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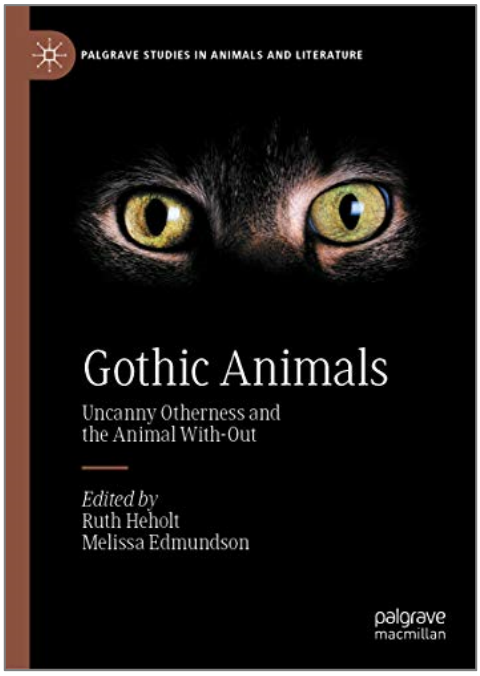
BOOKS

Ruth Heholt; Melissa Edmundson, *Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 307 p.



This Palgrave collection of studies on animals and literature, edited by Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson, brings together a series of cross-disciplinary approaches meant to reconceptualize the relationship between human and non-human literary beings in such a way as to acknowledge the continuum of sentience and affect between them. Ranging from of an analysis of faux documentaries about spectral predators to a diachronic incursion into the universe of American superhero comics, the studies are both rigorous and captivating. The collection as a whole revolves around the "animal turn" in historical, anthropological, philosophical and literary research and on this new momentum within the field of English studies, as I will try to show with reference to a few of the texts included here.

In "'Like a Madd Dogge': Demonic Animals and Animal Demoniacs in Early Modern English Possession Narratives," Brendan C. Walsh explores sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestant representations of the demonic animal, as encountered in possession pamphlets. His study establishes the 1957-1958 case of William Sommers "as one of the archetypical cases of demonic possession in the early modern English context," (31) and revolves around three written accounts produced by exorcist John Darrell. Walsh provides insight into the ways in which animals were spiritually and culturally perceived in the early modern period. The essay offers a compelling explanation as to why associations made between animals and the demonic Other became mirror images "to the model of Christian behaviour that early modern audiences were encouraged to follow" (35).

Michael Fuchs explores an irrational fear enhanced by Steven Spielberg's

1975 blockbuster *Jaws* in "Imagining the Becoming-Unextinct of Megalodon". Fuchs successfully argues that Spielberg promoted a heightened understanding of the biological truth that humans are not at the top of the food chain, but rather on the trophic level of an "anchovy." This self-awareness is the driving mechanism behind people's trepidation about an ancient predator that became extinct over 3 million years ago – the megalodon. Fuchs takes a jab at both the transgressive ontological movement of digital animals perpetuated by pseudo-documentaries, as well as at a "desperately naïve" techno-utopia in which the human can also become un-extinct through digital rendering (111). A sharp critic of "Gothic media" outlets such as the Discovery Channel, Fuchs infuses the Baudrillardian concept of hyperreality with light-hearted breakdowns of cinematic discourses in order to showcase the misleading ways of mise-en-scène, montage, cinematography and audio-visual special effects. The essay wittingly depicts a digital realm of constructed evidence meant to give viewers a sense that an uncanny ancient predator has the possibility to invade the now, "thereby collapsing the differences between past and present (and future)" (114).

Kevin Knott shifts the focus from galeophobia to "flyophobia" in his essay on Jane Rice's *The Idol of the Flies*. The macabre story of a psychopathic child with vicious tendencies, and his biblical companion in the form of Beelzebub was highly impactful on nascent American pulp fiction. Knott links Rice to the emergence of Domestic Gothic; her portrayal of domestic space as an entrapping universe for the female characters is nevertheless distinct, containing no sexual element (177). Knott traces the symbolic evolution of the fly from palpable metonym for "unpredictable fancies" during the Romantic era (177) to the embodiment of "muted, invisible, and similarly unspeakable" cruelty (179) in his overview of a novel with an unexpected predator who is not only human, but also a child.

Another unlikely predator, the RoboBee, emerges in Franciska Cettl's "Encircled by Minute, Evilly-Intentioned Airplanes". The automaton, a recent descendant of Jacques de Vaucanson's Canard Digérateur, is part of a history of machines found at the intersection between science fiction and Gothic literature; Cettl's essay is an exploration of the ethics of artificial life (188). Halfway through the piece, the reader is made aware of a singular moment in Mary Shelley *Frankenstein* that has eluded scholarly attention. This awareness morphs into a discussion on the dominant human relationship with the creature-as-insect (191). The essay also critically references Achille Mbembe's deathworlds and Foucauldian biopolitics, along with an episode of *Black Mirror*, in order to skilfully contour the more complex anxieties produced by the issues of "online surveillance and privacy, abuse and targeting on social media, and drone warfare" (195).

Fred Francis revisits a staple of modern mythology – the comic book superhero and his mild-mannered alter ego. "The Gothic Animal and the Problem of Legitimacy in American Superhero Comics" revolves around the origin story of one of the heavyweight names of the comic book universe. The Gothic origins of Batman – an idealistic paladin of heroic justice – are traced back to the non-fictional issue of producing a plausible character able to instil both fear and admiration. Francis establishes a valid connection

between nineteenth-century Gothic doubling and the duality of the Caped Crusader. The figure of the bat is at the centre of Francis's study, as the author chooses to dissect the reasons why Frank Miller reverts to the flittermouse for the Gothic rebirth of Bruce Wayne in the graphic novel *Batman: Year One* (1987). Francis also offers the reader a glimpse into the varying functions of the bat-as-animal; he traces its evolution from "a hero's *raison d'être*" (101) to its image becoming the herald of a legitimate American form of literature (11).

Paul Benedict Grant focuses on the monstrous representation of arachnids as Guilt personified in the third chapter entitled "'Most Hideous of Gaolers': The Spider in Ernest G. Henham's *Tenebrae*". The 1898 novel has been neglected by critics, yet Grant manages to establish a connection between *Tenebrae* and the earlier Gothic works of Jeremias Gotthelf, Bertram Mitford and the Erckmann-Chatrian French duo. Grant further explains the allure of the protean figure of the spider, and praises Henham's ability to render a feeling of "narrative claustrophobia" (53), likening it to Edgar Allan Poe's "sophisticated handling of the psychology of fear, guilt, and madness" (44).

Anja Höing examines another critically neglected piece and shifts the focus to anthropomorphic talking animals in the chapter entitled "Devouring the Animal Within: Uncanny Otherness in Richard Adams's *The Plague Dogs*". As Höing shows, "the danger this 'Other' presents is exposed not as an essential characteristic of otherness, but as a consequence of miscommunication, of misreading the other" (73). *The Plague Dogs* is highly political in nature, attempting to "disentangle the animal without from the animal within" (58). The reader will remark that, despite its abundance of Gothic tropes, *The Plague Dogs* has never been recognised as a Gothic novel, being neglected by critics in favour of Adams's highly acclaimed *Watership Down*. Nonetheless, Höing effectively highlights the dual function of a literary text which "employs the sensationalist dimension of the Gothic into its biting satire of British media" (60).

In the preamble to *Gothic Animals,* Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson recall the 2017 refusal of the Tory Government to formally recognise animals as sentient beings under the EU Withdrawal Act. Concurrently, across the Atlantic, the Trump administration attempted to reverse a ban on elephant trophies imported from Africa. Both decisions engendered controversy and were invalidated following severe backlash from the public. Nevertheless, such policies tend to relegate the nonhuman to a vulnerable position by further widening the divide between humans and animals.

The marginalization of animals under conditions of societal instability confers upon them the Gothic features of the "Alien, Other, and unknowable" (3). Yet the genre seeks to classify and contain the very image it generates; the animal-as-alien is thus attributed human characteristics. Anthropomorphism also automatically invokes the human-as-animal concept in the same manner in which Darwinism seeks to render "the human more animal and the animal more human, destabilizing boundaries in both directions" (4).

Still, the fear of the "animal within" – the Gothic double kept in abeyance – continues to grow. Nineteenth-century genre staples such as Mr. Hyde, the werewolf, the shape-shifting portrait of Dorian Gray or Doctor Moreau's uncanny

animals serve(d) as social archetypes or metaphors meant to explore contemporary taboos. Yet these are not merely Gothic stock characters, as they often bridge the divide and overlap with the human element. The interaction becomes the focus of the Palgrave collection, as current practices are blurring age-old conceptual lines, and human and nonhuman lives intertwine. However, *Gothic Animals* partly concentrates on the gulf between human and animal entities or "between the world as we perceive it and the vast possibilities of other worlds which we do not and cannot even begin to conceive" (9). Ultimately, what this collection of studies highlights is the human (mis)understanding of the nonhuman Other.

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