

# Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature

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Susan McHugh

Department of English  
University of New England  
Biddeford, ME, USA

Robert McKay

School of English  
University of Sheffield  
Sheffield, UK

John Miller

School of English  
University of Sheffield  
Sheffield, UK

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 nonhuman animal presences that haunt the margins of history, anthropology, philosophy, sociology and literary studies. Such work is characterised by a series of broad, cross-disciplinary questions. How might we rethink and problematise the separation of the human from other animals? What are the ethical and political stakes of our relationships with other species? How might we locate and understand the agency of animals in human cultures?

This series publishes work that looks, specifically, at the implications of the ‘animal turn’ for the field of English Studies. Language is often thought of as the key marker of humanity’s difference from other species; animals may have codes, calls or songs, but humans have a mode of communication of a wholly other order. The primary motivation is to muddy this assumption and to animalise the canons of English Literature by rethinking representations of animals and interspecies encounter. Whereas animals are conventionally read as objects of fable, allegory or metaphor (and 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. It examines textual cultures as variously embodying a debt to or an intimacy with animals and advances understanding of how the aesthetic engagements of literary arts have always done more than simply illustrate natural history. We publish studies of the representation of animals in literary texts from the Middle Ages to the present and with reference to the discipline’s key thematic concerns, genres and critical methods. The series focuses on literary prose and poetry, while also accommodating related discussion of the full range of materials and texts and contexts (from theatre and film to fine art, journalism, the law, popular writing and other cultural ephemera) with which English Studies now engages.

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Multispecies  
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*For Roselien and Jasper, and their wonderful sounds,  
and for Liesbeth, who listens to it all with me*

## PREFACE

This book is the result of what was supposed to be a short, easy project. Why would there be much to say about the sounds of nonhuman animals in written texts, let alone in novels? Surely my attempt to fill this gap in the secondary literature could be squeezed into a quirky, easily contained argument, I imagined, with few loose ends. But I kept discovering materials and having experiences that were relevant to my developing narrative. As my wife Liesbeth gave birth to our second child in this period, we spent the last few years listening attentively to wonderful baby language and creaky baby monitors, for instance, while buying children's books with embedded bird sounds and worrying about the sleep-disrupting noises of airplanes that pass above our home on the way to Brussels airport. Nor did I expect this project to involve many interlocutors when I first started it in 2014. Yet new publications about animals and their nonhuman acoustics continue to appear in a wide array of fields even as I am finishing these pages. What seemed to be a relatively simple argument about noisy animals and beastly humans hence kept changing and mutating while I read the work of contemporary novelists as well as contemplated that of academics in various disciplines. Complicating things further, I moved to a new university immediately after finishing the first outline of this project, forcing me to learn and perform numerous new tasks besides writing and thinking about animal voices and human listeners. Valuable time was lost, moreover, in writing grant proposals that went nowhere. For all of these reasons, this project ended up taking much longer and being more complicated than I first anticipated. Most importantly, I learned that there is actually quite a lot to say about the novel and what I will be calling the

multispecies soundscape. Indeed, I hope you will read and finish this book thinking that there is even more to say, and will pinpoint one or more loose ends that I failed to see—and listen to—along the way, so that we can continue the exciting interdisciplinary conversation profiled in the coming pages.

If I managed to finish the book despite these challenges, that is largely due to my wonderful colleagues and to several groups of people who have shown that the academic world can be a remarkably stimulating and generous community. At the universities of Leuven and Ghent, I want to thank my main teachers and sources of inspiration, Dirk de Geest, Jürgen Pieters, and the inimitable, indefatigable Jan Baetens, for introducing me to the rabbit hole that is literary studies. Other colleagues have enriched my time at these institutions, most notably Pieter Verstraeten (whose premature departure from the field is nothing short of tragic), Pieter Vermeulen, Anneleen Masschelein, David Martens, Sascha Bru, Stef Craps, Lars Bernaerts, Marco Caracciolo, and last but not least, Hilde Moors. Michel Delville, Liesbeth Korthals-Altes, Maarten De Pourcq, and Tom Toremans were kind enough to invite me to the universities of Liège, Groningen, and Nijmegen, and to the Brussels campus of KULeuven for teaching activities that I fondly remember. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the students and PhD students I have had the pleasure of working with, especially the students of my contemporary literature course at University College Maastricht, and the talented Nicolas Vandeviver, for always responding graciously to my probing questions. But I should thank Robert Pogue Harrison, Isabel Hoving, and my friends at the Benelux Association for the Study of Art, Culture, and the Environment (BASCE) too, as their subtle encouragements at a crucial stage in my career helped to lead me astray and to discover the weird and wonderful world of eco-criticism and the environmental humanities. In addition, this project has benefited from the advice and inspiration provided by my former colleagues at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of Maastricht University, the research group Arts, Media, and Culture in particular. Several people offered direct help and encouragement, and made me feel at home there from the start, most notably Emilie Sitzia (and her inexhaustible supply of dark chocolate), Aagje Swinnen, Renée van de Vall, Lies Wesseling, Merle Achten, Sophie Vanhoonacker, and Rein de Wilde. It was also a happy coincidence that my time at Maastricht was spent on a research project that corresponded well with the expertise of my new colleagues, in

particular Karin Bijsterveld, Joeri Bruyninckx, Raf de Bont, Jan de Roder, and Louis van den Hengel.

Additional advice and inspiration were supplied by other international experts, who generously helped to strengthen my argument via productive comments on presentations at conferences in Amsterdam, Sheffield, Glasgow, Ghent (twice!), and Lancaster, Pennsylvania. So I would also like to extend my gratitude to Jody Berland, Stephan Besser, Amitav Ghosh, Graham Huggan, Rosanne Kennedy, Robert McKay, Cary Wolfe, and Erica Fudge (who wisely urged me to stick with stethoscopes). But above all, I want to thank those colleagues who kindly agreed to read drafts of individual chapters. I hope the final version manages to address the incisive comments of Jan Baetens, Karin Bijsterveld, Pieter Verstraeten, Marco Caracciolo, Anna Harris, and Pieter Vermeulen. Finally, this book would not be what it is now without the practical help of Benjamin Doyle, Shaun Vigil, Camille Davies, and Ruby Panigrahi at Palgrave and the penetrating questions of the anonymous reader. You have all made me a better reader, writer, and listener. I started this project right before I joined the faculty at Maastricht and finished the first draft of this book in the summer of 2018, just before a new opportunity presented itself that meant I would be leaving this wonderful city. It will therefore always be the Maastricht book, in a way. But I should also thank my new colleagues at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve, where I started working in September 2019. I am looking forward to teaching fresh courses and writing new books in an environment where colleagues like Véronique Bragard, Stéphanie Vanasten, Geneviève Fabry, Hubert Roland, Marta Sábado Novau, Anne Reverseau, and many others are able to provide feedback and encouragement.

Besides this academic help, I received indispensable practical and emotional support from close friends and family, including my brother, my parents, and my parents-in-law. So thanks are also due to Jens De Bruyn, Ben Van Humbeek, Jan Heylen, Pieter Verstraeten, Alexander Mattelaer, Bart Campaert, Veronique Liekens, Tine Bogaerts, Ken Merckx, Jan De Bruyn, Diane Beeck, Mina Bal, Agnes Van den Eynde, and Miel Vander Weyden. I also want to underline my many debts to my grandparents, two of whom passed away while I was working on this project. Like Victor De Bruyn, Anna Vanherteryck and Désiré Beeck are sorely missed, not least by their great-grandchildren. But I will end this preface with apologies as well as words of thanks. Because it is not easy to live with someone who reads and worries about books all the time. So to Roselien and Jasper, and



my wonderful wife Liesbeth, who endured it all, I want to say sorry as well as thanks. If I have had to work on this long book occasionally, and was lost in thought when I should really have been paying attention to the sounds at hand, know that I was thinking about the other part of my life whenever I returned to reading and writing. And you can rest assured: I think this book is finished now.

One section of Chap. 2 first appeared in a different form in:

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UCLouvain  
Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

Ben De Bruyn

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Fig. 3.1 Sonic dimensions of novel reading. (Source: Author)

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