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## [Review] Dan Wylie, *Death and Compassion: The Elephant in Southern African Literature*, Wits University Press, 2018. ix + 267

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**Abstract**

Thirty-seven years ago, I was doing what many young university lecturers did at the time: supplementing my income by moonlighting during the summer vacation. The work in this case was a contract from the British Council to run creative writing workshops for trainee teachers in various colleges around the recently minted but already unhappy state of Zimbabwe. In one of these places there was a waterhole not far from where I was staying and I was able to wander out during the brief African twilight, before the swift onset of a night so dark it was actually impossible to see one's hand in front of one's face (I tried it), and watch the animals – mainly deer-like creatures of various kinds – come down for a drink. One evening I was standing there when an elephant appeared. Without a second thought I walked round the waterhole to meet it. It watched me approach and showed no anxiety when I stood next to it. And then it held its trunk to my temple.

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Thirty-seven years ago, I was doing what many young university lecturers did at the time: supplementing my income by moonlighting during the summer vacation. The work in this case was a contract from the British Council to run creative writing workshops for trainee teachers in various colleges around the recently minted but already unhappy state of Zimbabwe. In one of these places there was a waterhole not far from where I was staying and I was able to wander out during the brief African twilight, before the swift onset of a night so dark it was actually impossible to see one's hand in front of one's face (I tried it), and watch the animals – mainly deer-like creatures of various kinds – come down for a drink. One evening I was standing there when an elephant appeared. Without a second thought I walked round the waterhole to meet it. It watched me approach and showed no anxiety when I stood next to it. And then it held its trunk to my temple.

When I told my African students and colleagues about this next morning, they said I was mad and lucky to be alive and that I'd have been in less danger had I gone around to stroke a lion or pet a leopard. Maybe so. But I wasn't scared at the time and the elephant appeared to have had no violent intention towards me. And a lifetime later I still have not fully processed that experience except to feel that somewhere embedded in it was what Enlightenment thinkers called sublimity.

The place in question was Mutare which just happens to be Dan Wylie's hometown. I know this because he tells us so in this book as he considers some recent events concerning human-elephant interactions there. None, alas, had the happy ending of my elephant encounter but they do represent all too well the current plight of the elephant in Southern Africa and the difficulty in managing the borderline between the human and elephant worlds.

A few years ago, Dan Wylie wrote the rather good volume, *Elephant*, in the Reaktion Animal series and this book is also a worthy contribution to the literature. Indeed, in many ways it stands as a model of how one might survey a cultural field (in this case, Southern African literature) with a particular animal in mind and how one might organise that survey around a master concept (in this case, compassion) to create an integrated view of the subject which is easy to access and easy to understand.

The book is divided into chapters each of which (with one exception) surveys a genre of Southern African literature: Indigenous stories, early exploration narratives, hunters' memoirs, novels, rangers' memoirs, field research narratives and reports and poetry. The exception is a special study of the elephant Knysna and Addo herds which may be the least successful part of the book except for its magnificent characterisation of the hunter Major 'Jungle Man' Pretorius's memoirs as 'a repellently self-serving work' (185). The address to both aesthetically and (notionally) non-aesthetically driven genres works well partly because it enables a much fuller account to emerge than would otherwise be the case but also, more importantly, because it exposes the artifice and ideological distortions in what are, ostensibly, factual or scientific narratives. Even if one were not interested in elephants, reading this book would offer a marvellously comprehensive view of literature in the region from the colonial period to the present day.

Wylie defines his master concept (against sympathy and empathy – with deft little asides about sentimentality and anthropomorphism) as a consciously ethical response '*intended to benefit the animal*' and a sense of being '*on this journey together*'. His textual analyses probe for the presence or absence of compassion and one senses, from time to time, his anger at the persistent failure of – who? I would say governments but it's all of us – to protect and conserve elephants.

So, this book is not only a fine piece of cultural criticism, it is also a contribution to the actions that concerned people might take to stand up for elephants.

One sentence in the book will stay with me when I have lost the more nuanced detail:

The opposite of compassion for elephants is ivory. (10)

Could it be better put?