

Companionship of Children and Animals

Amy Ratelle. 2015. *Animality and Children's Literature and Film*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 171 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-37316-8

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Amy Ratelle's book is one of the newest contributions to animal studies as a relatively recent field of the humanist study of animals, which has become one of the most intriguing areas of research in the posthumanities. In five chapters ("Animal Virtues, Values and Rights", "Contact Zones, Becoming and the Wild Animal Body", "Ethics and Edibility", "Science, Species and Subjectivity", "Performance and Personhood in *Free Willy* and *Dolphin Tale*"), framed by an introduction and a conclusion, the author deals with (transcending) boundaries between the human and non-human in a number of classical animal stories and films for children.

After a short introductory overview of the status of non-human beings in Western cultural thought, the first chapter studies 19th-century connections between the animal rights movement and the children's rights movement, which actually arose from the former. The author focuses on animal autobiographies written from the equine point of view, such as the anonymous *Memoirs of Dick, the Little Poney, Supposed to Be Written by Himself* (1799), Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877) and Enid Bagnold's *National Velvet* (1935), in order to show that such works did not simply educate the young into a culture of labour and suffering, but also encouraged them to question their parents' values and empathise with animals in order to reaffirm their humanity. The horse characters are depicted in a way that is meant to instil kindness and temperance towards animals in the child audience. Such a relationship based on sincere kindness, affection and mutual respect between species is very close to Donna Haraway's "companion species" model or the relationship of "significant otherness", independent from the superiority of the human and the forced subordination of the animal. Thus undermining traditional Western notions of human exceptionalism, the animal is allowed to exist not as an object of production, but as a sentient being whose most valued quality is his or her emotional reactivity. Therefore, the animal's services are based on the emotional sphere, rather than (only) physical labour, giving it at least partly a pet status and reinforcing the power of a companion bond. The genre of animal autobiography was pivotal in fostering fellow feeling for animals and an impetus for enacting many of the earliest laws against cruelty to animals and in developing a culture of animal sympathy: the animal's point of view compels the reader into a close emotional bond with the animal, as it relates the story of its difficult life.

Apart from literature, Ratelle also builds her arguments on the work of many contemporary researchers and scientists, such as Robert Dingley, Marian Scholtmeijer, Cary Wolfe, Donna Haraway, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and David Perkins. However, she also relies on sources from earlier times: the thoughts of René Descartes, or Jeremy Bentham's question within the context of 1780 philosophic debates: the critical issue is not whether animals can reason or talk, but whether they can suffer. This challenges the assertions from René Descartes' autobiographical and philosophical treatise *Discourse on the Method* (1637) that animals are merely automata incapable of feeling pain as humans do, i.e. they do not experience it as suffering. Early arguments for animal rights were largely

the result of a major re-thinking of the relationship between humans and other animals. The author mentions the 1822 Cruel and Improper Treatment of Cattle Act proposed by Richard Martin, a Member of Parliament, as the first animal rights legislation in history.

In the second chapter, the author turns her attention to wild animals who have received less sympathy and respect than domestic ones. Through the analysis of Jack London's works – *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1905), as well as their film adaptations – Ratelle perceives his effort to enter the subjectivity of the wild, rather than create animals with human minds and perceptions. Writing his novels as a reaction to Sewell's and Kipling's stories, London problematised categories of the wild and the civilized. Using the examples of his works, Ratelle demonstrates how assumptions regarding this distinction undermine the potential for cross-species identification and, relying on Donna Haraway's terms "natureculture" and "contact zones", explores human-animal relations in a way that no longer privileges the human.

The following chapter deals with texts such as E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1948) and the films *Babe* (1995) and *Chicken Run* (2000), which thematise animal consumption. The author accounts for the ethical implications of human relations to the so-called "meat animal" in what Derrida refers to as a "carnophallogocentric" paradigm. Nevertheless, in today's world of technological posthumanism, animals are also being used as experimental subjects. Thus, the main aim of the fourth chapter is to show how the animal experience in the laboratory context is dealt with in children's culture, specifically Robert C. O'Brien's novel, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* (1971), its filmic adaptation *The Secret of NIMH* (1982), and William Kotzwinkle's *Doctor Rat* (1976). Ratelle lucidly points out that – especially in the sense of animal experimentation in the name of science and medical advancement – the borders between humans and non-humans are permeable and unstable. The final chapter also addresses the issue of captivity, but this time by researching the affections and identification between children and marine mammals. Based on two films – *Free Willy* (1993) and *Dolphin Tale* (2011) – the analysis calls attention to the need for legal acknowledgement of the personhood of whales. The concept of non-human identity is explained against the background of overlaps between the real lives of animal actors and their film-life scenarios.

Through a skilful historical contextualisation of the studied material, Ratelle's book provides a series of interesting examples and re-examinations of the animal-human divide in literary and cinematic classics, showing that at its core is the issue of subjectivity, established in Western culture as an exclusively human notion. Posthumanist scholarship nevertheless successfully fights against cultural anthropocentrism and institutionalised speciesism used as an alibi for the exploitation or extermination of other species. In that sense, Ratelle's research is a valuable and insightful contribution to correcting the common scholarly mistake of reading the animal exclusively as a symbol of the human or merely as a didactic tool, thus ignoring not only the rights of animals, but of children themselves.

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