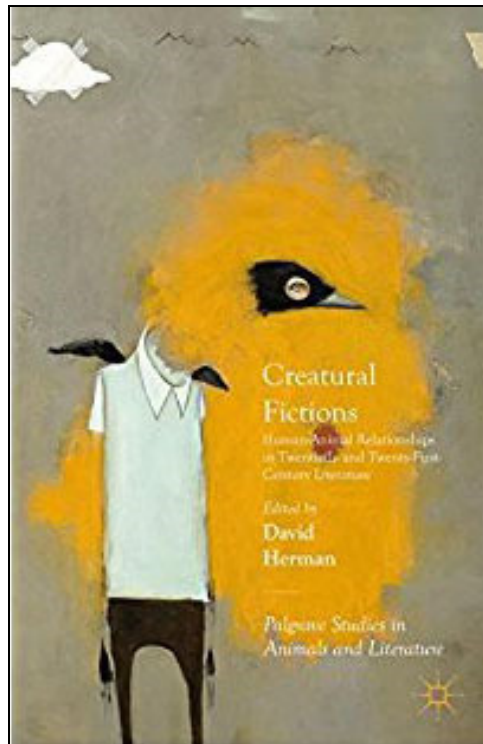


Reviews

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Creatural Frictions: The Trouble with Becoming-Animal

David Herman, *Creatural Fictions: Human-Animal Relationships in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 290 pp. \$95 hc.



Few viewers of Werner Herzog’s 2005 masterpiece of human-animal encounter, *Grizzly Man*, can come away with an untroubled understanding of becoming-animal. The film follows its charismatic, enigmatic, and comically earnest protagonist, Timothy Treadwell, through the thirteen summers he spent observing and bonding with grizzly bears at close range in Alaska — as well as his ensuing, untimely death by grizzly. The real tragedy of Treadwell’s end is not its absurdity or inevitability, but rather the sense, cultivated slowly over the course of the film, that his willingness to martyr himself while “protecting” the bears was fundamentally misguided, and possibly flat-out harmful. One of the film’s more sobering moments is an interview with anthropologist Sven Haakanson, director of the Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak, Alaska, who says of Treadwell: “He tried to be a bear. He tried to act like a bear, and for us on the island,

you don't do that. You don't invade on their territory.... When you habituate bears to humans, they think all humans are safe.... If I look at it from my culture, Timothy Treadwell crossed a boundary that we have lived with for 4,000 years.”

While rewatching the documentary recently, I was struck by the counterpoint it provided to much animal studies scholarship happening today, which tends toward celebrations of human-animal becomings as radical refashionings of all the old, taken-for-granted notions of human superiority and separability from nonhuman life. Where exactly does our disciplinary desire for convergences, becomings, encounters, relations, transformations, and all the other familiar verbal-nouns get us when, as Nandini Thiyagarajan points out in a new edited collection on literary human-animal relationships, “becomings of this kind do not serve the animal in quite the same way” (210)? Whether we’re dealing with Deleuze and Guattari’s pack-sublime or Donna Haraway’s more domesticated *becoming-with* companion species, it seems like high time we ask: is becoming-animal always the ethical or ontological position to strive for? I was therefore quite engrossed in the collection that houses Thiyagarajan’s insights, *Creatural Fictions: Human-Animal Relationships in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature* (2016), which dramatizes this very question through a series of articles that take up the various literary possibilities — and perils — of narratives of interspecies becoming. At just the point when “becoming-animal” is starting to take on that academic staleness that encrusts so many of the most useful concepts, *Creatural Fictions* provides a range of perspectives that, taken as a conversation, leave the reader with fresh questions about literature’s capacity to engender ethical relations across species whose interests are not always aligned.

The collection, edited by David Herman (Durham University), begins with a meditation on the term “creatural,” which Herman helpfully distinguishes from “creaturely” as a way of understanding creatureliness to include human animals, as well as describing relationships between human and nonhuman beings. He explains, “The slight semantic shift from *creaturely* to *creatural* in this volume’s title is meant to indicate its alignment with [a strand of discourse associated with Anat Pick] in which the status of being a creature, subject to the requirements of the surrounding environment, the vicissitudes of time, and the vulnerabilities of the body, emphasizes the fundamental continuity between humans and other animals” (Herman 3). It is tellingly easy to misread the book’s key framing concept as “cultural” rather than “creatural,” which resonates with the collection’s focus on literary representations of human-animal relationships as reflective and generative of culturally contingent notions of “the human,” attitudes toward animal rights/ethics/liberation, and popular affective orientations toward

particular species. From the outset, then, this is a book that is not only interested in how humans might become-animal, but how other animals become (or, in the biopolitical mode, are made) creaturely within particular environments, societies, and bodily economies.

This universalizing move leaves quite a bit of leeway for the various approaches to becoming-animal that populate this collection. On the one hand, there is space for the kinds of celebratory, even utopian accounts of de-anthropocentrizing encounter that show up in Marianne DeKoven's readings of Kafka's animal stories, Shun Yin Kiang's analysis of *My Dog Tulip* by J.R. Ackerley, or Jopi Nyman's discussion of Jane Smiley's horse-racing novel *Horse Heaven*, where mutually transformative, intersubjective encounters between humans and animals can enable forms of knowing and being that are precluded by "[species] differences that the dominant order translates into identity-based and categorical distinctions" (Kiang 147). For example, DeKoven incisively says of Kafka's ape-become-human, Red Peter: "As ape, he had freedom but did not know he had it; as humanimal, he can see both that freedom is unattainable by humans, something that humans cannot see, and also that freedom is permanently lost to him. These insights, which undercut ideas of human superiority, would be unavailable either to a human or to an ape" (21). Though the troubling ethics of Red Peter's encounter with humans are clearly articulated in the story, DeKoven suggests, the epistemological import of his transformation is nonetheless valuable for its disruption of human-exceptionalist claims to language and reason. Nyman's chapter on horse-racing narratives likewise acknowledges the risk disparities within human-horse relationships, even listing specific incidents of abuse within the horse racing industry. But he still finds that representations of these relationships do important work to amplify the role of nonhuman animals in constructing Americanness, as well as to show how, even within the confines of human-constructed and controlled settings like the racetrack, a non-anthropocentric literary imagination can "restore agency to nonhuman animals and problematize human control over the nonhuman" (Nyman 226).

To be sure, all these explorations of the in-betweenness of human-animal encounters — the relational, the intersubjective, the mutually transformative — represent the philosophical heart of critical animal studies today. But after reading so many optimistic takedowns of the human-animal divide, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of skepticism toward this reparative approach. Mustn't there be a point at which the appropriative or exploitative aspects of becoming-animal outweigh the ontological insights it provides? I found myself wondering, in other words: what if we take Donna Haraway's directive to "stay with the trouble" in a different direction, and ground our thinking in the troubling parts of human-animal interactions: the inequitable

distribution of agency, vulnerability, and dependency in common relationships like domestication, training, and professional performance. What might we gain by dwelling in those unequal, possibly antagonistic or violent spaces without rushing to recuperate them through appeals to interspecies becoming? (This would, of course, mean taking a rather different approach to dog agility training than Haraway herself does!) *Creatural Fictions* astutely anticipates this response and reserves space for this mode of critique, generating productive tensions across its twelve collected essays. In “Like Words Printed on Skin’: Desire, Animal Masks, and Multispecies Relationships in Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt*,” Nandini Thiyagarajan points out that the very human-animal divide for which critical animal studies is constantly seeking alternatives is a European, colonial construction, arguing that increased attention to postcolonial literature can invigorate fresh lines of inquiry beyond that conceptual punching bag. It is quite refreshing to read claims like, “Though *The Book of Salt* prompts us to dwell within the human-animal distinction without encouraging us to see the *potential* of the animal and the limits of the human, the novel does engage with an important aspect of the human-animal distinction: how proximity to the animal determines what it means to be human” (198). In Thiyagarajan’s analysis, human-animal proximity — namely, metaphor and meat eating, common bogeymen in animal studies — looks nothing like the radical decentering of the human that has become a go-to critical move, and yet Thiyagarajan’s readings of literary animals still have clear political stakes for both postcolonial and critical animal studies.

Meanwhile, the collection’s final chapter, Roman Bartosch’s “Ghostly Presences: Tracing the Animal in Julia Leigh’s *The Hunter*,” takes on the “fuzzy and rather oxymoronic debate about ‘becoming-animal’” through close readings of Leigh’s novel about a man hunting the last surviving Tasmanian tiger by developing “a peculiar form of empathy” through which he “seemingly succeeds at becoming-animal” and ultimately kills the tiger (260-262). Arguing that “the text endorses what some scholars celebrate as a fundamentally subversive event of becoming-animal with a sense of fragility and undecidability,” Bartosch asks, “what good does it do to ‘become-animal’ if the result is extinction?” (265). The implications of this question are certainly farther-reaching than this particularly extreme example, however. As the other essays in this very collection demonstrate, the human cultural imagination has produced many versions of becoming-animal that have uncertain or clearly worrisome consequences for the nonhuman animals involved. What good does it do to become-animal, we might ask, if the result is a horse fatally injured on the race track? Might dwelling in the trouble in our cultural criticism necessitate more critical stances toward the real-world practices they portray? Bartosch and the collection end with an emphasis on human-

animal “recognition” rather than transformation, in which the beings encountering one another may be linked in their status as vulnerable subjects, but remain differentially situated in ethically significant ways (268).

The conversation around becoming-animal is certainly not limited to literary study, but the collection’s strongest points are those that think deeply about the relationship between interspecies relationships and literary form. *Creatural Fictions’s* four sections are organized around literary periods and themes, to be sure: bookended by period-oriented works on early-twentieth-century modernism and contemporary fiction, respectively, the middle two “theory-building” sections focus first on gender, sexuality, and species, and then on genre and species. It is the essays on genre that feel freshest from a literary studies perspective; though literary animal studies often prioritizes content and ethical analysis over form, these chapters draw new and persuasive connections between genre constraints and the human-animal relationships depicted within them. Christy Tidwell’s “‘A Little Wildness’: Negotiating Relationships between Human and Nonhuman in Historical Romance” engages an under-theorized archive that is both amusingly familiar in its tropes — think, as Tidwell’s introduction invites us to, of the lurid dime-store cover art populated by lusty humans and horses — and refreshingly unfamiliar in its subversions of those tropes through human-animal comparisons. Hilary Thompson’s essay tracing the operations of Giorgio Agamben’s “anthropological machines” in *Life of Pi* is equally compelling from a literary perspective, as it theorizes a “millennial” subperiod of contemporary literature that is distinctly interested in planetary self-criticism and humanity’s shared worlds with animals. These essays are fabulous examples of how the theoretical and thematic concerns of critical animal studies can be brought to bear on textual analysis beyond the level of content. They delve deeper than the question of what literature can tell us about human-animal relationships, and instead ask what those relationships can tell us about literature. This is the part of the book that best fulfills the pedagogical ambitions outlined in Herman’s introduction, where he aims for the collection to “[exemplify] how frameworks for understanding human-animal relationships afford a basis for interpreting particular works [and]... to provide instructors and students alike with models for critical practice” (12). Any of the essays in this section would be prime candidates for an animal studies methods syllabus.

The other of the two “theory-building” sections rests on shakier conceptual ground. It is not at all clear why gender and sexuality is the only such identity-oriented section in the collection, especially when literary animal studies is so urgently in need of theory from the perspective of fields like critical race theory and disability studies. Human-animal scholarship has a long history of engagement with feminist literary theory, which

includes contributors Marianne DeKoven and Josephine Donovan as major players. Though that work has undeniably earned a place in a volume such as this, there are several important, emergent strains of intersectional scholarship that are either minoritized in the collection or omitted entirely. It is hard not to long for a disability section when characters with disabilities are uncritically referred to as “grotesque beings,” men transformed “into beasts” (Reddy 121), and “crippled dogs” (Donovan 91), just as the absence of a black studies section seems glaring when references to the “sexual enslavement of women” arise (DeKoven 27), or when gender-centric readings of J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* leave out the post-apartheid racial dynamics of relevant passages (Donovan). Though no edited collection can be expected to cover all theoretical grounds, the privileging of women’s and gender studies over other critical fields is conspicuous in light of the lack of an intersectional sensibility in this volume’s feminist perspectives. Moreover, the gender and sexuality section makes few new moves in its own conceptual world: it does little to draw out the implications of human-animal relations beyond binary gender categories, and only one of its three articles — Kiang’s reading of a gay man’s friendship with his dog in *My Dog Tulip* — theorizes queerness in relation to human-animal affinities at all. Though Mel Y. Chen’s *Animacies* is an occasional reference in these essays, it mainly resonates as a missed opportunity, as Chen’s attentiveness to trans, queer, and critical race theory, resistance to gender essentialism, and valuation of disabled/atypical embodiment do not find much purchase here.

All in all, however, *Creatural Fictions* is a collection that does impressive work to show how the fictional and the creatural act upon one another through form, genre, and interpretation. Other highlights include Damiano Benvegnù’s chapter on Italian modernism and Andrew Kalaidjian’s essay on the “dark pastoral” in the work of Djuna Barnes, both of which offer sharp analyses of how more-than-human worlds figure into modernity’s — and literary modernism’s — rapidly developing interchanges between rural and city life. Their historically specific analyses are vivid in their localized scope, describing how a particular moment in human-animal relation can shape literary production. There are many wonderful moments of specificity like this, from Craig Smith’s discussion of contemporary debates over cetacean personhood, to Kiang’s account of how Ackerley and his dog find ways to accommodate their movement through the highly circumscribed urban environment of 1950s London. These rewarding readings attest to the fact that, sometimes, before we can radically reconceptualize human-animal relationships, it helps to understand the intricacies of how we conceptualize them in the first place. *Creatural Fictions* gives its readers room to do both.