

AMY RATELLE
**ANIMALITY AND CHILDREN'S
LITERATURE AND FILM**

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Zoocriticism, how odd and funny does not that sound? If we substitute the concept for its synonym of “animal studies”, however, we seem to enter into more familiar ground. Both terms were initially used to denote that relatively recent field of the humanist study of animals, which emanated from the broader field of ecocriticism some fifteen years ago. The field of animal studies has subsequently established itself as one of the most intriguing areas of research in the humanities in the 21st century, or, should I say, in the posthumanities, as well as in what is called the environmental humanities.

The effective deconstruction of the human-animal dichotomy is far from new; some of its most influential modern practitioners have been Valerie Plumwood, Donna Haraway and, of course, Jacques Derrida himself. The history of thought on human-animal intertwinement, however, stretches as far back as Darwin at least. Nevertheless, and in the *longue durée*, even before Darwin there were voices adopting a balancing view of the human-animal divide and the hierarchy based on it. One of the most important of these critics was the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, whose famous statement in 1780 regarding animals – “[the issue] is not Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?” – became mandatory for future laws and regulations on the treatment of animals. Before him, another British philosopher, John Locke, had emphasized the need for kindness towards animals, as he, in an Aristotelian fashion, recognised a connection between cruelty towards animals and cruelty towards humans.

In her recent book *Animality and Children's Literature and Film*, Amy Ratelle discusses animals, the animalistic and animal-human relations in a number of classical animal stories and films for children, with some of the thinkers mentioned above as her theoretical

inspiration. It should immediately be said that Ratelle's work is highly lucid, elegantly written, and that it offers a source of intriguing examples and compassionate analyses and deconstructions of the animal-human divide in literary and cinematic classics such as *Black Beauty*, *Babe*, *The Call of the Wild*, and *National Velvet*. This is already an achievement of rank, but what makes Ratelle's book into a superlative one is her pregnant and skillful historical contextualisations of her material. The history of ideas, environmental history and scientific history are the three disciplines that provide the contexts for Ratelle's many times ingenious readings.

So what do they generate? Ratelle's method yields both intellectual and emotional insights. She makes the reader perceive, sense, the genealogy of the problem of animal subordination and human domination in Western tradition and social practices, but she also demonstrates through her material how the dichotomy has been and can be negotiated. What is more, building on Plumwood and Haraway, she introduces new concepts in order to understand the silenced aspects of the relationship between humans and other animals, aspects that help to underscore the similarities between us. "Contact zone" and "companion species" are two of these concepts. How refreshing and encouraging is it not to think of human beings as a companion species? The idea is of course that we humans can also be companions to animals different from ourselves and not only the other way round. Once we enter into a contact zone with a non-human animal, a mutual relationship is born. This should be obvious, but due to the persistent hierarchical division between humans and animals the whole idea may seem strange.

Amy Ratelle shows that it is ultimately the issue of subjectivity that has run through and informed the complex of the animal-human divide. The human subject over the animal non-subject is an old idea which was subsequently cemented by means of the Cartesian cogito. Posthumanist philosophy; ethics; and the most recent research into animal behavior and physiology, however, have shown that granting animals subjectivity is indeed motivated. Amy Ratelle's valuable study compellingly excavates this historical development, but above all it demonstrates how literature and film for children have been and still are central to it.

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