

Zoe Jaques, *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (New York: Routledge, 2015)

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In *Children's Literature and the Posthuman*, Zoe Jaques argues that 'thorny ontological models emerge as an essential component of the children's literary tradition in ways that variously predict, align, complicate or challenge the central tenets of posthumanism' (143). Perhaps that observation might be extended: childhood is itself a thorny ontological model, or rather a state in which ontological models are not yet fully developed and embedded. As such, its categories are not yet fully formed or fixed, and its literature is unusually liberated in being able to relax its ordinary mimetic modes. Children's fiction encourages a breaking of naturalistic conventions not generally afforded in the adult sphere, and the distancing quality of shifted subjects often takes on a satirical gaze. There is a frenzied animation of things ordinarily considered inanimate, often to comic effect.

Jaques takes in a wide range of children's literature, from Pixar and contemporary picture books to Swift. The extensive comparison of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Carroll's *Alice* books offers fertile – and underexplored – ground for a consideration of human and non-human relationships and the problematized human self, exploring some of the anthropocentrism axiomatic to Enlightenment notions of reason. With Carroll, it is less clear that any intrinsically posthuman, or anti-anthropocentric, intentions are at work, for most notable episodes of Carroll's *Alice* might be better described, as Jaques briefly does, as categorical skits in a game of logical inversions.

Jaques uses the *Peter Pan* notion of 'betwixt-and-between' (10) as a way of holding the ongoing categorical confusions that beset the human and non-human divide throughout the book. Some texts stumble into this liminality for their own reasons, and some engage it specifically for pedagogical purposes. Philosophical sources old and new are usefully employed in casting light onto posthuman readings of texts whose content enters the 'betwixt-and-between'; the conflicts of categories and their failure, and of negotiating relations between them, form both the plot of much children's fiction and a substrate for contemporary anthropocentric interests.

There is one annoyance in this book: a tendency for the term 'ontological' to proliferate, and in doing so drift on occasion from appropriate application. In the course of one passage in the chapter 'Robot', for example, there is reference to a 'utilitarian and material ontology' (178) and a 'radical ontology' (179), the casual deployment of the term losing clarity in the process. While the question of imposed human/non-human categories forms the central thread of Jaques' thesis, lines of inquiry are opened more rigorously and effectively in close readings of the texts and the unpacking of human and non-human attributes found there.

The chapters on more recent literary and filmic outings into posthuman territory are rewarding, perhaps reflecting a more explicit concern with the limits of

consciousness and techne. In 'Robot', Jaques moves neatly through depictions of the animate robot, from the stuttering verbal mimicry of TikTok in L. Frank Baum's *Ozma of Oz* to the literal post-human vision of Pixar's *Wall-E*, in which the eponymous robot protagonist is more conscious than the relics of the human world. For all the apocalyptic imagery of defunct humans floating about in a state of space-bound false consciousness, however, Jaques writes that 'the overall message is not a technophobic one. The robots aboard the ship are spirited and largely autonomous, their diversity opposing the homogenized, identically clothed, bloated humans who form an indistinct mass' (204).

Here, the question of consciousness, the underpinning of most notions of what sets apart the human from the non-human sphere, offers an obvious ontological angle that lacks exploration elsewhere. The change in the handling of robot consciousness, from crude simulacrum to critical autonomy, offers a snapshot of changing understandings, over a relatively short time period, of what artificial intelligence might look like. In doing so, it queries the Cartesian endowment of consciousness as uniquely human.

Elsewhere, the shift away from human subjectivity brings with it a quietly anti-anthropocentric politic, altering social order and hierarchies of power, as Jaques demonstrates in a detailed reading of *Lady and the Tramp*. At its best, her work unpacks the many perversities sedimented into common sense in the industrial adult world. On the relations between humans and animals, Jacques identifies

[...] an ironic division of the domestic animal from the caged one; in a physical manifestation of a strict ideological separation that places certain animals in cages and others on leashes, the zoo wall bears a "No Dogs Allowed" sign. Tramp, of course, breaks this rule daily on a much broader scale; he is not only banned from the zoo but from the town itself – an unlicensed, uncontainable embodiment of the wildness that should be suppressed like the domestic pet or the captive zoo animal. (88)

Perhaps the visual detail necessary for animation provokes a deeper engagement with the strangeness of human entertainments, whether imprisoned lives at the zoo or the screen'n'mall dystopia of *Wall-E*. Perhaps the swell of urbanisation and the new ecological instabilities of the anthropocene creep more relentlessly into its vernacular culture than they might have before.

Where anthropocentric and 'anti-conservationist' relations still prevail, as set out in a number of examples from the Harry Potter books, a form of 'humanist hubris' is at work. Jaques has written elsewhere on Pullman, and a comparison of *His Dark Materials* would have made an excellent companion to her *Harry Potter* critique here too.

Overall, however, the question of how and why children's literature offers such a timely account of posthuman concerns is demonstrated to be a rich site of study and speculation. Jaques offers perceptive insights into the politics and power relations of texts whose function is at least in part to educate, at once unpacking the didactic tendencies of children's literature through the ages and tracking the ebb and flow of relations beyond the human.