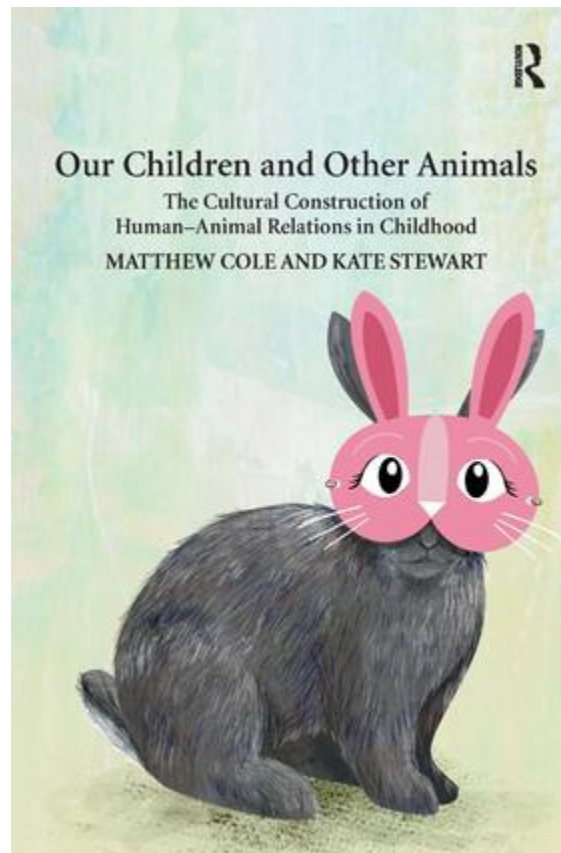


Reviews

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Show and Tell: Exposing Anthroparchy in Children's Culture

Matthew Cole & Kate Stewart, *Our Children and Other Animals: The Cultural Construction of Human-Animal Relations in Childhood*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014. 195 pp. \$100.00 hc; \$43.96 pb; \$49.46 e-book.



Quite recently, I read a column in a Dutch women's magazine. It was a short text, in which the author described how her teenage son came home with a little pet fish, and presented it to her as gift. His mother was not going to fall for this trick again, and told him that the fish was his responsibility. She expected the poor creature to be dead within a fortnight, but the boy proved to be remarkably tender and displayed a level of care and compassion that surprised her. She ended her column by expressing her desire

for grandchildren. This short column contains a number of implicit claims about children and animals that are common in the West. Notice the casual act of the child consumer purchasing a living creature, the intergenerational negotiation of responsibility, the gendered nature of care, and the idea that pet keeping prepares children for becoming parents.

In spite of the fact that animals, real ones and representations, are ubiquitous in the lives of children, there is limited research into how their presence affects children's attitudes towards them. This lacuna, as well as the often contradictory messages that children receive about the nonhuman animals in their lives, is what inspired sociologists Matthew Cole and Kate Stewart to write *Our Children and Other Animals*. In the introduction they state how their "interest in children's relations with other animals was sparked by this specific contemporary cultural artefact: the promotional tie-in meal offered by fast food chains that juxtapose nonhuman animal 'characters' as images and toys alongside the mangled body parts of other animals" (4). Since this combination of "[d]eath and delight" (169) does not seem to spark any obvious indignation among children or adults, Cole and Stewart have made it their mission to expose the cultural mechanisms that ease children into a mind-set in which the exploitation of nonhuman animals is the norm.

The authors focus on practices and animal representations in the UK, but stress that due to globalization, their findings are likely to be applicable to other countries in the West. Grounded in Critical Animal Studies, the book seeks to expose the anthroparchal mechanisms that influence children's attitudes towards nonhuman animals, in order to challenge and ultimately overturn them. They explain that "a core contention of this book is that childhood socialization of dominant discourses and practices about other animals is, and has to be, extremely thorough, due to the very contingency and precariousness of those discourses and practices" (35). The authors adopt Cudworth's term "anthroparchal" to describe the hierarchical social structures in which humans come to dominate nature, because it "captures the interplay of the material and discursive constitution of domination" (27). One of the strengths of this book lies exactly in the authors' insistence on the interconnectedness of discourse and practice, which they demonstrate in their analyses.

Another important asset is that the examples given convincingly demonstrate the important role of popular culture, such as cinema and magazines, as socialization sites where anthroparchal relations are shaped and reinforced.

The book is divided into three parts, the first of which gives an overview of the historical developments that shaped the conceptualization of human-nonhuman animal relations in Western societies, the UK in particular. This sets the stage for the second part, in which the authors look at how different cultural spaces contribute to the formation of children into tacit supporters of anthroparchy. The authors discuss children's food, toys and pets in the family home, the cute style used in representations of animals in mass media, animals as food and objects of education in schools, and interspecies power relations in the digital media. As these areas overlap in the lives of children, the influence of anthroparchy is reinforced.

In their empirical analysis of practices involving human-nonhuman animal relations in which children are implicated, Cole and Stewart expose the often grotesque ways in which exploitation of animals is obscured or justified. A powerful example is their discussion of educational practices, in particular those involving the keeping of animals on school grounds. These animals are sometimes raised in order to be slaughtered and sold, or even consumed by the school children themselves. This sheds light on the profound contradictions that determine human-nonhuman animal relations in the West. One moment we invite children to care for and empathize with these animals, the next they are asked to accept their killing, mutilation, and commodification. The authors argue that children are not overwhelmed by this paradox, because of the immense power that anthroparchy holds over their lives, discursively, emotionally, and in practice.

The cute style that is typically used in popular media for children is characterized by the animals' fluffiness, cheerful expressions, and their permanent focus on the reader. This gives the reader the impression that the animals are always readily available to the children, always waiting to be touched, fed or cuddled. Being habituated to animal characters with no lives of their own makes it increasingly easy for players to be convinced that real animals have no intrinsic value either. A striking observation is that, although the animals depicted are often infants, there are no same-species caregivers around. The animals solely depend on care and affection provided by the human child, reinforcing the idea that animals have no species-specific needs.

This is also the case in the farming simulation games on social media, where the practice of "constructing the willing complicity of exploited others" (135) is common, which gives the player the impression that farm animals exist in order to please human desires by offering them (the products of) their bodies. This is reinforced by the use of anthropomorphism, infantilism, and cuteness (129). In these games, players re-enact

and reproduce dominant exploitative farming practices. Tellingly, subversive gameplay is impossible: if we want to play, we have to subject ourselves to the ideology of the game.

Cole and Stewart explore ways to offer children opportunities for resistance within the practices they describe, and alternative, non-exploitative lifestyles. Throughout the book, they argue for the normalization of veganism, so that children will become aware of and will eventually choose a non-exploitative lifestyle. In order to present the reader with an example of such an alternative cultural sphere, the third section of the book discusses the genre of vegan children's literature. The genre, as Cole and Stewart describe it, aims to empower vegan children and show non-vegan children that veganism is a real, ethical alternative way of life that is available to them.

Characteristics of this genre include the decentralization of the human subject and a critique of hierarchical interspecies relationships. This is achieved by a representational that highlights the animals' autonomy, and, as opposed to the cute style, these books show that animals can have lives of their own that do not necessarily include human children. They also show ways children can enjoy the company of animals on their terms, without exploiting them.

Reading the authors' analyses of a selection of vegan books leaves me with two concerns, not so much about the authors' interpretations, but regarding the genre and its development. First of all, the tone of these books seems to lean towards the didactic. In the current literary climate, in which entertainment and aesthetics are valued at least as highly as the educational/moral content, this poses a problem. When the message takes over the narrative, it limits the possible impact on neutral readers, and may even antagonize others. The other concern is that, while Cole and Stewart acknowledge that speciesism often intersects with other issues, they do not address the fact that this genre appears to be quite Eurocentric. In encouraging children to adopt a vegan lifestyle, it is easy to forget that in a multicultural country like the UK, some children are not in a position to make their own food choices, either because they have no desire to oppose their elders, or because the consumption of animal products is part of their cultural identity, and therefore laden with emotion. Didacticism and eurocentrism are understandable flaws in a young genre, but they need to be addressed in order for it to mature. All children deserve access to texts that challenge anthroparchy, since ultimately, these texts empower their readers.

Containing many striking examples of exploitative practices, this book is thought provoking and inspiring, not only for scholars in the social sciences and the humanities,

but also for educators and policy makers. By addressing the question of the effects and consequences of animal presence in the lives of children, this book offers opportunities to improve the welfare of both children and animals. Children are acknowledged as capable moral agents, and when they are given the opportunity, they can become critical readers and consumers who can make their own informed choices. This book encourages those working with children's culture to translate these insights into practice. The authors themselves hope that their book will have "practical pedagogical applications in helping children and adults to critically trace their own socialization routes," and I wholeheartedly share this hope with them.