Review 2

Amy Ratelle

Animality and Children’s Literature and Film

(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

Dedicated to a dog named Sam, who ‘seems to have always thought that he is a person’ (1), *Animality and Children’s Literature and Film* sets out to deconstruct the familiar human-animal dichotomy and hierarchies based upon it. In this thought-provoking, interdisciplinary study, Amy Ratelle challenges the prevailing popular and critical tendency to regard animals in books and films for children simply as anthropomorphised substitutes for humans. Instead, drawing on the emerging field of animal studies and on posthumanist scholarship that critiques the notion of an exclusively human subjectivity, Ratelle provides fresh insights into a dozen or so stories published between the late eighteenth to the early- twenty first century, as well as a small selection of films for children.

Charting the literary and later filmic representation of animals and their relationships with humans over more than two centuries is no easy task. Ratelle’s solution is to focus largely on canonical works with which readers are likely to have some familiarity. So, for example, a discussion of Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty* (1877) is conducted alongside an explication of Judith Halberstam’s theories about the architecture of monstrosity to explore how the conflation of human inferiority and animality problematizes notions of race, class, gender and sexuality in the well-known and long-admired children’s novel. Similarly, a detailed account of the history of pigs and factory farming is linked to an analysis of E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* (1952), *Babe* (1995) and *Chicken Run* (2000) as part of an investigation of spurious vindications of producing animals to feed humans. In another chapter, a comprehensive summary of the technologies of pain employed from antiquity to the late-Victorian period provides context for an examination of the ethics of laboratory testing of animals in a discussion of *The Rats of NIMH* (1971). While the inclusion of the critically neglected *Memoirs of Dick, the Little Pony* (1799) is to be lauded, it is the only relatively unknown text covered in the study.

In Ratelle’s view, the configuration of childhood as separate to adulthood resembles the constructed distinction between the human and the animal. Furthermore, children, because they are relatively powerless and seldom as articulate as their elders, have, according to Ratelle, long been associated with animals. In *Fabulous histories, designed for the instruction of children, respecting their treatment of animals* (1786), Sarah Trimmer drew on this association to compare and contrast the behaviour of human children with a group of nestling robins and so provide social and moral lessons for her young readers, who were encouraged to treat animals with kindness. Early writers of children’s fiction encouraged identification with animals, who were endowed with only those human characteristics likely to provide examples of good and bad behaviour. During the nineteenth century, writers of children’s fiction, including Anna Sewell, similarly tended to encourage their readers to empathise with animals in order to reaffirm their own humanity and superiority. Interestingly, however, middle-class, Victorian children who read animal autobiographies such as *Black Beauty*, went on to become active members of the anti-vivisection and animal rights movements. As a result of an increasing recognition that animals are capable of suffering, American and late-
twentieth century children’s fiction and film, while endeavouring to empower children, increasingly challenged the assumption that animals are inherently subordinate to humans. Nevertheless, both Charlotte’s Web and Chicken Run ultimately retreat from critiquing human consumption of animals on a large scale and so re-inscribe the human/animal binary they challenge.

The dedication and the study itself reflect Ratelle’s passion for animals. That passion enhances what might otherwise have been a dry or earnest application of posthumanist theory to a range of children’s texts and films. Throughout, theorists who challenge the assumption that humans are superior to other animal species are invoked to insist convincingly on the rights and agency of all animals. For example, Donna Hathaway’s concept of a ‘companion species’ and Deleuze and Guattari’s hypothesis of ‘becoming animal’ are used to highlight the complexity of Jack London’s deconstruction of nature/culture, animal/human and domesticity/wilderness dichotomies in The Call of the Wild (1902). In a related vein, Jacques Derrida’s identification of a carnophallogocentric paradigm of meat consumption informs Ratelle’s analysis of Charlotte’s Web.

For scholars of children’s literature, this approach has both advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, it fuels original readings of canonical texts and highlights how fruitful and provocative the application of critical theory to children’s literature can be. Less helpfully, there are occasions when the explication of critical theory and historical background take precedence over textual analysis. For example, the explication of technologies of pain through the ages takes ten pages while the analysis of the 1982 film, The Secret of NIMH, runs to just three pages. Furthermore, Ratelle argues that focus on exceptional, individual animals in children’s books has resulted in a denial and/or rejection of animality in general. Yet, she focuses only on a small sample of canonical stories and films for children in her study. This narrow focus, however inadvertently, misrepresents and/or denies the variety, richness, and breadth of children’s literature in general. The provocative basic premise of this lucidly written monograph – that humans are animals like other animals – implies that children are essentially little beasts. That, alone, ensures that Animality and Children’s Literature and Film will be of interest and value to anyone involved in the study of texts and films produced for children, rather than kids or puppies or the young of any other animal species.

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