

8-2-2018

## Narratology beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life by David Herman

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### Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

McCormack, Brian. "Narratology beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life by David Herman." *The Goose*, vol. 17, no. 1, article 9, 2018,  
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol17/iss1/9>.

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***Narratology beyond the Human:  
Storytelling and Animal Life* by DAVID  
HERMAN**

Oxford University Press, 2018 \$99.00 USD

Reviewed by **BRIAN McCORMACK**

In *Narratology beyond the Human*, David Herman develops a cross-disciplinary approach situated at the intersection of narratology and cultural understandings of animals and human-animal relationships. He argues that narratological concepts and analytic tools have not yet been fully utilized in animal and human-animal studies, while for narratology, the study of animals in human cultures holds the potential to transform how storytelling is understood. Herman makes an instructive comparison between his project and recent work in anthropology (by Tim Ingold, for example) that seeks to reposition the human subject within a wider ecological context. Herman works to articulate a concept of narrative that is applicable beyond distinctively human experience:

This model resituates processes of storytelling and story interpretation, as well as the analytic frameworks that have been developed to study those processes, in a trans-species ecology of selves, marked by a prolific allocation of possibilities for subjective experience across species lines. (x)

The work of Val Plumwood is especially important for Herman's efforts to counter reductive, anthropocentric notions of narrative and the cultural ontologies to which they are bound. In addition to developing a cross-disciplinary analytic framework for the study of narratives

beyond the human, therefore, Herman challenges hierarchical, dualist beliefs about what sorts of beings comprise the world and how they relate to humans. Herman focuses primarily on post-Darwinian, Western, English-speaking narratives concerning animals and human-animal relationships, however. As a result, he does not engage in substantive discussions of a large number of rich narrative traditions that would seem to be especially important for his project.

Part 1 focuses on fictional and nonfictional self-narratives that reflect and sometimes work to reshape cultural assumptions about who qualifies as a self. Self-narratives range from more restrictive, anthropocentric (parsimonious) to more expansive, biocentric (prolific) senses of selfhood. In the examples Herman discusses in the first chapter, human protagonists lose access to parsimonious notions of the self and the claims to human sovereignty on which they depend, only to find renewed agency and stable identity in wider ecologies of selves. While these examples shift self/other distinctions, the second chapter explores narratives in which these distinctions are more radically reconfigured. Cross-species self/other hybrids and metamorphized subjects are described as boundary conditions that animate affinities and anxieties in volatile mixtures across species lines. These narratives, Herman argues, can potentially enable identification across species boundaries and reshape the hierarchical value practices that intersect with them. The third chapter examines accounts from therapeutic contexts within which narrators must negotiate complex cultural norms surrounding notions of selfhood, family, and species difference.

Part 2 delves more deeply into narratological theory. Chapter 4 concerns

how graphic narratives featuring animal subjects negotiate multispecies geographies and temporalities. These multimodal narratives offer media-specific possibilities for shaping multispecies narrative worlds through the arrangements of words and images they enable. This framework becomes more complex when a given graphic narrative is further contextualized relative to a narrative corpus, on one hand, and to iterations of the same story across different media, on the other. The cross-disciplinary potential of Herman's multispecies transmedial narratology is aptly illustrated in his analysis of several graphic adaptations of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.

The second part of chapter 4 marks an important thematic shift in Herman's text, in which he introduces a set of strategies for theorizing perhaps the most difficult and contentious topic for a narratology beyond the human: meaningful nonhuman experience. Herman argues that analytic frameworks based on a Cartesian internal/external distinction between mind and world should be replaced by a continuum ranging from course-grained to fine-grained accounts of animal experience. In course-grained accounts such as animal allegories, nonhumans are often little more than stand-ins for humans. Narratives that avoid attributions of subjectivity entirely would also occupy this position on the scale. At the other end of the scale lies what Herman terms "*Umwelt* modelling," referring to narratives that attempt to faithfully represent nonhuman experiential worlds. *Umwelt* modelling immediately raises questions of representational accuracy and anthropomorphism. Herman addresses these questions productively by making them inseparable from the work of analyzing the cultural contexts and strategic

purposes in relation to which any given instance of *Umwelt* modelling might be undertaken. When an instance of *Umwelt* modelling appears in juxtaposition with a course-grained representation within the same narrative, for example, it can employ that contrast to draw the reader's attention to how agency gets distributed in more or less restrictive ways across species boundaries.

Chapter 5 discusses questions of genre, focusing on nonhuman biographical life writing. Herman's primary concern in this chapter is to complicate the tendency to classify classic animal biographies as purely fictional. Herman argues that works such as Virginia Woolf's *Flush* disrupt fiction/nonfiction as well as human/nonhuman binaries, highlighting continuity across divergent mind/world entanglements. Chapter 6 revisits questions of nonhuman lived experience. Mind-ascribing practices, Herman argues, can be analyzed via the concept of discourse domains, which mediate between cultural ontologies and individual ascriptions of mental states. Chapter 7 explores Thalia Field's *Bird Lovers, Backyard* as a case study demonstrating how experiments with narrative form can help to reshape assumptions concerning multispecies relationality. The coda shifts focus to scale, analyzing how narratives that move along the sub-individual, individual, population, and species levels, across a variety of timescales, can make manifest how the human species is embedded within larger biological communities.

Most of the themes addressed in Herman's text will be familiar territory for those already immersed in animal and ecocritical literature and theory. It is expansive and rich enough in theory and case studies, however, that it will

consistently reward most readers. This text will resonate most strongly with readers who are willing to subordinate questions of representational accuracy in narrative accounts of animal worlds to the task Herman, following Plumwood, describes as the

double movement that simultaneously undercuts assumptions of human exceptionalism and valorizes other-than-human ways of experiencing the world. (155)

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