

Jopi Nyman and Carol Smith, eds., *Animal Magic: Essays on Animals in the American Imagination*. Faculty of the Humanities, University of Joensuu, 2004. Studies in Literature and Culture 11. 165 pages; ISBN 952-458-531-6.

This collection of eight essays dealing with animals in the American imagination, especially as expressed in the field of literature, ranges far and wide across its topic. A similar diversity can be found in the varied backgrounds of the contributors, who come from seven different countries, and who exhibit a refreshing multiplicity of views and angles on their subject. What unites them all is the conviction that the traditional ways of interpreting animal tropes simply as symbolic or allegorical constructs, is a wholly inadequate approach to the complex referentiality of their appearance. As Jopi Nyman expresses it in his illuminating Introduction to the volume:

As the foregoing shows, animal texts need to be reconceptualized as cultural and social constructs, rather than as ahistorical fables. Hence animal narratives are not mere allegories of human nature but as cultural products they are more complex and can be understood as attempts to explore such problematic issues as gender, race, class and nation. In other words, animal narratives are cultural texts which, regardless of the apparent objectivity of such forms as the animal documentary, construct American (and Other) identities in various ways ranging from the promotion of anthropomorphized readings of animal behavior to their symbolic role in nation-making.

From such a common starting point in the belief that "animal narratives can be related to their social and historical contexts and thus function as ways of promoting ideas and views peculiar to the values and ideologies of their contexts of origin," the contributors have gone in widely different directions when it comes to the concrete manifestations of such a conviction. Jochen Achilles, in the collection's longest essay, has gone back to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and a couple of lesser-known nineteenth-century texts by Joseph Le Fanu and Harriet P. Spofford to look at "Monkey Business in Intercultural and Intertextual Perspective." Especially his analysis of the interpretative ambiguities created by the pivotal role played by the orangutan in Poe's story provides an instructive example of how this particular animal functions as much more than a simple symbol of the irrational and instinctual. From one point of view, one may see the story and its simian protagonist as representing "a universalist cosmological tale, suggesting an evolutionary world view which challenges religious orthodoxy and replaces a divinely ordered universe by a disenchantingly contingent world," thus illustrating the crisis of Enlightenment universalism. A modern, gendered reading may focus on the story's presentation of the sexual repressions and perversions of the white male, while a post-colonial perspective will see the orangutan (and his owner, the Maltese sailor) as representatives of the "primitive," colonized other. In the author's own words, "in all three tales discussed, the animal presences function as symptoms of repressed and ambivalent cultural problems, the tabooed desire for and exploitation of people of different sex and race, the fear of and attraction by civilizational progress, godless rationalism, disorienting urbanization, as well as the imagined security of Christian or unorthodox

belief systems." Faced with the seemingly motiveless frenzy of Poe's orangutan, the reader is made to encounter the terror of a god-less world devoid of design and moral certainties.

Jude Davies focuses on "Animals and the Social in Theodore Dreiser's 'The Shining Slave Maker' and *The Financier*," attempting to produce "a reading of Dreiser's naturalism for the twenty-first century." According to Davies, "it is precisely the wavering between determinism and deconstruction in Dreiser's naturalism that leads through a consideration of animals into a probing of the limits of, and the fractures within, human sociality." Starting from the famous incident of the lobster and the squid at the beginning of *The Financier*, he argues that this metaphor of the survival of the fittest is not the reductive social Darwinism it is often made out to be, but a much more complex object lesson for Frank Cowperwood on the road towards his realization of human difference and multiplicity and the many types of conflict they necessarily engender. In the short story "The Shining Slave Makers," Dreiser's tale of a man who is transformed into an ant and made to observe their anthropomorphic behavior, poised between innate selfishness and more altruistic tribal obligations, further underlines the continuity between animal and human in what amounts to much more than a simple Darwinian universe.

Jopi Nyman's essay on the "United States of Animals" has singled out a 1986 animated movie (*An American Tail*) and two books of fiction (Ernest Thompson Seton's *Wild Animals I Have Known* from 1898 and Rafi Zabor's *The Bear Comes Home*, published exactly a hundred years later), in an attempt at "refiguring American identities." Nyman's contribution, which is probably the one which comes closest to living up to the volume's overarching purpose, is also the best example of an interdisciplinary approach to his chosen themes. Combining a modern movie with fictional texts from different centuries provides him with a broad range of animal representations in their site-specific, historical, cultural, and social contexts. In the story of Fievel Mouskewitz and his family's emigration from Russia at the end of the 19th century, Hollywood has predictably promoted national unity and the gospel of unlimited possibilities at the expense of barriers of class and ethnicity. The hero's singing "Never Say Never" at the top of the Statue of Liberty is clearly a worthy emblem of the film's simplistic all-American message! Balanced against such conventional national mythologies are the two literary texts of Nyman's analysis, where especially *The Bear Comes Home* is a forceful reminder that the real United States of America is "a hybrid site of racial and interspecies mixing where boundaries are crossed and new modes of expression formed." This way "the novel's story of in-betweenness replaces the fixed identities of race and species with more fluid identities that are capable of embracing Otherness."

Space unfortunately does not permit more than a cursory glance at the remaining essays in the collection. Katalin Orban's intriguing essay on "Werebeavers of the World, Unite? Animals on the Verge of Readability in Thomas Pynchon's Novels" deals with the important role played by animals in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason &*

Dixon, concluding that “typically for Pynchon, it is a fugitive robot duck that bears the burden of the most serious questions of responsibility posed by the text.” Ernesto Suárez-Toste has studied “Empathy vs. Surrealism in Elizabeth Bishop’s *Animals Poems*,” while Malgorzata Rutkowska has gone on the road with her “Travelers and Their Faithful Companions: Dogs in Contemporary Travel Writing,” focusing on John Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley* (1961), Peter Jenkins’ *A Walk Across America* (1980), and Lars Eighner’s *Travels with Lizbeth* (1993). In her essay on “‘Brer Rabbit Takes a Walk’: The Trickster in Afro-American Folklore and Fiction,” Ewa Luczak uses examples from central figures like Joel Chandler Harris, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison in sorting out the various questions of thematics and provenance in the African-American tradition of animal stories. The final title in the collection, Tom Cohen’s “‘Trackings’: Faulkner, Nietzsche, and the Question of the Animal in Post-Humanist American Studies,” is also the only essay that is not accessible to the ordinary reader, since its convoluted syntax and general abstract impenetrability puts it out of reach of anyone but (post-humanist?) specialists.

What all of these essays in sum make abundantly clear, is the pervasive importance of animals in the New World imagination, both past and present. From the very beginning, the colonists to the wondrous continent in the west, not surprisingly, integrated the animals of their new-found land in their perceptions of themselves and their fledgling nation. The Founding Fathers engaged in spirited debate about the national bird, for example, and while the (bald) eagle won out, a heavyweight like Benjamin Franklin voted for the wild turkey, risking a less than heroic “The Turkey has landed” a few centuries down the road... It is also entirely in keeping with this importance that a great many American football teams, for instance – from the Buffalo Bills to the San Diego Chargers – are given animal names, indigenous and otherwise.

Animal Magic is a valuable, interesting, and useful volume for anyone interested in understanding this central aspect of American culture, even if the enormously important role played by animals in Native American culture is conspicuously absent here, as is Disney’s all-American animal world. But asking for comprehensiveness in a collection of disparate essays is probably unfair; still, it is always a good sign when you reach the end of a book and keep asking for more.

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Hans. H. Skei, *Faulkner and Other Southern Writers: Literary Essays*. Oslo: Novus Press, 2004. 196 pages; ISBN 82-7099-392; Novus Studies in Literature ISSN 1503-3457; € 34.

More books have been written on Faulkner than on any other writer in English except Shakespeare; the question when reviewing a book in this seventh decade of Faulkner studies is whether there is room for yet another study of his work. Hans H. Skei’s *Faulkner and Other Southern Writers: Literary Essays* is a readable and welcome