

2018

[Review] Creatural Fictions David Herman, editor. Creatural Fictions: Human-Animal Relationships in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature

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Recommended Citation

Woodward, Wendy, [Review] Creatural Fictions David Herman, editor. Creatural Fictions: Human-Animal Relationships in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature, *Animal Studies Journal*, 7(1), 2018, 319-321.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol7/iss1/15>

[Review] *Creatural Fictions* David Herman, editor. *Creatural Fictions: Human-Animal Relationships in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature*

Abstract

David Herman has put together a landmark collection of essays in the Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature series. Drawing from the Animal Studies theories of Donna Haraway, John Berger, Jacques Derrida and Cary Wolfe, for instance, the collection has a lot to offer students new to Literary Animal Studies. Rigorous essays which further debates mean that the collection also has appeal for established scholars in the field. *Creatural Fictions* takes its title, Herman explains, partly from the creaturely theories Anat Pick turns to in Simone Weil, but the term ‘creatural’ is preferred in order to emphasise continuities between human and animal embodiment, our common existence in time and place, and the concomitant ‘relational ties’ (3). This mode of enquiry is deployed to open up various literary texts, ranging from the early twentieth century novels of Djuna Barnes to contemporary novels by Jane Smiley, Zakes Mda and Yann Martel. While some of the novels like JM Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and Martel’s *Life of Pi* have already been discussed extensively, the essays proffer new interpretations. It was a pity, though, that poetry did not get a look in.

[Review] Creatorial Fictions

David Herman, editor. *Creatorial Fictions: Human–Animal Relationships in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature*. Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature, 2016, 290 pp.

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In Part I, Literary Modernisms, Animal Worlds, and Trans-species Entanglements, Marianne DeKoven has a substantial essay on Kafka’s Animal Stories. As I very recently (in Cape Town) attended ‘Kafka’s Ape’ performed by Tony B. Miyambo (directed and adapted by Phala Ookeditse Phala), DeKoven’s essay felt particularly relevant. That Red Peter is an ‘oscillating humanimal’ (21) was certainly borne out by Miyambo’s moving performance of a suffering

creature nowhere at home. Damiano Benvegna's essay on 'The Tortured Animals of Modernity' not only attempts to redress the 'paucity' of scholarship on modern Italian culture but also makes the case strongly that Literary Animal Studies, in order to transcend its limits, needs to include Italian literature in its geographical and cultural contexts. Andrew Kalaidjian reads Djuna Barnes with reference to Uexkull suggesting that animality is inescapable for humans no matter how much they may wish to transcend it. His reading of *Nightwood* as a 'dark pastoral materiality' extends the import of the novel in relation to a 'modernist environmental aesthetics' (80).

In Part II, Literature beyond the Human I: Species, Sexuality and Gender, Josephine Donovan makes a convincing case for the feminising of animal sacrifice and scapegoating in *Disgrace*, particularly in her reading of the contentious ending. Through a gendered lens she regards the ritual scapegoating of the euthanized dog as counterbalancing the re-assertion of David Lurie's masculinity. Rajesh Reddy's essay on Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* raises the controversy (which could lead to much classroom discussion) of women's recognition of their animal embodiment and its celebration in carnival. Shun Yin Kiang writes refreshingly on *My Dog Tulip* suggesting the notion of 'friendship' and its reciprocity as an interpretive solution to the usual power play in human-animal relationships.

Part III on Literature beyond the Human II: Human-Animal Interactions across Genres opens with Christy Tidwell on human and nonhuman in Historical Romance. This thorough, perceptive essay is disturbing in its analysis of 'what readers want' in this genre – the overstepping of species boundaries in ways that are mostly cruel and perverse even as animals are made to emphasise not just the differences between human and nonhuman, but their interconnectedness. Hilary Thompson reads the animals in *Life of Pi* via Giorgio Agamben's notion of anthropological machines while paying attention to the 'creaturely rhetorics' of caesura and epanalepsis. This complex, well-argued essay, contradicting conventional critique, inserts 'the animal' into a reading of the ending of this millennial novel. Nandini Thiyagarajan's chapter on Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* incorporates postcolonial theory, stressing the overlaps between the categorising and animalising of the human other. Yet she makes a significant point, contra Spivak and Fanon, proposing that animality, if deployed strategically and

in a nuanced way, can render ‘both personal and historical traumas legible’ as well as encourage readers to ‘envision alternate multispecies relationships’ (199).

Part IV on Human-Animal Entanglements in Late-Twentieth-and Early-Twenty-First-Century Fiction opens with an essay by Jopi Nyman on Jane Smiley’s *Horse Heaven*. Nyman coins the term ‘horsescapes’ via Arjun Appudurai – a space where horses are agentive and which is transformative of human-animal relationships. At the same time she notes Smiley’s criticism of the ethics of racing (a comparison here with Smiley’s own involvement in racing in her *A Year at the Races: Reflections on Horses, Humans, Love, Money, and Luck* (Faber and Faber, 2004) would have been interesting) concluding that, in spite of some instances of human-horse ‘becoming with’ these are limited ‘by the way speciesism and capitalism intersect in transnational settings’ (237). Craig Smith’s essay about Zakes Mda’s *The Whale Caller* criticises the novel for not having a clear animal rights message while acknowledging that it includes ‘more broadly metaphysical, epistemological, and ontological questions about whales’ (244). Yet he neglects the contradictoriness and playfulness of the narrative as well as the joy and the music in the human-whale relationality. In his essay on Julia Leigh’s *The Hunter*, Roman Bartosch asks, via Critical Animal Studies how ‘literature [could] be of help in continuing and bringing closer to us this relational, more-than-human entanglement of creatureliness’ (261) while emphasising the imperative to acknowledge ‘uncertainty not ecological precision’ in how literature depicts creatureliness. Because the focaliser of the novel, the eponymous hunter, is unethical, Bartosch finds that the environmental concerns of the novel are extradiegetic. Thus the interpretation of the reader renders the effect of the text ‘both narrative and ethical’ (272) to do with the story and the ‘real’ world.

Creatorial Fictions adeptly addresses the core issue throughout – how literature figures and fosters human-animal relationality. The collection also raises some central quandaries about human-animal entanglements which will encourage further debate.