



BOOK REVIEW:  
*Animals and Science Fiction*

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Castle, Nora, and Giulia Champion, editors. *Animals and Science Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. ISBN: 978-3031416972.

*Animals and Science Fiction* addresses a rather glaring gap in SF scholarship. Since Sherryl Vint's seminal 2010 text *Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal*, there has been limited work merging animal studies and the genre study of SF. Castle and Champion's work marks the first edited collection on the subject.

To be sure, there have been some excellent animal SF articles in the usual publications: *Science Fiction Studies*, *Science Fiction Film and Television*, here in *Fafnir*, and particularly in the journals *Extrapolation* and *Humanimalia: A Journal of Human/Animal Interface Studies*, which often focus on works that dwell in the strange liminal spaces between many speculative fields. A 2022 special issue of the journal *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* (vol. 26, no. 2) called for articles examining depictions of "animal futurity," while a 2024 theme issue of *Trace: Finnish Journal for Human-Animal Studies*, asked for responses concerning animals in "uncommon worlds," both resulting in animal SF articles. Beyond this, there exist several books that center on other fields but analyze animal SF texts as examples, such as David Herman's *Narratology Beyond the Human* (2018) or Missy Molloy et. al.'s *Screening the Posthuman* (2023). Individual scholars have made significant contributions to the field, such as Joan Gordon and Sherryl Vint herself. Finally, there have been several recent edited collections concerning critical *plant* studies and SF, including Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga's *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* (2017), Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari's *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (2019), and Katherine E. Bishop's *Plants in Science Fiction* (2020). Yet there is currently a lack of published work dedicated specifically to animals and SF, making Castle and

Champion's collection a sorely needed addition to scholarship, with more books on the subject hopefully to follow soon.

I should note here the collection's chosen acronyms: "NHAs" for nonhuman animals and occasionally "HAS" for human-animal studies (while NHA and HAS are capitalized in the text, SF is not). Starting from the editors' introduction, it is clear that the goal of *Animals and Science Fiction* is to "reinvigorate scholarship focused on this crucial topic" (2) by building directly upon Sherryl Vint's work in *Animal Alterity*. Castle and Champion lay out the critical importance of combining HAS and SF, noting that "sf texts allow readers to imagine alternative methods of 'seeing' nonhuman animals, both on their own terms and with regard to their inextricable entanglement with humanity" (2). The power of SF, then, "can be effectively mobilized to explore, critique, and theorize the current state – and, importantly, the future of – human and [NHA] relations" (3). This introduction is followed by a transcribed interview with Vint herself, on how the field has changed since she wrote *Animal Alterity* 14 years prior, and where she sees it going from here. The interview is invaluable to scholars working at this niche intersection of fields.

The editors note that they have intentionally "taken a broad view of what constitutes sf, what constitutes a text, and even what constitutes an animal" (3). Despite the potential of this to frustrate some scholars who crave definitive categorization, this collection is working under expansive, fluid frameworks, following Vint's notion of "sf as a network of linked texts, motifs, themes, and images, a network in which it is always possible to make new and novel connections" (3). This openness to new and novel connections is clear in the exceptional diversity of chapters in *Animals and Science Fiction*. Knowing that one of the shortcomings Vint notes about her *Animal Alterity* is a lack of diverse perspectives, Castle and Champion have striven to correct this. *Animals and Science Fiction* is divided into five parts with 20 chapters, and I will address all 20 briefly, as the contents therein are so varied that a comprehensive overview proved difficult.

Marta Mboka Tveit opens "Part I: Affect and Identity" by examining two "African Speculative Fiction (ASF)" (40) texts, one a short story by Edwin Okolo and the other a series of photographs by David Uzochukwu. This chapter draws quite masterfully on a large number of theorists, from Joan Gordon to Joshua Bennett, in order to create a nuanced argument for "the 'uneasy' kinship between the people who often suffer the most under the (neo)colonial logic and the nonhuman animal, and how ... Critically embracing that kinship can bring an edifying sense of solace and strengthen both" (51). Tveit's article is followed by Melissa Bianchi's analysis of less-examined 2D video games (as opposed to lush 3D) in which one plays as an NHA, including *Frogger* (1981) and *The Plan* (2013). This part of the collection then concludes with Peter Sands' chapter on Philip K. Dick's post-nuclear, species-destabilizing novel *Dr. Bloodmoney*.

In "Part II: Animal Communication" – perhaps the strongest part of the collection – four scholars offer studies of fictional human-NHA communication in delightfully different texts. Jerika Sanderson outlines "pity" versus "empathy" as evoked by the dinosaur vocalizations, i.e. "voices," in *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (2018). Rachel Fetherston contrasts Laura Jean McKay's novel *The Animals in That Country* (2020) – a work of Australian speculative fiction that is rapidly becoming a central text of human-NHA communication – with Robbie Arnott's *Flames* (2018). By tracing a path to

these texts through more “problematic perspectives of the nonhuman” (113) in older settler-colonial Australian literature, Fetherston argues that, in McKay and Arnott, these outdated ideas “are being subverted by ... more nuanced, ecological perspectives of human–nonhuman relations.” Following this, Liza B. Bauer and Nora Castle explore the SF trope of animal “uplift” through Adam Roberts’ key text in the field, *Bête* (2014). They discuss how uplift encapsulates human exceptionalism and the entrenched idea that language separates those with personhood from the voiceless, animals and others thus made “killable,” to use Haraway’s term, by that lack of language (130). Lastly, Iulia Ibragimova writes stirringly about the animality and communication of SF’s living, biological spaceships, including those in the television series *Farscape* and Nnedi Okorafor’s *Binti* trilogy.

Part III of the collection considers more medical, bodily, and scientific human-NHA interactions, under the heading “Bio-intervention and Corporeality.” Monica Sousa introduces readers to the little-known British novel *The Many Selves of Katherine North* (2017) by Emma Geen who creates a storyworld in which the protagonist “jumps” into various semi-virtual animal bodies in her profession as a “phenomenaut” – a witty portmanteau implying that voyaging into another creature’s phenomenology (or *Umwelt*) is akin to an astronaut departing our familiar planet. Then with an abrupt shift of genre – for this collection keeps its readers on their toes – Katarzyna Ostalska invites readers on a journey into the microscopic through Canadian poet Christian Bök’s *Xenotext: Book 1*, where, by using the genetic coding of bacteria as an enciphering process to produce words, the poet has created what Ostalska calls an “‘alien’ biochemical language” (189). Next, Brianna R. Burke explores how the Korean English film *Okja* (2017) “eviscerates the simulacra obscuring the factory-flesh-food system” (204) by presenting viewers with both emotional human-NHA relations and visceral horrors, and Emma Trott closes this part of the collection by examining the rich potential of interactions between black bodies and NHAs through medical transplantation in Malorie Blackman’s YA novel *Pig Heart Boy* (1997).

“Part IV: Community (Re)building and Entanglements” explores SF texts that are both culturally and generically diverse. Frances Hallam uses a variety of ecocritical and postcolonial lenses to illustrate “Africanfuturist assemblages” in Okorafor’s *Lagoon*, concluding that “the flow of matter—oil, water, and blood—merge and mix within the ocean inhabitants as a material-semiotic Anthropocene encounter” (246). Then Conrad Scott examines the entanglements of dogs, turtles, humans, and bacteria from the Canadian Indigenous perspective of Thomas King’s *The Back of the Turtle*. Lastly, Zoei Sutton et al. stretch the definition of SF to include speculative urban planning, imagining a “multispecies right to the city” (275).

Part V, titled “(Future) Fossils, Ancestrality, and Haunting,” is the least strong segment of the collection, mostly because its lack of cohesion makes each chapter feel rather like an afterthought – perhaps an inevitable difficulty when attempting to collate such disparate articles. First, Thomas Moran argues that Jia Zhangke’s 2013 Chinese film *Tian Zhuding* uses animals as both divinatory mirrors and witnesses for the human protagonists, to “attest to a deep disquiet within the accelerating temporality of Chinese capitalism” (311). Alice Fox then outlines the playable future symbiogenesis of *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), a post-apocalyptic videogame world haunted by the “lively ghosts” (322) of

machine-animals. After this, Vera Thomann walks the line between SF and scientific speculation using Dougal Dixon's *After Man: A Zoology of the Future* (1981). Finally, most notable in this section is Kathryn Heffner and Edward Guimont's discussion of dinosaur erotica as a locus for feminist sexual empowerment. Self-aware, they write:

Despite initially seeming absurd, dinosaur erotica offers a route to discuss and explore a plethora of issues, from the ethics of animal cruelty and exhibition to the politics of both gender and animal rights, the colonial ideal of fetishizing women ... and the racial aspects inherent in notions of deep time. (332)

In their analysis of dinosaurs as a critique of fetishization and domination in erotica, Heffner and Guimont illustrate the potential for fruitful scholarship in even the most unusual texts. Their acknowledgment of absurdity also recalls Castle and Champion's statement of taking a broad approach to what SF can be, leaving SF academic space open for a plethora of unexpected explorations.

Indeed, many of the SF texts discussed in *Animals and Science Fiction* may once have been seen as absurd in critical circles, and yet in this rapidly mutating and entangling academic climate, stretching the definitions and understandings of "animal" and "SF" is a vital practice. Castle and Champion's collection achieves its goal of reinvigorating Vint's line of inquiry at exactly the moment when the study of animals in SF seems poised to explode. It is a collection with palpable enthusiasm and propulsion, relaunching a crucial question, and it will prove useful to any scholar working on the subject.

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