Narrative Works
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

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BOOK REVIEW

David Herman. *Narratology beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0190850401.

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In this excellent work of literary criticism, David Herman reconstructs narrative theory from a critical animal studies perspective. Adopting this perspective in *Narratology beyond the Human*, Herman addresses in fiction and nonfiction texts the coupled threats arising first from anthropocentrism, which rigidly imposes binary divisions between human animals and non-human animals, and second, from anthropomorphism, which uncritically denies the alterity of non-human animals. The author credits his key narratology assumptions to Darwin's deconstruction of hierarchical oppositions between human and nonhuman animals in works such as *The Descent of Man* (1871/2004) and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872/2009). By dislodging human-centric hierarchies in the anthropocentric humanist ontologies, Darwin's studies laid the foundations for the biocentric ontologies and biocentric storytelling traditions upon which Herman builds his new narratology beyond the human. Within a biocentric community, humans abandon their instrumentalizing approach to animals as tools usable for human ends and instead embrace what Jurgen Habermas (1984–1987) would call a communicative reasoning approach that appreciates the subjective agency of non-human animals in their own rights. While Herman briefly glances at points of overlap between the projects of feminism and critical animal studies, he does not consider at length the feminists whose research helped to usher in critical animal studies or whose social justice academic research has led to improved standards of living for animals.

The progression across the chapters is to start with the subjectivities of individual animals; to progress to the reconstructed institution of the transhuman family; to radiate further outward to animal

geographies; and, finally, to move to the granular and textured descriptions of multimodal texts. In chapter 1, "Self-Narratives and Nonhuman Selves," Herman focuses on the constructions of animal subjectivities. He argues that animals have selves with agency in the same ways that humans have selves with agency. Herman challenges those scientists who have denied autonomous consciousness and emotions to animals. Considering Lauren Groff's (2011) short story, "Above and Below" and Jesse Reklaw's (2013) graphic novel, *Thirteen Cats of My* Childhood, he finds "in both texts a human self takes shape in a larger constellation of selves, many of them nonhuman" (p. 49). Herman finds that many of these transspecies narratives have difficulty navigating the boundaries between human and non-human animals: "The concept of relationality entails differences as well as similarities; understanding of the self's being always-in-relation-to nonhuman others requires avoiding both the Scylla of dichotomization (underidentification) and the Charybdis of homogenization (overidentification)" (p. 65). Herman strives to retain the modernist third space by balancing between the two extremes.

In chapter 2, Herman uses a range of modernist, postmodernist, and contemporary texts to explore acts of identification and outright transformation across the species boundary. He considers the constructions of self-narratives that result in human-to-animal and animal-to-human transformations that result in hybrid identities. These hybrid subjectivities break down the anthropocentric-biased binary divisions between human animals and non-human animals. In this chapter, Herman considers at length Angela Carter's (1979) short story, "The Tiger's Bride," from her collection, *The Bloody Chamber*. In this story, Carter uses myth and fairy tale conventions to create an "antinormative account of species categories and hierarchies" (p. 84) that calls into question the coherence of the concept of the human itself and the patriarchal assimilation of women with the category of other-than-human beings. Herman points to Carter's counter-logic which is "based on the recognition of humans' place within, and ties to, the larger animal world; it disrupts jointly speciesist (Ryder 2000) and patriarchal institutions and practices whereby both women and animals are treated as invisible 'in the market place, where the eyes that watch you take no account of your existence'" (p. 85). Herman writes that Carter points to a fluid boundary separating human and animal that allow for hybrid identities and that suggest alternative self-other relationships across the species boundary. Herman cites overlap between the projects of feminism

and critical animal studies where "women and animals become marginalized as other in interconnected ways by masculinist ideals of the self" (p. 97). Herman agrees with feminist critics that this concern for animals has been coded as feminine and disregarded by patriarchal institutions.

In subsequent chapters, Herman explores alternative transspecies institutions and spatial regimes. In chapter 3, "Entangled Selves, Transhuman Families," Herman looks at transspecies families where humans live alongside non-human animals in biotic communities. "These stories…are fables of transhuman families; more precisely, the tales at once evoke the transhuman reach of the concept of family and draw on concepts, metaphors, and associations linked to families to figure forth more-than-human worlds" (p. 106). He considers autism memoirs that blur the binary boundaries dividing human and non-human animals. "Humans who have specific physical impairments, which are coded as disabling, can be slotted into the category of the nonhuman, itself interpreted as the less-than-human" (p. 99). The ableism bias that results in the pathologizing of those with disabilities is similar to the speciesism bias that results in the pathologizing and denial of autonomy of animals. Herman looks at research examining how pets and animals become parts of transhuman families through processes like "triangling" (p. 107), where intense emotions between two human family members are deflected onto an animal. Pets can also play key roles in a family's functioning and relationship dynamics. These narratives challenge anthropocentric traditions, institutions, and practices and broaden the ecology of selves to include animals as subjective agents in their own right, as opposed to merely serving instrumental uses to humans.

Subsequently, Herman develops and broadens this reconfigured construct of a transpecies family into a construction of biocentric animal geographies inside and outside of the domestic transhuman home. In chapter 4, he looks at how authors of graphic novels have adapted stories like Franz Kafka's (1915/2015) *Metamorphosis* to model alternative animal geographies where the presence of an earlier disdained insect, Gregor as the insect, is allowed into intimate human spaces. Herman argues that this alternative animal geography challenges anthropocentric animal geographies and creates instead biocentric animal geographies. One of Herman's observations is that in order to move away from anthropocentric imaginings of animal experiences, authorial narrators need to anchor these nonhuman experiences in "a less summative, more detailed or granular way" (p. 139). By grounding their narratives in

multmodal concrete and granular expressed experiences, what Clifford Geertz (1973) describes as "thick description" (p. 5), Herman argues that authors will more closely access the subjective agencies of animals. Herman applauds Nick Abadzis's (2007) multimodal graphic novel, *Laika*, for demonstrating this fine-grained granular narrative strategy with visual as well as print representations. Herman laments the instrumentalized use of the dog for speciesist institutional and political ambitions: "The inclusion of the smaller images of Laika…portrays in a more fine-grained way what it may have been like for Laika to experience the deteriorating conditions inside the cockpit" (p. 140). In contrast to the granular detail presented in a multimodal graphic novel like *Laika*, Herman finds monomodal generalizations in human-centric allegories like Jack London's (1903/2017) *Call of the Wild* and Anna Sewell's (1877/2007) *Black Beauty*.

Although Herman's mournful tone bespeaks his empathy with lost animals like Laika, I wonder at the lack of urgency to transform his written criticisms of speciesism into concrete social justice results. In a wearied voice, Greta Gaard (2012) acknowledges that posthumanist research on animals "has been good for academe. The question is, has it been good for animals?" (p. 14). In *Narratology beyond the Human*, Herman expresses faith in the modernist ability to move beyond the Cartesian polarity between the mind in here and the world out there.

Herman's modernist rebuttal in *Narratology beyond the Human* to such criticisms of Gaard seems to be that his modernist research is not inward-gazing but "stages how the mind is spread abroad or situated in the worldly environments that it at once helps constitute and is constituted by" (p. 138). To my mind, a more persuasive defense of the modernist project is the Habermasian acknowledgment of its incomplete nature and of the recognition of necessary praxis to complete modernist goals. Since the Cartesian polarity is propped up by an observer's perspective, it is through a participant's post-Cartesian perspective that biocentric thinking can be applied in democratic deliberations to expose speciesism as biased thinking. Members of the Frankfurt School long ago challenged the instrumentalization of animals by humans. Horkheimer and Adorno (1969) wrote:

> The conclusion they [animal psychologists] draw from mutilated bodies applies not to animals in the free state but to man as he is today. It shows that because he does injury to animals, he and he alone in all creation voluntarily functions as mechanically, as

> blindly and automatically as the twitching limbs of the victim which the specialist knows how to turn to account. The professor at the dissecting table defines these spasms scientifically as reflexes, just as the soothsayers at the altar once proclaimed them to be signs vouchsafed by his gods. Reason, mercilessly advancing, belongs to man. The animal, from which he draws his bloody conclusion, knows only irrational terror and the urge to make an escape from which he is cut off. (p. 245)

In opposition to this anthropocentric reasoning that instrumentalizes animals, a biocentric community will be constructed through public unmaskings of speciesism through the processes of deliberative democracies.

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