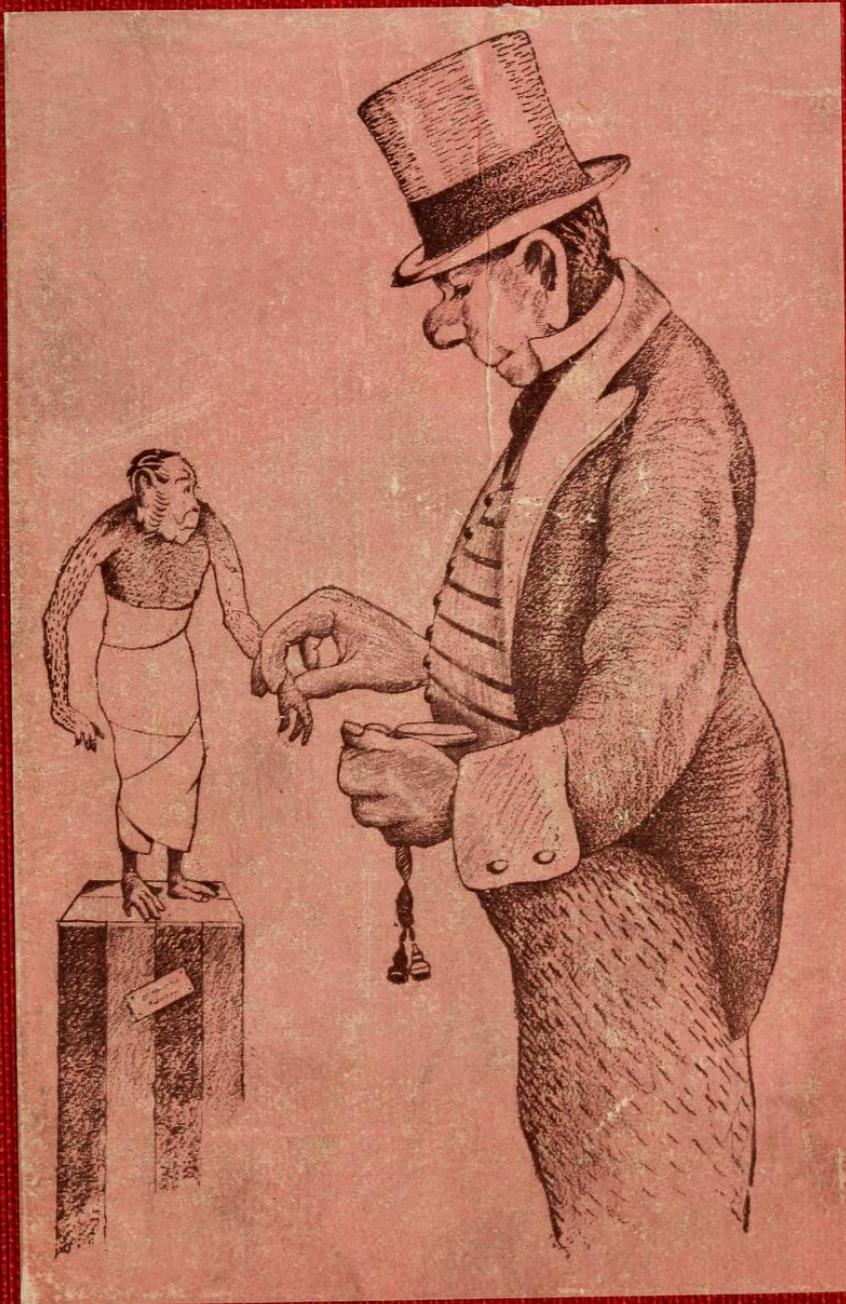


Doctor Dolittle

HUGH LOFTING



Lofting

K 199333/104



The story of Doctor Dolittle, being the history of his peculiar life at home and astonishing adventures in foreign parts

by Lofting, Hugh, 1886-1947

Publication date	1920
Publisher	New York : Frederick A. Stokes Company
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Reviews

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Reviewer: stbalbach - ★★★★★ - July 12, 2009

Subject: The Story of Doctor Dolittle

The Story of Doctor Dolittle (1920) is the first book in the Dolittle series and introduces the good Doctor and how he came to talk to the animals. It is shorter and aimed at a younger audience than the later books, but it has a great deal of Victorian charm and upbeat optimism that is infectious. There are about 12 books in the series, nine published between 1920 and 1933, the last 3 published posthumously in the 40s and 50s. *The Story* has gone through multiple editions over the years, later editions bowdlerized to remove racist content (see below); the copy on Internet Archive is the first edition (caution!)

Dolittle is an English gentleman who finds himself in the wrong occupation, a doctor of people, and gradually withdraws from society becoming a poor down and out town recluse. One day his English speaking pet parrot Polynesia lets him in on a secret that animals have a language of their own. Dolittle, now able to understand the complaints of animals, becomes a successful and world-renowned doctor of animals. Animal language is the

central device of the series - in an age when every Disney film features English speaking animals it seems almost normal, but Lofting makes it seem new and marvelous. Indeed, the animals don't speak English, but each species has its own "secret" language - which is not too far from reality with "horse whisperers" and "dolphin languages".

It's impossible to talk about this first edition without mentioning the racism towards black Africans - not only the obvious language problems (the "n" and "c" words), but attitudes of colonialism such as European racial superiority - it goes a long way to explain why the book is not as popular as it could be, and better known from the movie series (the books went out of print by the 1970s and underwent bowdlerization). As an adult well versed in post-colonialism I have no problem recognizing and removing myself from the influence of racism, and find it instructive on what institutionalized racism looks like and how it can manifest in children's books; in other words, the non-political correctness is refreshingly curious.

Dolittle is a social misfit who has mostly found friends through nature outside of human society. He has decoded the language of nature, a language that is right there in front of us all, if we only take the time and sympathy to understand it. And he applies his powers for good and not evil, as a healer of animals and a righter of wrongs. Of course science is also the language of nature and "doctors" are also scientists. The Enlightenment optimism that science will lead to good and solve mankind's problem finds expression through the good will and kindness of Dolittle. In this sense, it is the "best and brightest" of society that will bring about goodness, a view popular in the early and middle 20th century. Today we are more skeptical of such paternalism and look for positive change through "open society", Dolittle should not be the only keeper of the language, but teach everyone. Perhaps in later books this happens. I look forward to reading the second book, *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* (also on IA), which is longer and more mature, the basis for the film and winner of the Newberry Medal.

--Review by Stephen Balbach (C) cc-by-nd 01-2008 30

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