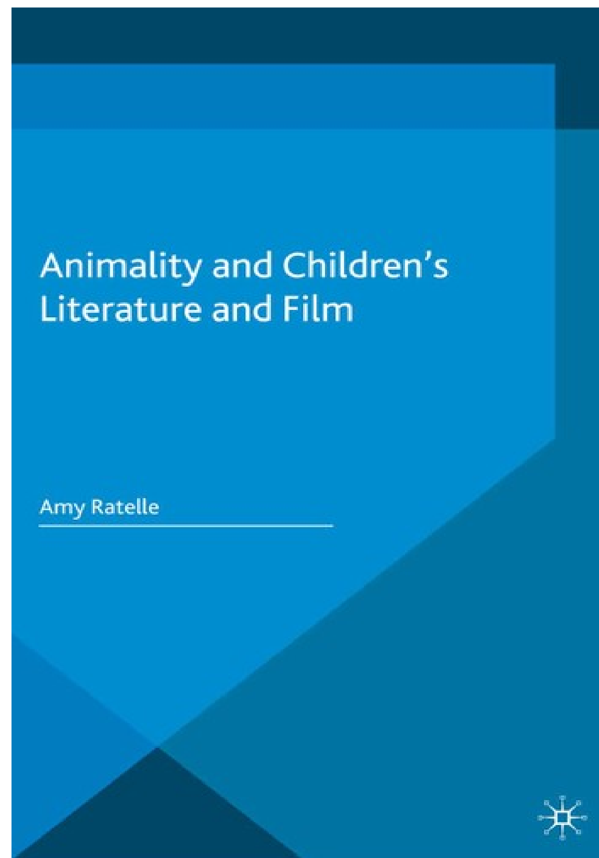
Reviews

Amanda Monteleone

Animal Subjectivity and Child Animality in Children's Media

Amy Ratelle, *Animality and Children's Literature and Film*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2015. viii + 171 pp. $93.48 (hc); $79.99 (e-book).



Amy Ratelle's *Animality and Children's Literature and Film*, uniting the disciplines of children's literature and animal studies, clarifies the significant contributions of children's literature and film to animality in Western literary studies. Ratelle argues that by assigning subjectivity to animals and/or rendering children in an animalistic way, children's books and movies complicate their own apparent function of establishing human subjectivity and a clear boundary between animals and humans. Beginning with *Memoirs of Dick, the Little Poney* (1799), Ratelle analyzes a series of mainly British or American children's works against prevailing Western notions of human subjectivity

and dominance over other animals. Ratelle foregrounds the analyses in each chapter with relevant information about animal-related issues and anxieties of the period. Ratelle's critiques often point to the limits that the narratives ultimately place on the realization of animals' personhood. However, some of Ratelle's readings also suggest that more recent human actions to acknowledge animal personhood, such as the public interest in freeing Keiko, the killer whale in *Free Willy*, from captivity, and "Book Buddies," a reading program that fosters confidence in children by encouraging them to read to their animal companions, may have stemmed from the animal subjectivities presented in children's texts.

Ratelle organizes each chapter around particular kinds of animals in children's texts, prefacing discussion of individual works with historical accounts of when and why particular animals rose to the public consciousness. The chapters focus on horses, canines, livestock (pigs and chickens), lab animals (rats and mice), and cetaceans. The texts portraying these creatures follow a rough chronological order throughout the book. Ratelle uses a cluster of critical lenses that deprioritize anthropocentric readings of texts, including those of Donna Haraway, Cary Wolfe, N. Katherine Hayles, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. Ratelle also contextualizes the works with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's and John Locke's philosophies on cultivating human subjectivity and compassion toward animals within children through literature in order to ensure children's development into civilized, rational beings. Throughout *Animality*, Ratelle reads the overt intent in the books and films she analyzes as stemming from humanist philosophies. However, Ratelle argues, an ambiguity between human and animal becomes apparent in child protagonists who develop intimate connections with animals, and in animal protagonists who attempt to find their footing in human worlds. This confusion of animal and human roles is emphasized throughout Ratelle's analyses of children's texts.

In the first chapter, "Animal Virtues, Values and Rights," Ratelle considers the horse in its dual roles in the nineteenth century as suffering brute and a symbol for human values of wealth, nobility, and power. The tensions in these roles become apparent in Ratelle's analyses of the anonymously written *Memoirs of Dick, the Little Poney*, and Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877). Ratelle describes how each work sympathetically portrays the misery of horses in their forced servitude to humans as well as the terms under which each protagonist voluntarily develops a relationship with human children. Ratelle describes nineteenth-century animal rights activism as an upper- and middle-class endeavor rising from concern over violence of the lower class, associated with their abuse of beasts of burden. Ratelle compares these texts with Enid Bagnold's

National Velvet (1935), which portrays an evolution in the horse's role from labor source to prized show animal. Ratelle's analysis of *National Velvet* focuses on its adolescent human protagonist and, disfavoring previous readings of the adolescent girl's sexuality, reads her sensual experiences of riding, or dreams of riding, horses as an indication of her "kinesthetic empathy" with horses. Kinesthetic empathy, a term Ratelle attributes to Kenneth Shapiro, describes how bodily intimacy between humans and animals results in a physical, rather than emotional, sympathy between them (36). Ratelle ultimately finds that these texts, which she perceives as intending to emphasize bonds between horses and children, ultimately reveal the animals' inability to live with humans without a compromise of their free wills.

In "Contact Zones, Becoming and the Wild Animal Body," Ratelle focuses on canines in literature and film, beginning with an account of the literary significance of wolves in European folklore as evildoers and enemies. In her readings of Jack London's *Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906), Ratelle observes tensions between canine "wildness" and human imperialist values. Ratelle characterizes *White Fang* and *Call of the Wild* as boys' adventure stories that privilege imperialism and human action over intimacy or emotions. However, Ratelle finds, London's works portray a canine-human bond that reflect on Haraway's idea of "becoming with," a kind of contact zone between human and animals characterized by fluidity and ongoing changes (53). Ratelle ends the chapter with an analysis of Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997), finding that the animated film complicates the identity categories of animals and women as the film simultaneously animalizes and sexualizes women. Ratelle finds that London and Miyazaki portray characters with both canine and human qualities that must ultimately decide between animal and human worlds.

Ratelle considers the terms for animal protagonists' survival in E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* and the films *Babe* (1995) and *Chicken Run* (2000) in "Ethics and Edibility." Ratelle reviews the nineteenth-century slaughterhouse reforms that sought to separate humans physically from animal killing and death in urban environments. According to Ratelle, in rural environments, pigs were more problematic as livestock animals because their living conditions necessitated their close physical proximity to human quarters. Because of this physical closeness, humans, including children, formed close bonds with animals reared for slaughter, resulting in their emotional turmoil when adults killed the animals for food. In Ratelle's analysis, Wilbur's personhood in *Charlotte's Web* relates to his (perceived) capacity for human language, as well as a physical cleanliness that contrasts with the dirtiness of "Uncle," another pig portrayed unsympathetically and presumed for slaughter. Similar to Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web*, in the film *Babe* the sheep-herding pig

must present some semblance of extraordinary intelligence to be rescued from death. The protagonists of *Chicken Run* escape factory farm life and find safety in a bird sanctuary after realizing they were reared for purposes of slaughter. Ultimately, none of these works, Ratelle finds, go so far as to claim that the consumption of meat equates murder, since the animals that survive must prove themselves exceptional for their species. However, according to Ratelle, *Charlotte's Web*, *Babe*, and *Chicken Run* problematize the artifices and secrecy that surround the rearing and killing of livestock.

The use of research animals in children's works is the focus of Ratelle's "Science, Species and Subjectivity." Ratelle finds that the lab animals personified in Robert O'Brien's *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* (1971) and William Kotzwinkle's *Doctor Rat* (1976) transcend the carnophallogocentric paradigm described by Derrida, in which animals become candidates for human exploitation because of animals' lack of reason or language (78). In the stories of O'Brien and Kotzwinkle rodents evolve rapidly as a result of experimentation and develop sophisticated societies of their own. Ratelle foregrounds her analysis with laboratory animal philosophies dating back to Galen (130-201 B.C.), on the practice of animal vivisection as a means of affirming the authority of ancient texts for students. Ratelle finds that O'Brien's novel depicts a permeability of boundaries between animals and humans, while Don Bluth's film adaptation, *The Secret of NIMH* (1982), deemphasizes this quality from the book, instead centering the story around questions of political power. Kotzwinkle's *Doctor Rat* portrays laboratory animals who, having assumed unusual intelligence, have themselves been indoctrinated in the scientific practice of fact verification as well as the practice of desensitizing students to animal suffering. Ultimately, in both stories, the rodents must separate themselves from the human world completely in order to form viable societies.

In the book's final chapter, "Performance and Personhood in *Free Willy* and *Dolphin Tale*," Ratelle analyzes films that portray child-cetacean bonds through the use of captive animals. Both *Free Willy* (1993) and *Dolphin Tale* (2011) develop the identities of child protagonists and marine mammals in close sympathy with one another. Ratelle describes recent evaluations of dolphins' intelligence as anthropocentric in nature and counterproductive to the elimination of systems of animal exploitation. According to Ratelle, captive marine mammals like those at Sea World are forced to bond with their trainers in a manner that relates to Agamben's concept of "bare life," a condition of a biological existence that, without perceived language or culture, exposes entities to violence (138). Ratelle finds that, ultimately, *Free Willy* suggests species difference in how the human and whale characters develop an increased longing for their own kind

through their prolonged interactions. Ratelle notes that *Free Willy*'s popularity launched public concern for Keiko, the killer whale in the film who, released years later from captivity, continued to interact with humans as well as other whales until the end of his life. Ratelle finds that *Dolphin Tale* portrays a high degree of interspecies intimacy as boy and dolphin develop a very personal, almost romantic, relationship. Ratelle's analyses reveal the tensions rising from the films' captive animal stars and the boundary-blurring, interspecies relationships these animals appear to experience on-screen with child protagonists.

Ratelle's perspective toward the texts analyzed in *Animality* remains animal-focused. The majority of Ratelle's analyses are complemented by a cluster of theoretical lenses that include Haraway, Agamben, and Derrida. From an animal studies perspective, Ratelle's analyses illuminate recurring features in children's literature such as animals' language use, power relations in human-animal interactions, and boundary-blurring between children and animals. Though perhaps beyond the scope of Ratelle's focus, questions of race, gender, and other identifications remain largely unexplored within the texts, particularly regarding the white, male protagonist that often serves as the default body in children's literature. While Ratelle's analyses do consider female protagonists in terms of their gender identification, a more thorough treatment of race and gender within the network of power relations emerging in the analyses would have opened the findings to a broader range of interested scholars.

Another issue that emerges in Ratelle's methodology concerns her inclusion of *Princess Mononoke*, a Japanese film, which she foregrounds in the chapter with a Western history and Western theoretical lenses. An animal studies analysis of *Princess Mononoke* requires more thorough contextualization and grounding in Japanese history and theory regarding animals in order to furnish the same kinds of insights that Ratelle yields from analyses of Western texts. While it's clear from Ratelle's analysis that *Princess Mononoke* reveals a kind of boundary-blurring between humans and animals, the film appears to be situated in an imaginary stemming from Japanese tradition and requires more explication regarding that tradition for her conclusions about the film to be convincing.

Animality and Children's Literature and Film does critical work in both animal studies and children's literature disciplines by shedding light on familiar children's texts with new interpretations that challenge prior anthropocentric readings. One important contribution to this intersection of studies is Ratelle's argument that the portrayal of human-animal bonds in children's texts, intended to cultivate children's humanity, also results in a depiction of more permeable boundaries between children and animals.

Ratelle's analyses of multiple forms of children's media make the book useful for scholars of children's literature and or children's films. Additionally, Ratelle's lenses and methodology complement texts clustered around particular historical moments, making her readings valuable to nineteenth- or twentieth-century literature scholars analyzing other texts of the period from an animal studies perspective. Noting real-world actions that have emerged from this animal-human boundary blurring, such as public sympathy for Keiko, of *Free Willy* fame, and children's "Book Buddies" programs, Ratelle suggests that some recent portrayals of animal personhood in children's works provide hope for more widespread recognition of non-human animals.