CREATURAL FICTIONS
Before the 2000s, the humanities and social sciences paid little attention to the participation of non-human animals in human cultures. The entrenched idea of the human as a unique kind of being nourished a presumption that Homo sapiens should be the proper object of study for these fields, to the exclusion of lives beyond the human. Against this background, various academic disciplines can now be found in the process of executing an ‘animal turn’, questioning the ethical and philosophical grounds of human exceptionalism by taking seriously the animal presences that haunt the margins of history, anthropology, philosophy, sociology and literary studies.

This series will publish work that looks specifically at the implications of the ‘animal turn’ for the field of Literary Studies. Whereas animals are conventionally read as objects of fable, allegory or metaphor (that is, as signs of specifically human concerns), this series significantly extends the new insights of interdisciplinary animal studies by tracing the engagement of such figuration with the material lives of animals. The series will encourage the examination of textual cultures as variously embodying a debt to or an intimacy with non-human animals and advance understanding of how the aesthetic engagements of literary arts have always done more than simply illustrate natural history.

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CREATURAL FICTIONS

Human-Animal Relationships in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature

Edited by

David Herman
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This volume was made possible by the generous assistance of many colleagues and friends, and I would like to acknowledge the invaluable help and encouragement provided by Jan Baetens, Paul Batchelor, Jens Brockmeier, David Fuller, Dan Grausam, Teemu Ikonen, Simon J. James, Jane MacNaughton, Bob McKay, Rebekah Mitsein, Mary Offutt-Reagin, Matthew Ratcliffe, Stephen Regan, Carrie Rohman, Corinne Saunders, Jenny Terry, Sam Thomas, Will Viney, and Angela Woods. I am also grateful to the editors of the Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature series, Susan McHugh, Bob McKay, and John Miller, for their support of this project; to the reviewers of the volume (particularly Jeanne Dubino), for their invaluable suggestions for improvement; and to Ryan Jenkins, Shoba Rajeev, and Paileen Currie at the press, for their help with every stage of the editorial and production process. I thank Michele Mikesell, too, for her kind permission to use her painting Missed Flight as cover art. Closer to home, Sweet Beak provided uplifting trans-species companionship, while my deepest gratitude goes to Susan Moss—for the life that sustains.
This volume assembles essays by established experts as well as forward-thinking early-career scholars to explore how twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary texts engage with relationships between humans and other animals. The volume is divided into four main parts. Parts I and IV, bookending the study, are period-focused: part I centers on varieties of modernism and part IV on late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century fiction. The other two parts foreground the more general project of theory building in the domain of literary animal studies. Part II examines how ideas about species, sexuality, and gender link up in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary texts. Part III considers how the norms and expectations associated with fictional genres—including historical romance and postcolonial fiction—shape possibilities for understanding humans’ affiliations with other animals, even as those ways of understanding in turn shape the formation and evolution of genres. Overall, what distinguishes the volume is its dual commitment to, first, presenting a range of perspectives on fictional treatments of human-animal relationships; and second, demonstrating how ideas from literary animal studies can be leveraged to develop detailed interpretations of particular works written in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. The volume also includes chapters on some of the most-taught texts in the emergent canon of animal narratives, including Franz Kafka’s animal stories, J. R. Ackerley’s *My Dog Tulip*, Julia Leigh’s *The Hunter*, Yann Martel’s *The Life of Pi*, Zakes Mda’s *The Whale Caller*, and others.
Creatural Fictions thus aims to be a state-of-the-art contribution to research on literary engagements with relationships that cut across the species boundary. At the same time, encompassing diverse case studies and using a variety of methods to analyze them, the chapters in the volume collectively reveal how the very notion “animal” carries mythopoetic, biological-ecological, sociohistorical, and legal-political resonances that are multiplied when human-animal interactions come into view. Indeed, one of the larger goals of the book is to underscore how fictional texts centering on modes of entanglement between humans and other animals give rise to “transdisciplinary” questions for research, the proper articulation of which will require the combined efforts of scholars in the arts and humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. In investigating how the history of literary writing intersects with changing attitudes toward animals; how questions of gender and sexuality get mapped onto concepts of species identity, and vice versa; how particular genres such as romance fiction generate specific affordances and constraints when it comes to imagining the nexus of human and nonhuman worlds; how the portrayal of animals in postcolonial settings links up with histories of domination; and how the fictional styles and strategies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries not only reflect but also potentiate new understandings of human-animal relationships, Creatural Fictions aims to open pathways for cross-disciplinary exchange among scholars working in the humanities (literary scholars but also philosophers and historians), researchers based in the life sciences (ethologists, ecologists, and evolutionary biologists), and social scientists (anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers).

Yet the volume also raises issues that reach beyond the academic community, including the ethical dimensions of human-animal relationships, problems of species loss and diminishing biodiversity, and anthropogenic impacts on animal environments. The gap between the scientific consensus and public discourse (or nondoctrine) surrounding species loss, for example, remains profound. Developing innovative approaches to the study of fictional narratives that feature nonhuman beings, particularly in their interactions with human characters, has the potential to bridge cultural and scientific understandings of humans’ ties with and responsibilities to broader biotic communities. In particular, fictional texts provide means for (re)imagining the complex networks of affiliation linking human lifeworlds to the lifeworlds of other animals. Uncovering these sometimes submerged or repressed networks of affiliation, the
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contributors collectively fashion new ways of examining how twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary texts project animal worlds and their interconnections with humans’ institutions, practices, and experiences.

Engaging with the Creatural; Or, Literature beyond the Human

The title of the present volume signals its engagement with issues that have come into focus in recent discussions of the concept of “the creaturely.” As noted by Hilary Thompson in her chapter in this volume (see also Faber 303–4; Pick 75; Vermeulen 559–60), one strand of discourse concerning the creaturely derives from the work of Eric Santner. This approach to the creaturely begins from the premise of the distinctiveness of the human; the approach posits an ineradicable difference between humans and animals when it comes to existing in a condition of creatureliness, exposed to the necessities and constraints by which living beings are made vulnerable. But there is another strand of discourse on the creaturely, which Anat Pick traces back to the ideas of Simone Weil and which Beatrice Hanssen identifies in the same thinkers from whom Santner derives his thesis of human uniqueness when it comes to creaturely life. This second approach explores how the forms of bodily exposure and vulnerability linked to creaturely existence foreground not human distinctiveness but rather relational ties between humans and animals that might otherwise be overlooked. The slight semantic shift from creaturely to creatural in this volume’s title is meant to indicate its alignment with the second of these two strands of discourse, in which the status of being a creature, subject to the requirements of the surrounding environment, the vicissitudes of time, and the vulnerabilities of the body, emphasizes the fundamental continuity between humans and other animals. In turn, this focus on the ways in which fictional texts project such creatural ties across the species boundary fosters new possibilities for the study of literature beyond the human, as demonstrated by the chapters assembled in the present volume.

As Pieter Vermeulen notes, for Santner the constitutive vulnerability of creaturely life is bound up with but not reducible to animal life (657). In Santner’s own formulation, the concept of the creaturely, which he extrapolates from a tradition of German-Jewish writing that includes Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, Paul Celan, and others,
signifies a mode of exposure that distinguishes human beings from other kinds of life: not exposure simply to the elements or to the fragility and precariousness of our mortal, finite lives, but rather to an ultimate lack of foundation for the historical forms of life that distinguish human community…Creatureliness is thus a dimension not so much of biological as of ontological vulnerability, a vulnerability that permeates human being as that being whose essence it is to exist in forms of life that are, in turn, contingent, fragile, susceptible to breakdown. (Santner, Royal Remains 5–6, quoted in Vermeulen 659–60)

Santner develops this same line of argument in his book On Creaturely Life, where he suggests that what distinguishes human experiences of the creaturely is the way those experiences unfold in relation to the domain of politics: “human beings are not just creatures among other creatures but are in some sense more creaturely than other creatures by virtue of an excess that is produced in the space of the political and that, paradoxically, accounts for their ‘humanity’” (26). Later, reemphasizing the contrast between modes of creaturely existence experienced by humans versus other animals, Santner remarks that “for the writers I have discussed here the ‘creaturely’ pertains not primarily to a sense of shared animality or a shared animal suffering but to a biopolitical animation that distinguishes the human from the animal” (38–39).²

If Santner uses the concept of the creaturely to elaborate a distinction between human and nonhuman experiences of exposure, constraint, and vulnerability, and to anchor this distinction in the space of the political that humans both define and are defined by, in the second strand of discourse on this topic the overall aim is to use humans’ and other animals’ shared condition of embodiment, their shared vulnerability vis-à-vis the environments in which they live, to highlight modes of affiliation and connectedness across species lines. Further, if for Santner the human experience of creatureliness derives from a capacity to constitute and in turn be (de)constituted by political institutions and structures, in this second way of thinking about the creaturely the inextricable entanglement between humans and other animals—the being-in-relation-to-animals that in part constitutes what it means to be human—helps form the horizon within which the discourses and practices of politics as well as ethics take shape.

Thus, in developing the project of a creaturely poetics as well as a creaturely ethics, Pick seeks to build on Weil’s statement that “The vulnerability of precious things is beautiful because vulnerability is a
mark of existence’’ (3). As Pick notes, this statement has implications for understanding the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman lives, since “the relationship between vulnerability, existence, and beauty necessarily applies across the species divide and so delivers us beyond the domain of the human” (3). For Pick, “the creature . . . is first and foremost a living body—material, temporal, and vulnerable,” and a focus on the creature in this sense highlights “the ramifications (for thought and also for action) of being oriented toward vulnerability as a universal mode of exposure” for all animals, human as well as nonhuman (5). By the same token, a “creaturely ethics . . . does not depend on fulfilling any preliminary criteria of subjectivity and personhood. Its source lies in the recognition of the materiality and vulnerability of all living bodies, whether human or not, and in the absolute primacy of obligations over rights” (193). Pick’s project thus uses the concept of the creature not to reinstate a species hierarchy by drawing contrasts between ways of experiencing exposure and vulnerability, but rather to emphasize the indissolubility of the ties between humans and other animals, rooted in their shared conditions of existence. This emphasis translates, in turn, into a need to rethink any politics or ethics grounded on the assumption that vulnerability can be quantified, and allocated in different measures to different kinds of beings—or perhaps even to different individuals within a single taxonomic category.

Likewise, working in a different tradition of inquiry but along lines that can also be described as “creatural” in the sense indicated at the beginning of this section, Diane Davis argues that rhetoric, rather than being an exclusively human endowment, “takes place at the level of the creature” (89)—as a potential for the production and interpretation of signals that cuts across the species boundary (see also Kohn 27–70). Drawing on ideas outlined in George A. Kennedy’s 1992 article “A Hoot in the Dark,” Davis suggests that this trans-species capacity for signal creation and signal reading stems from an affectability or persuadability that is due not to any creature’s specific genetic makeup but to corporality more generally, to the exposedness of corporeal existence. To be affectable, persuadable, is to be always already affected, persuaded, which means: always already responsive. Rhetoric is not first of all an essence or property “in the speaker” (a natural function of biology) but an underivable obligation to respond that issues from an irreducible relationality. (89)