

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

Packham, Jimmy

*License:*  
Creative Commons: Attribution (CC BY)

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*  
Packham, J 2021, 'Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson (eds), *Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out* (review)', *Gothic Nature: New Directions in Eco-Horror and the EcoGothic*, no. 2.  
<<https://gothicnaturejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/1-GN2-Book-Reviews-J-Packham.pdf>>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

### General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

### Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

# GOTHIC NATURE



---

## GOTHIC NATURE II

**How to Cite:** Packham, J. (2021) Book Review: Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson (eds.), *Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out*. *Gothic Nature*. 2, pp. 202-206. Available from: <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/>.

**Published:** March 2021

---

### **Peer Review:**

All articles that appear in the *Gothic Nature* journal have been peer reviewed through a fully anonymised process.

### **Copyright:**

© 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

### **Open Access:**

*Gothic Nature* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

**COVER CREDIT:**

*Model IV*, 2017

Artist: D Rosen

Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask

(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

21 x 25 x 12 in.

Photo credit: Jordan K. Fuller

Fabrication: Chicago Crucible

**WEB DESIGNER:**

Michael Belcher

## 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.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Heholt, R. and Edmundson, M. (eds.) (2020) *Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out*. Cham, Palgrave-Macmillan.

Resnick, B. (2020) “*This is Not the Bat’s Fault*”: *A Disease Expert Explains Where the Coronavirus Likely Comes From*. Available from: <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2020/2/12/21133560/coronavirus-china-bats-pangolin-zoonotic-disease> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2020].

Wong, T. (2020) *Sinophobia: How a Virus Reveals the Many Ways China is Feared*. Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-51456056> [Accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2020].