



# Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law

*Joseph R. Slaughter*

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In this timely study of the historical, ideological, and formal interdependencies of the novel and human rights, Joseph Slaughter demonstrates that the twentieth-century rise of world literature and international human rights law are related phenomena. Slaughter argues that international law shares with the modern novel a particular conception of the human individual. The Bildungsroman, the novel of coming of age, fills out this image, offering a conceptual vocabulary, a humanist social vision, and a narrative grammar for what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and early literary theorists both call the free and full development of the human personality. Revising our received understanding of the relationship between law and literature, Slaughter suggests that this narrative form has acted as a cultural surrogate for the weak executive authority of international law, naturalizing the assumptions and conditions that make human rights appear commonsensical. As a kind of novelistic correlative to human rights law, the Bildungsroman has thus been doing some of the sociocultural work of enforcement that the law cannot do for itself. This analysis of the cultural work of law and of the social work of literature challenges traditional Eurocentric histories of both international law and the dissemination of the novel. Taking his point of departure in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Slaughter focuses on recent postcolonial versions of the coming-of-age story to show how the promise of human rights becomes legible in narrative and how the novel and the law are complicit in contemporary projects of globalization: in colonialism, neoimperialism, humanitarianism, and the spread of multinational consumer capitalism. Slaughter raises important practical and ethical questions that we must confront in advocating for human rights and reading world literature—imperatives that, today more than ever, are intertwined.

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