

Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson (eds), *Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out* (review)

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GOTHIC NATURE



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REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEWS: CRITICAL

Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson (eds),
Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out
(Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)

Jimmy Packham

A menagerie of nonhuman animals haunt the pages of Gothic prose and poetry: ravens and black cats, wolves and bats, rats and flies, octopuses and squid—and snails. As this new collection of essays persuasively argues, we are, it seems, never more than six feet away from the uncanny and abject others against which we—the human animal—have regularly defined ourselves. In *Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out*, Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson, and their contributors, have produced an expansive and compelling account of both the role of the nonhuman animal in Gothic fiction and, at the same time, of the frequently Gothic relationships that have long existed between humans and nonhumans.

This volume, as Heholt and Edmundson suggest in their introduction, addresses the contention that there are ‘an infinite variety of alien worlds here, within touching distance of ourselves, embodied in the presence of the creatures that we share space with—even if we do not always share understanding’ (p. 9). It is the job of the Gothic, we discover, to reflect on ways we might work towards some form of greater understanding, or, if this is ultimately impossible, to critically examine (and unsettle) the issues and inequalities that originate in this inability to understand—for as several chapters in this collection remind us, we are likely always to be constrained by the limits of human thought and anthropocentrism. In exploring these ideas, the eighteen chapters included here chart a history of the Gothic animal from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English pamphlets on devilish dogs, through the classic Gothic of Ann

Radcliffe, to twenty-first century reimaginings and reinventions of the Gothic animal in young adult fantasy fiction and contemporary Scottish women's Gothic. A number of chapters also touch on what may be yet to come in our disturbing relationship with the animal: both Michael Fuchs's chapter on *faux* documentaries concerning the return of the megalodon and Franciska Cettl's study of the biopolitics of robobees imagine the ways in which scientific and technological developments might notionally reverse animal extinctions. The digital presence of the megalodon and the robotic simulacrum of the bee remain haunted by the real animals they imitate: 'the ghost[s] in the machine of Gothic science fiction' (p. 188). Such work also raises the question 'of who can possibly control these uncannimedia and for what purposes exactly' (p. 196).

Robobees notwithstanding, one of the greatest strengths of this volume is its dedication to what we might, for better or worse, term the 'real' animal. In this regard, *Gothic Animals* is well placed to contribute considerably to animal studies, ecocritical studies, and, above all, ecoGothic studies. It is easy to imagine a conspectus of the animal in the ecoGothic that never quite arrives at 'the animal-for-itself' (p. 279); we might gesture, for instance, to the animals associated with (or contained within) Frankenstein's creature, Dracula, and the Wolf Man, or to the human-animal hybrids of more recent fare like *Splice* (2009) and *Annihilation* (2014). While a number of these creatures inevitably put in an appearance in *Gothic Animals*, by and large this volume takes a refreshingly noncanonical approach to its uncanny creatures and the texts in which they appear. Edgar Allan Poe is the most familiar Gothic figure to make repeated appearances—most substantially in Kirstin A. Mills's magnificent reading of monstrously masculine horsemanship and Gothic pastiche in tales by Poe and Washington Irving.

'Real', of course, does not suggest these animals are any less horrifying than more fantastic beasts: a number of essays here explore cultural imaginaries haunted by prehistoric and/or extinct creatures (Fuchs's megalodon and Alex Philp's thylacine), or by animals otherwise beyond humanity's ken (such as Natalie Deam's astute analysis of the devilish octopus in Victor Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea* [1866]). Moreover, in its extensive consideration of uncanny encounters with domestic(ated) or more commonplace animals—notably dogs, spiders, and rats—*Gothic Animals* aptly registers the enduring centrality of the *unheimlich* to the *heimlich*, and thereby of the uncanny to the Gothic. Such work is at its most exciting when it uses the animal to reinvigorate this basic

tenet of Gothic theory: Timothy C. Baker's concluding chapter, for instance, explores how, in recent Scottish women's Gothic, 'women and non-human animals are united in their peripheral status' to show how concepts including the uncanny are 'underpinned by patriarchal and speciesist perspectives' (p. 294).

Baker's is one of several chapters emphasising how, in the vein of Donna Haraway, Gothic fiction imagines the good that might stem from entering into companionship with animals in order to disrupt longstanding anthropocentric and masculinist ideologies and power structures: establishing 'a kinship bond in a time of trouble', and opportunity for inclusivity 'where the stories of all creatures, in life and death, are taken seriously' (pp. 301, 303). As this might suggest, *Gothic Animals* demonstrates the difficulty with which Gothic writing—and, implicitly, all human cultural production—grapples in apprehending the animal-as-animal. Even as we celebrate the political work the animal helps the human to undertake—that is, how they help 'in exposing, not causing, the horrors' of our own making (p. 129)—the animal within is as significant here as 'the animal with-out'. The contributors are clearly attuned to the idea that the more energetically we pursue the animal itself, the more we find it will continually slip from our grasp, eluding finally being known.

It is difficult to overstate quite how appropriate for the current climate *Gothic Animals* is. Animal studies and ecocritical studies are currently enjoying a period of rich discussion; and *Gothic Animals* speaks productively to other recent Gothic and ecoGothic scholarship on (often more overtly supernatural) human-animal relationships, including Robert McKay and John Miller's edited volume, *Werewolves, Wolves and the Gothic* (2017), and Carys Crossen's monograph on this topic, *The Nature of the Beast* (2019). More to the point, however, *Gothic Animals* arrives in the midst of a global pandemic, the origins of which have been traced back, considerately and otherwise, to a human world that has routinely and extensively mistreated and exploited the animal. *Gothic Animals* may indeed help us to further understand not just this long history of abuse—whether literal or ideological—but the ecoGothic narratives that coalesce around disruptive animal presences and unsettling encounters between human and nonhuman. For example, sinophobic responses towards Covid-19's emergence in human populations (Wong, 2020)—most evidently the 'bat soup' conspiracy—implicitly stress the apparent horror invested

by humans in certain creatures, and the cultural contingency of notions of proper ways to ‘encounter’ (or consume) the animal. Even reports in popular media that sought to mitigate such narratives reiterated a perspective in which the human is distinct from and superior to the animal: ‘Viruses that circulate in animals keep jumping over to infect humans’, writes one (Resnick, 2020). Across its eighteen chapters, *Gothic Animals* grapples with human-animal entanglement and can help readers see the long historical and cultural contexts of this ‘alienation of the “human” from the “animal”’ (p. 2). Further, as mentioned above, this volume suggests the ways in which the Gothic, as a literature of protest, might proffer imaginative alternatives to the violences of the norm.

Gothic Animals is deliberately positioning itself as a catalyst for further conversation; as a result, there are inevitably some suggestive threads throughout the collection that it would be interesting to see developed in more detail. The focus here is largely on Euro-American (eco)Gothic, and those chapters which do venture beyond these territories (notably Philp’s and Shuhita Bhattacharjee’s) generally follow a colonial presence. Following recent work in indigenous Gothics, Asian Gothic, and the tropical Gothic, it would be fascinating to explore, via the varied critical frameworks presented by *Gothic Animals*, the role of the animal in these traditions—exploring, for instance, the work performed by the animal in Japanese ghost and supernatural tales. As understandings of what has been termed the ‘globalgothic’ develop alongside a much broader awareness of the perilous place of the animal in the networks of globalisation, these are undoubtedly conversations to be having, and which *Gothic Animals* is well placed to help foster.

Heholt and Edmundson have curated a volume that will surely find a wide and enthusiastic readership. In its totality, *Gothic Animals* demonstrates how, across a multitude of contexts, the animal is continually participating (unwillingly, unconsciously...) in the construction and deconstruction of the human and its cultures. Nor, indeed, is it the most outlandish, exotic, or apparently monstrous of real creatures that undertake such work. As Fiona Peters makes clear in her chapter on Patricia Highsmith, we would do well to be mindful even of the humble snail, threatening us by its gradual and slimy approach since at least the middle ages, ‘borderless and

alien to social order' (p. 163), in whose viscous maw we may well be swallowed up—figuratively, if not (one hopes) literally.

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