International Ecolinguistics Association

Book Review

John Yunker (Ed.), *Writing for Animals: New Perspectives for Writers and Instructors to Educate and Inspire*. Ashland Creek Press, 2018; ISBN: 978-1-61822-058-5.

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According to Margulis, Wong, Simchy-Gross and McAuley, humans possess a tendency to narrativize abstract events. In their 2019 paper, the authors point out that when we face any type of chaotic information, we infer a narrative. The tendency to transform unknown information into narratives shapes the way people make sense of their lives and the way we interact among us humans and with other species: characters, events, context. We assign roles in our stories even to rocks, rivers, tables and chairs. Narratives and stories not only help us relate with the world around us, but they make us understand and empathize. We can figure out something about the characters in a story by the unfolding events, and vice versa, the type of characters may suggest a plot. We can also foresee upcoming events due to our experience with previous narratives. But the most important thing about narratives is how they make us feel. We get involved in social action because we care, because we feel something that happened to others may happen to us or someone we love. In this sense, *Writing for Animals: An anthology for writers and instructors to educate and inspire* is a toolbox for writers and communicators but also a guide on how to build bridges between non-human animals and a human-dominated world.

The book starts with an invitation to rethink the way we relate with other species and the part they play in our lives. In the introduction, John Yunker reminds us how much we talk and write about animals and yet how little we really know them, or rather, how little we think about their needs, emotions and intelligence. Yunker takes the opportunity to point out to the difference between writing *for* animals and writing *about* them. In doing so, he makes his ecosophy explicit while he invites us to include animals in our narratives and lives by taking a look at their world, not adopting a dominating perspective but through the ethnographer's vision. The internal structure of the book suggests a journey following this perspective: it starts with the place of the writer in the narratives and ends with a description of the impact they can achieve in the world.

Part I: The Writer as Naturalist*,* is divided in three chapters devoted to make us question our place in animals' lives by considering our narratives. In *Do We Have the Right to Write about Animals?* Joanna Lilley analyses what we say about animals in comparison with what we really do to them. We kill them because they compete with us for basic resources and then we transform them into symbols to praise human qualities. That does not seem a good way to include them in our stories. According to the author, our impact in nature as species is not usually considered when we use animal characters in our writings. In Lilley's words, the place animals occupy in our narratives must be considered by re-elaborating our relationship with them in terms of respect and mutual recognition. We must acknowledge our role in their suffering and try to connect with what they are thinking and feeling.

In *Animals that Work in Stories,* Lisa Johnson differentiates the ways in which animals have been used as a stylistic resource from narratives that help us see them as beings with interests, feelings and lives of their own. From Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* to J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello,* animals have been depicted in different roles and the examination of these roles can help other writers (and communicators) see animals can play more than a few parts in their stories. From this perspective, Johnson analyses several literary works to reveal the meanings conveyed by animals in each work and the consequences that these have. Pointing out that animals can be conductors for the author's thoughts, they can demonstrate elements of human condition, mark character growth, signify loss of nature or loss of attachment to nature or foreshadow the plot. The author reminds us that animal characters deserve the same consideration as humans do.

In the next chapter, Rosemary Lombard's *A Case for More Reality in Writing* for *Animals,* the author suggests that the main element we must keep in mind when writing about animals is that we write for their benefit; that is, we communicate to persuade readers about their value and needs. To compose a good narrative about animals calls for a deeper understanding of them. If their repertoire of communicative features looks strange to us, then we are not capable to understand their ways and our narrative will inevitably lack verisimilitude. When we are to write from an animal perspective, we must know their world. Our animal hero must possess realistic features and we must adopt their vision, even when it is hard for us humans to understand it.

In Part II: The Craft of Writing about Animals, writing resources constitute the main focus. Kipp Wessel's *Meeting the Wild Things Where They Are* describes the common origin that we share with the other animals and remarks that, given that there is less that separates than joins us, we write not about them but about their lives. Therefore, we must imagine the world through their eyes. Following Cousteau's idea, Wessel proposes to go encountering animals in their world, in their terms. Watch them living as they live free from human dominion, as they really are. And then, when writing about them their true character can be captured. In *Rewilding Literature: Catalyzing Compassion for Wild Predators through Creative Nonfiction,* Paula MacKay analyses scientific discourse and how to create an emotional way to relate to animals through scientific data. Personal narratives, storytelling and personal insight are some of the elements presented to arouse emotional engagement with readers

when presenting natural science data on predators and animals that live in the wilds. Sometimes, this can be the only way to save their lives.

The following chapter, *Rabies Bites: How Stephen King Made a Dog a Compelling Main Character,* by Hannah Sandoval, analyses the growth of Cujo, the fictional dog created by Stephen King and how the development of the character from his very first moments as a sweet puppy, his rabies behaviour and his violent end resemble an epic character' narrative. Cujo is not the villain of the story but the hero. Sandoval explains very clearly how Cujo fights his illness at all times and finally dies doing the right thing, as a medieval knight. In the next text, *Real Advocacy within Fantasy Worlds,* Beth Lyons describes a vegan writer's work creating non-harmful narratives. Lyons revisits her own work to detail her journey taking cruelty off her stories. In her revision, she invites the readers to question the power relations imposed and naturalised by carnism (Joy, 2009) as the basic way to deconstruct violence towards animals in addition showing us not to be afraid of making mistakes. Going through her old stories Lyons finds elements she had not thought about when she first wrote them: humans riding horses, drinking from waterskins, etc. Lyons posits that our aim must be to give animals a voice. Our voice. Right after, Hunter Liguore, in *Writing Animals Where you Are*, argues about the selection of animals that writers usually adopt, proposing a change in that selection and a change of perspective which is based on building a new relationship with the animals we live with: mice, deer, the cat at the grocery store, the neighbour's dog, pigeons at the park, etc. Liguore gives the readers some homework: identify these animals that surround us, describe them on paper and think about a memory to relate to them. This fantastic exercise allows to establish an emotional connection with animals and include them from a new perspective.

Part III: Anthropomorphism and Literature, deals with how to consider animals in a new way and begins with Marybeth Holleman's chapter, *Other Nations.* Adopting Henry Beston's concept, Holleman equates human conditions to the differences with animals, favouring an unmediated experience of the non-human world: in direct experience lies the truth. Unmediated experiences free us from other people's ideas, experiences, stories, myths, etc. But we must remain curious and open-minded to explore this path and remember that anthropomorphism is not anthropocentrism. Following this, John Yunker introduces a personal experience to evidence how stories can really have an impact on animals lives. In *Giving Animals a Voice: Letters from an Ashland Deer*, Yunker narrates how a series of letters in the readers' section of an Ashland's newspaper became a tool to introduce the animals' voice in a discussion that involved them directly. For those interested in Critical Discourse Analysis, social change and discourses involved are well described in this paper. The last paper on Part III, written by Midge Raymond, is titled *No One Mourns an Unnamed Animal: Why Naming Animals Might Help Save Them.* In it, Raymond addresses the relation between identity and rights for non-humans and what this really meant in a range of contexts, differentiating naming from anthropomorphizing. Identification by name provides an identity humans can relate to and, therefore, empathize with.

Part VI: Writers Change the World, exhibits the impact narratives for animals can have in the material world. This part opens with *Are you Willing?,* by Sangamithra Iyer. Iyer provides examples and strategies (in that order) to teach us how to guide the reader into the new territory of animal perspective. Following the stories of Ahmed Errachidi – a political prisoner at Guantánamo Bay – and Gandhi, the paper describes how animals and stories can open hearts for a better way of looking at life, even in the darkest of times. Part IV completes the book. Here Alex Lockwood presents *With a Hope to Change Things: An Exploration of the Craft of Writing about Animals with the Founders of Zoomorphic Magazine,* an introduction to *Zoomorphic* magazine as a space of truce and discussion on human/non-human relationships, and a brief interview with its founders: Susan Richardson and James Roberts. The interview addresses the origins, current issues, horizons and even the editors' relationship with animals and the impact they envisage for the magazine.

In addition to the articles, the book provides the readers with a section of resources for writers. In it, the editor presents a list of journals, magazines, and blogs dedicated to publishing animal-centric fiction and nonfiction.

Writing for Animals is, in the first place, a very enjoyable reading for writers, linguists and the general public. But it is much more than that: the tools authors deliver are useful to write about animals, to read about animals and to think and interact with them. Because one of the ideas that runs across all chapters is that building bridges between human and non-human worlds, in our current times, means to approach animals as a different nation, with the entire respect their population deserves in the hope, one day, that we can all be part of the same nation.

References

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