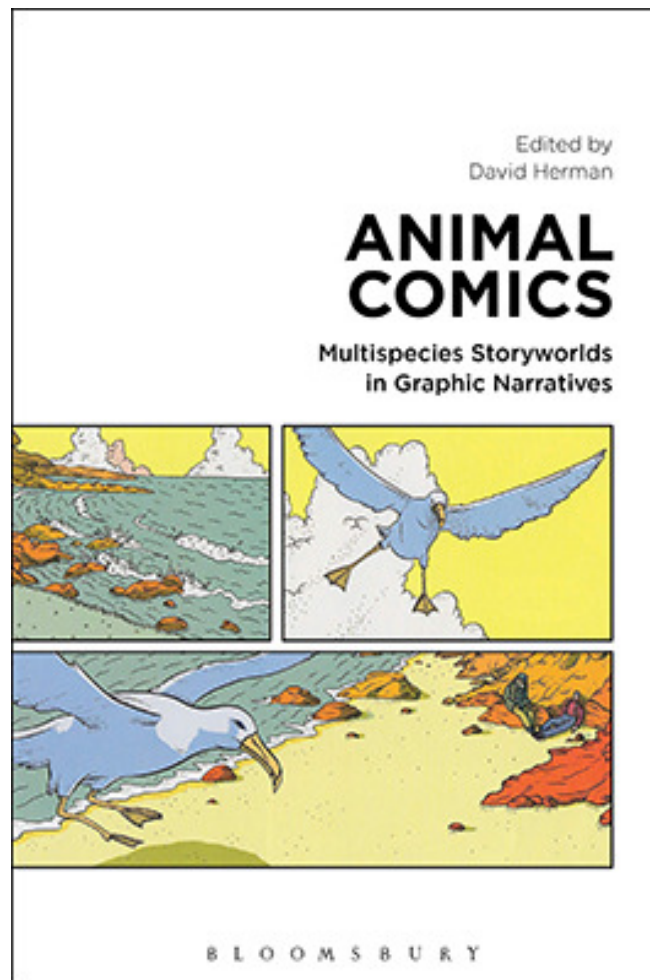


Reviews

Thomas Doran

What Is it Like to Be a Sequential Animal?

David Herman, ed. *Animal Comics: Multispecies Storyworlds in Graphic Narratives*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. 280 pp. \$114 hc, \$39.95 pbk.



The history of animal representation in comics art is so long, vast, and varied that it is surprising the medium does not already dominate arts and humanities scholarship in animal studies. Reasons why not abound, mostly stemming from the fact that comics art

lacks a central position in a traditional academic discipline. For decades, scholars in art history and literary studies have been making attempts to incorporate comics into their existing critical landscapes. As a result, much comics criticism and pedagogy in these fields continues to exhaust itself and its readers by arguing for the medium's artistic legitimacy and unique narrative or representational affordances, hindering the development of comics studies as a field in its own right. Comics studies scholar Hillary Chute has argued for a diversity of critical approaches in comics studies while also challenging existing fields' approaches to the medium: "Part of the pleasure of writing about comics is the absence of an analogous discipline that provides a ready-made, fully importable lexicon — not film studies, despite its useful language of framing, view, temporality, and visual pleasure; nor literary studies, despite its helpful iterations of narrative theory; nor even art history, despite its rigorous attention to spatio-temporality" (634). In applying this problem of incongruence to *Animal Comics*, a volume whose contributors are predominately literary studies scholars, the decisive question concerns whether the volume makes more of a contribution to comics studies and animal studies, or comparative narrative theory.

The essays in *Animal Comics* are organized under four subsections covering history and theory, animal alterity, critical frameworks, and pedagogy. The first subsection of essays, "Animal Agency in the History and Theory of Comics," features two essays that provide most of the historical context for the collection. Of all types of literary or visual artists, comics artists are probably the most self-conscious about their debt to animals as a direct result of the medium's historic reliance on anthropomorphized animal characters, and a thorough study of the historical evolution of animal representation in comics art has not yet been produced. In what should be required reading in comics studies courses, as well as animal studies courses that assign comics, Glenn Willmott's "The Animalized Character and Style" expands upon the concept of the "funny animal," which he describes as "any character recognized as embodying nonhuman animal types and qualities." Often such characters, like Mickey Mouse, are regarded as little more than "human characters in superficially animalized form," but Willmott uncovers their influence and evolution to show how they "trouble mimesis, doing funny things to identification and our ethical response them" (53). Two core influences on the funny animal Willmott discusses are the grotesque and the animal fable. The influence of the grotesque, especially the proliferation of "plastic, distorted, or combinative creatures," Willmott argues, "are the ludic source of caricature and comics style alike, the basis of styles representing things/persons with biomorphic freedom from conventional notions of species and nature" (56–57). The influence of the fable, wherein "the animal mask or body allowed for the *defamiliarization* of human traits," evolved in comics to the point where funny animals no longer seemed to possess

“moral cognates in conventional virtues” or to broadcast a “taxonomically stable or biologically recognizable” natural world. Unlike in the animal fable, the funny animal “defamiliarizes both human and animal under the alluringly stylized sign ... of an inaccessible or uncertain nature at large” (60).

Rounding out the history of animal comics, Daniel Yezbick offers an expansive survey of animal comics from the Enlightenment to the present in “Lions and Tigers and Fears: A Natural History of the Sequential Animal.” This essay’s strength is in its dizzying array of theoretically situated recommendations — organized under three categories: companion, anthropomorphized, and mutated animals — rather than its historical complexity, and it should prove a valuable resource for readers looking to expand the historical reach of their courses or scholarship. Though perhaps not the fault of the author, this function of the essay would be greatly improved with at least a few visuals (rather than zero).

This shortage of visual accompaniment troubles the entire collection. Excluding the creative work that concludes the collection, the average number of visuals per essay is between one and two, all of which are reproduced in grayscale despite the intricate and vital coloration of several of the original comics. Given the countless works of art history and comics criticism that have faithfully reproduced and more extensively incorporated visuals into their ethic of criticism, it is difficult to view the paucity of visualization as merely an unavoidable consequence stemming from budgetary constraints in academic publishing. Instead, it speaks to the volume’s critical priorities and constricted sense of audience. Many essays offer brilliant analyses of comics iconography, linework, color, paneling, and page layout but with the unintended consequence that, without visual support, close analysis of an absent visual landscape can feel either tenuous or overdetermined depending on the interpretations drawn from it. Further, many comparative claims — such as Mary Knighton’s claim that manga is somehow distinct from Western comics art in its ability to construct “an experience of simultaneity and not just one of sequential [by which Knighton means linear rather than the nonlinear sense of *sequential* popularized by Scott McCloud] unfolding” (140) — can only be substantiated through a fair and thorough display of visual evidence. In the isolated moments where essays actually do establish a true critical dialogue with provided visuals — as in David Herman’s continuum for visual representations of animal’s subjective experience (202–11), Carrie Rohman’s reading of gendered iconography in Nick Abadzi’s *Laika* (125–29), or Laura Pearson’s analysis of the role of anthropomorphism in representations of human-shark contact zones in Matt

Dembecki's *Xoc: The Journey of a Great White* (162–67) — we see precisely and variously how it can alter the critical values and potential audience.

Regardless of visual limitations, most essays in *Animal Comics* deliver necessary interventions into popular texts, and sometimes unique contributions to the critical vocabulary necessary for discussing the intersection of comics art and animal studies. In his reading of Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples's ongoing series *Saga*, Michael Chaney connects the award-winning comic's core interest in mixed-race identity with its sprawling galaxy of animal and hybrid figures. Chaney notes that animal characters seem to do little more than draw attention to "boundaries of difference" among various human races by generating "heightened emotionality" along the narrative's peripheries (100). To be sure, plush dolls of Ghüs, a haughty though undeniably adorable anthropomorphic seal, and statues of Lying Cat, a reserved sort of feline lie detector, feature prominently among *Saga* merchandise despite their marginal status in the narrative. At its core, Chaney argues, *Saga* is concerned with "mixtures carried out to extremes," but with a predominantly aesthetic interest in animals (109). This aesthetic is developed "through a vast repertoire of sight gags, jokes, visual turnabouts, scatological signs, grotesque ironies, and meta-reflexive signifiers, which point to established orders of expectation (of genetic resemblance, for example, or of species uniformity or trans-species difference) only to violate them" (115). Chaney's reading of *Saga*'s animal aesthetic is likely exportable to countless works of fantasy that sideline animal characters in any visual medium. But it should be noted that while the essay is appropriately theoretically situated, it actually engages sparingly with comics art as a spatiotemporal medium.

On the other hand, Carrie Rohman's "Curly Tails and Flying Dogs: Structures of Affect in Nick Abadzi's *Laika*" thoroughly engages comics art's capacity to reinforce gendered forms of affect through amplified style. Rohman focuses on the relationship between *Laika*, the Moscow street dog murdered by the Soviet space program in 1957, and Yelena Dubrovsky, *Laika*'s fictional trainer, arguing that Abadzi distinguishes "spatial codes" evoked by curling, nurturing lines and straight, rigid lines to "highlight how modes of empathetic engagement that cross species lines are themselves entangled with the cultural codes linked to gender" (120). Drawing on the work of Lori Gruen, Greta Gaard, and others, Rohman connects the circularity of the line with an ethics of care that governs Dubrovsky and *Laika*'s relationship in opposition to the ethics of justice that drives nation-state conquest of outer space and irretrievably hurls *Laika* into orbit in a steel tomb. Throughout, Rohman is attuned to the gender essentialism inherent in this visual dichotomy and attends to cases where Abadzi's representations of animal care appear excessively feminine, leading to an appropriately uncertain conclusion

regarding “the degree to which [he] is aware of — or merely traffics in — gendered stereotypes” (136).

Although *Animal Comics* reserves a subsection for pedagogy “and beyond,” the collection actually only features one teaching essay, Charles Baraw and Andrew Smyth’s comprehensive summary of undergraduate responses to *Pride of Baghdad*, *WE3*, and *Duncan the Wonder Dog*. Student insights into Duncan complement Alex Link’s essay, featured earlier in the collection, on the “The Politics and Poetics of Alterity in Adam Hines’s *Duncan the Wonder Dog*,” which discusses how “refracting ideas of species difference through concepts of cultural difference, and vice versa ... creates a dialectical interplay between anthropomorphizing the nonhuman and zoomorphizing the human” (70). While Baraw and Smyth’s essay makes a strong case for how *Duncan* and *WE3* especially complicated student’s perspectives on animal intelligence, interspecies kinship, and the ethics of animal exploitation, at least one other essay highlighting innovative forms of comics pedagogy would round out this section. How, for example, might students produce work within the comics medium in order to advance and complicate their ideas about animals and animal representation? And how might comics themselves be used as a medium for generating ideas and presenting evidentiary reasoning, either by supplementing or replacing the traditional, text-based essay?

This question of the form comics criticism assumes applies not only to students but to scholars as well. In his introduction to *Animal Comics*, David Herman asks whether “graphic narratives about animal agents afford different storytelling possibilities than other kinds of multimodal narratives that exploit alternative semiotic channels” (12). Obviously, the answer is *yes*. But this may only be demonstrated effectively if we thoughtfully incorporate the comics medium itself, and its creative processes, into criticism. This is not to say that all essays about comics should take the form of actual comics, like Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* (1993), but certainly *some* should. More generally, as Chute reasons, “in interpreting the desires of the (verbal *and* visual) text, I have found that an analytic purview can be enriched by knowledge and engagement with practices of production” (634). In light of this critical ethic, *Animal Comics* may read as a collection that does not desire to embrace the full potential, the reality, of the medium it proposes to study, often taking refuge in the narrative theories of text-based literature. As a result, the volume can occasionally appear more interested in narrative theory than in animals or comics in their own right. Still, the collection may prove useful to those already working at the intersection of comics studies and animal studies. Perhaps its most consistent strength rests in the many contributions and

qualifications it makes to the canon of animal comics, both in revealing the complexity of already popular comics and unearthing valuable texts that have gone overlooked. But its resistance to including comics art, both as visual accompaniment and as a critical practice itself, along with its theoretical density, may prevent it from truly extending the reach of comics art into the larger interdisciplinary field of animal studies.

Work Cited

Chute, Hillary. "Drawing is a Way of Thinking." *PMLA* 134.3 (May 2019): 629–37.