Rethinking the Representation of Animals in Twentieth-Century Canadian Fiction

Alice Higgs, *Animal Fiction in Late-Twentieth-Century Canada* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2023)

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Alice Higgs sets out to delve into the rich field of animal writing in the twenty-first-century Canadian context, offering a varied and complex exploration of an area of Canadian studies that has been widely overlooked in critical discourse. The book primarily concerns literary texts that incorporate animal imagery, demonstrating that animal stories are significant not only for their symbolic potential, but also for their role in shaping personal and national identities. In the author's words, the book aims "to explore the forms of social identity-based, critical commentary on animal writing that takes shape across" (4) the late twentieth-century. The author includes a variety of literary texts by different authors, including well-known names such as Marian Engel and Margaret Atwood. Higgs also explores extensively the figure of the coyote, a central element in Native American mythology, by examining Gail Anderson-Dargatz's novel *The Cure for Death by Lightning* (1996). This section of the study is particularly useful for gaining a better understanding of the postcolonial context of *The Cure for Death by Lightning* (1996) and the intricate relationship between Indigenous culture and the knowledge systems of settlers.

Animal Fiction in Late-Twentieth-Century Canada draws on recent historical events, such as the case in 2020 when a grizzly bear was relocated rather than killed at the request of local First Nations people after it was spotted on Hanson Island looking for food. Higgs also analyses the various interpretations of Canadian animal stories, including Atwood's seminal contribution *Survival* (1972) and Janice Fiamengo's collection *Other Selves: Animals in the Canadian Literary Imagination* (2007), which Higgs considers to be the first major

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contribution to animal studies in Canadian literature. She also dedicates part of her book to what she refers to as 'nature fakers', namely the sentimental writings of Ernest Thompson Seton and Charles G. D. Roberts, considered among the first writers of animal stories in Canada.

Higgs traces the evolution of the animal story in Canadian literature in chronological order. The starting point is Farley Mowat's 1963 memoir *Never Cry Wolf*, which challenges the cultural perception of the wolf as merely a dangerous predator by presenting a more favourable portrayal through anthropomorphism. Furthermore, Higgs emphasises how literature can influence social policies, demonstrating how *Never Cry Wolf* marked a cultural movement that prioritised conservation in the 1960s and 1970s. However, this is only briefly mentioned at the end of the first chapter, rather than being discussed in more detail.

For avid readers of Margaret Atwood, chapter three offers insights into two of her celebrated novels: *Surfacing* (1972) and *Life Before Man* (1979). It argues that, although animals appear in these seminal texts, the narratives fail to construct a meaningful "pro-animal ethics" (71). Instead, Atwood uses animals as a symbolic tool to reflect on personal and national identity. The chapter includes cultural references and explores the social and political context of twentieth-century Canada, particularly in terms of feminist ideology, offering valuable insights into the novels and enriching the reading experience through the broad range of references. However, the chapter leans towards an interpretation of the novels that argues non-human animals are merely symbolic and that the dead animal body is just a form of "subjectively transformative experience" (144), rather than promoting the idea of empathy towards animals.

One of the highlights of the book is the chapter on Marian Engel's *Bear* (1976), in which Higgs combines commentaries from online platforms such as Reddit with cultural insights and an excellent literary analysis of the novel. This expands the theoretical horizons by including a wide range of critical voices that have explored the novel. This interpretative exercise demonstrates how Engel moves away from the traditional representation of animals as symbols and moves towards a more inclusive approach, proving "that it is possible to deliver nuanced animal representation that offers constructive ways of thinking about human-animal relationships outside of a symbolic framework" (77). Furthermore, Higgs emphasises Engel's contribution to the development of contemporary Canadian animal stories and explores the metafictional strategies employed in the novel to reflect on

the construction of animal writing and interrogate the boundaries between symbolic and material animals (78).

Another interesting chapter focuses on Timothy Findley's novels *The Wars* (1977) and *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984). Findley's ethics of care, queerness, kinship, and emphatic prose are central to the interpretative exercise, and Higgs contextualises the novels masterfully, both historically and culturally. Higgs argues that the novels "introduce a pro-animal element that opens up space for more developed understandings of material relationships between humans and animals" (117) so they are relevant for their subversive potential and pro-animal stance.

The next chapter discusses the 1996 novel *The Cure for Death by Lightning* by Gail Anderson-Dargatz, focusing on its portrayal of Indigenous ethics of care. By focusing on the mythical figure of the coyote, a recurring and pivotal element in Native American stories and mythologies, Higgs also addresses relations between North American Indigenous Nations and settlers, concluding that the novel highlights the need for settler writing to actively decolonise by meaningfully and respectfully engaging with Indigenous epistemologies and stories, rather than appropriating them (138).

Overall, the book makes a valuable contribution to the ever-growing field of animal studies, particularly as it sheds light on a specific cultural environment: Canada. The novels' chronological ordering helps readers better situate them and observe the evolution of animal writing. At the same time, the critical analysis extensively employs a social-identity-based critical lens, and the criteria appear to lean towards pro-animal ethics, which is necessary. However, a more multifaceted theoretical framework could have broadened the scope of the study's analysis. Nevertheless, the book is engaging, demonstrating critical mastery and emotional depth regarding non-human animals, and promoting an ethics of care and empathy towards animal subjects.