

Humans and Animals' Relationship in Karen Joy Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*

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Abstract

*This article has explored on the relationships between humans and nonhuman creatures which has long been a predominant dichotomous conceptualization. Especially it has analyzed Karen Joy Fowler's book *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* which focuses on the relationship between humans and animals. The book also makes readers think about the interspecies relationship's ethics and epistemologies as a part of eco-poetics. The present debate over animal rights and the condemnation of speciesism, which accords human creatures' epistemic and ontological privilege, are central issues in critical and cultural animal studies.*

The dichotomous view of human-animal relationships holds that there is a categorical border between humans—who are perceived as moral subjects with personal rights and whose internal life is psychologically accessible—and animals, some of which can be considered as companions but always have a lower (or no) status in terms of legal and cultural status and whose minds are inaccessible. To investigate human and animal relations, I have formulated three steps throughout the paper. I have started by discussing recent theories that examine the bond between us and monkeys. Then I have discussed how Kellogg's experiment serves as a significant backdrop to Fowler's book.

Finally, I have addressed the novel's contribution to current critical discussions about human-animal interactions and animal rights, as well as the major plot of the book, which develops when the protagonist learns her own role in the eco-poetics of her chimpanzee sister Fern. The paper has investigated eco-poetics that emphasizes the move from interspecies companionship and togetherness to human superiority and instrumental asymmetry, focusing on the intricate human-animal relationships which recount an environment that causes (non-)human trauma and loss.

Key Words – human, animal, eco-poetics, species, nature, culture

Introduction

Literature has, however, historically contested rigid divisions between nature and culture and between animals and humans. Franz Kafka's story *A Report to an Academy* (1917), in which the liminal character Rotpeter describes the quick “evolution” from ape to human as a cycle of unrelenting violence that mutilates body, mind, and soul, is one particularly potent illustration. According to Rotpeter, “the entry into human civilization can only be accomplished by the separation from nature” (Neumeyer, 1917, p. 391), which involves “an act of violence” (p. 393). With the ape's agonizing

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search for a way out of captivity, Kafka's book challenges the institutional and cultural frameworks that support the categorical division between humans and animals. Of course, both interpretations of the text are valid: both humans and animals are cultural beings. Surprisingly, one of the recent and widely acclaimed books Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* (2013), focuses on the relationship between humans and animals. The book examines how nature and culture can help people recover from trauma. It does so through a quasi-autobiographical narrator who focuses on Rosemary's time at UC Davis, where she studied literature as a twenty-two-year-old. Rosemary is coping with the repressed death of her "twin-sister" chimpanzee who died seventeen years previously. The first-person narrator uses a casual and intimate tone to address a peer—possibly the reader or an imaginary other. The novel blends in-depth views on animal experiments, animal welfare, and animal rights with a close portrayal of feelings, compassion, and loss. The narrator examines and articulates in detail her own role in the brutality against animals, who are not even protected when recognized as a cherished "sister" chimpanzee, in order to demonstrate a high level of moral thought on inter-species relationships.

Chimpanzees appear to hold a unique place in recent writing on the nature/culture divide, as a transitional species at the primary boundary of modernist discourse, according to Gisli Palsson's statement (Palson, 2014). In *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* by Fowler, the author discusses how humans and their closest living relatives, primates, and in particular chimpanzees, blur the line between humans and other animals. The famous real-life experiment of the Kellogg family, who attempted to raise a baby chimpanzee alongside their own child in 1931, is another source of inspiration for the book. When Kellogg (1967) noticed that their young boy started acting like a chimpanzee, the experiment was quickly put to an end.

In contrast, the fictional experiment in Fowler's book lasts five years, and the family as a whole suffers permanently damaging effects from the final separation from the chimp. The brother joins the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) after learning that his chimp sister has been sent to an animal laboratory, the mother suffers from depression, and the daughter distances herself from the memory of the incident that resulted in the loss of her twin sister. The father, whose scientific reputation is ruined, develops a problem drinking problem. The book questions the hierarchical and dichotomic model of human-animal relationships by examining a number of minute parallels and contrasts between people and chimpanzees.

Methodology

The research uses the qualitative research method for its textual analysis of Karen Joy Fowler's novel *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. Literary devices like similes, metaphors, personification, the language of animation, symbols, and images used to represent human and animal relationship are analyzed. Furthermore, I apply three procedures that I use throughout the paper to study the relationships between humans and animals. I begin by talking about current hypotheses that look at our relationship

with monkeys. Then I talk about how Fowler's book uses Kellogg's experiment as a major backdrop. I cover the novel's significance for current debates on animal rights and human-animal interactions, as well as its main plot, which is revealed when the protagonist discovers her place in Fern, her chimpanzee sister's ecopoetics.

Findings and Discussion

Gerhard Neumann (2009) analyzes the separation of nature and culture in a brief paper on humans and apes. Neumann differentiates three positions when conceptualizing nature as a performative process of semantic formation. The behavioral study of the stages of primate development takes up the top position. As an illustration, consider Frans de Waal's 2001 book *The Ape and the Sushi Master*, which explores primates as human ancestors and indicates that other species have cultures besides humans. The "anthropological machine," a persistent system of discourses, practices, and techniques used to (re-)produce the construction of humans in contrast to animals by dealing with inclusions and exclusions of what is considered human and nonhuman, is the second position, as articulated by Giorgio Agamben (2003) in his book *The Open: Man and Animal*.

Agamben emphasizes the power relations between humans and animals as a narrative of cultural force and views the descent of humans from animal ancestors as a strategy of biopolitics, in contrast to the primatologist de Waal who seeks to minimize the difference between humans and apes by emphasizing their common origin. According to Agamben, what makes a human person who they are and what they do differs from "the" animal (Borgards, 2015, p. 239). Bühler and Rieger (2006), on the other hand, emphasize the shortcomings of humans in comparison to animals; it is a reversal of the same connection that emphasizes the use of the animal as a knowledge channel. According to Neumann (2009), the lengthy history of attempts to establish a line dividing nature and culture is the history of "identity shock" brought on by the presence of the other (p.93). He further says that the paradigm for how people view themselves in modernity is the essential feeling of "otherness" (p.101).

According to this viewpoint, looking at animals is an experience of otherness that mediates how people form and comprehend their own selves. Agamben (2003) and Bühler/Rieger (2006) reconstruct not only how humans define themselves as clearly distinct from animals, but also highlight the constitutive function of animals for humans, whereas De Wal (2001) emphasizes the similarities between humans and apes—for example, in contrast to primatologist Michael Tomasello who emphasizes the differences between animal and human cultures. A second significant perspective presented by Donna Haraway (2008) that focuses on the interaction between humans and nonhuman creatures must be added to Neumann's list of arguments. She elaborates on the concept of "companion species" in her book *When Species Meet* by highlighting the act of "being with" as the condition of "becoming worldly" and creating an "alter-globalization," peaceful and equitable globalization (p. 3). She makes the assumption that all living things create their identities through interactions.

According to her, organisms take on their physical forms through “material-semiotic nodes or knots in which varied bodies and meanings coshape one another” (p.4). In her book *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), Haraway emphasizes the interdependency of human culture and nature, or what she calls “natureculture,” as opposed to viewing nature as an object of scientific and philosophical investigation (p.2). Here, she adopts the scientific and technological studies philosophy of Bruno Latour. The interactions and intra-actions between humans and other species and organizations seem to form a complex web.

Haraway shows that dogs are “fleshly material-semiotic presences in the body of technoscience” and “[t]hey are here to live with” by examining the history of interactions between people and canines (p. 5). She talks about her own personal engagement and how her experiences and those of her dog, Ms. Cayenne Pepper, were integrated into situational mutual transformations. Haraway (2003) criticizes Derrida's meditation on his humiliation in response to his cat's gaze and focuses on the relationships of response and mutual respect, which she sees as necessary for comprehending an animal's goals. A zoopoetic perspective considers both (non-)human agency and the prerequisites of (non-)human boundaries and restrictions in order to analyze the diverse representations of interspecies relationships.

Returning to Fowler's book *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, it indicates that Rosemary, the main character, has read Haraway carefully since she employs Haraway-congruent language when discussing her close bond with Fern, the chimpanzee sibling. Rosemary views Fern as a receptive friend who she thinks is intelligent. However, there is also a sharp division that kept the two apart. When Rosemary, age 22, is accused by her brother of being responsible for Fern's expulsion from their family, she starts to think back on the experiment and its “premature and calamitous end” (p.99).

The narration leads Rosemary to the conclusion that her life is divided between the times she spent with Fern and the times she spent without Fern. Because remembering does not happen in a straight line, neither does the narration, which jumps around spirals and zigzags to the point where the twin sisters split apart. As the reader discovers at the very end of the novel when Fern and Rosemary face one another through the dividing glass of the cage, Rosemary reconstructs the family's emotional impact and the “shadow of grief” (Charles) that the events have left. This includes the grief of captive Fern (p.308). In exploring the apes as a liminal area, the book makes reference to earlier studies, particularly the Kellogg study, which aimed to compare how humans and chimpanzees mature but focuses on the psychological effects on all participants.

In order to compare the growth of their emotional behavior and language learning, Winthrop and Luella Kellogg, comparative psychologists at Indiana University, cross-fostered their son Donald and the chimpanzee Gua in 1931. When they noticed that their son had started acting like an animal after nine months, they decided to end the experiment. The Kelloggs, who assumed that “humanizing the ape” would necessitate raising the “anthropoid with a human baby of about the same age,” as the title of a famous article

in 1931 stated, came to the conclusion that environmental influences play a "tremendous role... upon captive wild animals before they are brought to laboratory" (Kellogg, 1967, p. 174). The Cook family adopts the chimpanzee Fern, who was discovered in the Congolese woods as an abandoned baby.

After five years, the experiment is finally abandoned when Rosemary laments that her sister Fern is making her feel more and more "afraid" (Fowler, 2014, p.270). The incident that led to the allegation was horrifying: Rosemary had handed Fern a kitten to show her love and sympathy, but the chimpanzee strangled the small animal in her hand. Rosemary's objection prompts her parents to abandon the experiment in order to avoid the possibility of someone being harmed by Fern. Because of the book's subtle structure, the reader doesn't discover until near the end that the Cooks had taken Fern to a medical facility where she was caged, threatened with rape by older male chimpanzees, gave birth to three children, and gradually rose through the social ranks of the caged troop. The book examines the degree of similarities between chimpanzees and humans and "shares affinity with both animal studies and animal rights advocacy" in the US (Lopii and Petkovi, 2016, p. 125).

The Ape and the Child by Kellogg, published in 1933, "follows the scientific standards" in disseminating scientific information, in contrast to Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, with the "unfavorable side effect" that "the ape is objectified and has no voice" (Stolle, 2016, p. 30). Although they refer to both their son and the chimp as "subjects," Kellogg (1967) refers to Gua as a "subhuman organism" and views the chimp as "less than a human" (p.29), whereas Fowler's novel creates narrative situations that foster an empathetic bond between the "sisters," with Rosemary trying "to give Fern a voice" (p. 30). This is where the novel's nonlinear structure shines: Rosemary's story starts off in the midst of her life and develops into a number of non-chronological flashbacks where she, the first-person narrator, remembers the time she spent with her sister Fern. She talks about her family, which includes her mother, who agreed to the real-life experiment when friends were looking for a new home for the chimpanzee, her father, a psychologist at Bloomington University, and her older brother Lowell, who, like Rosemary herself, soon views Fern not just as a companion animal but rather as a sister. Fern seems to acquire the status of an equal subject or a person in this familial constellation.

Rosemary explains how she "used to believe [to know] what Fern was thinking" in a variety of circumstances. No matter how odd her actions were (p.98). It's crucial to highlight that I was also all those things to Fern, she says, adding that Fern "was my twin, my fun-house mirror, and my whirling another half" (p.79). The description of the relationship is based on a strong sense of empathy, the concept of reciprocity, and the conviction that true mutual understanding exists. *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, which alludes to a time in the book where Rosemary, Lowell, and Fern are completely engrossed in exuberant, uncontrolled play in the snow, also seems to support this. The idiomatic title describes a scenario in which there is undeniable similarity,

community, and equality when they are experiencing great joy together. Although the narrative uses family story tropes, the strange and unsettling also make an appearance. Rosemary highlights the mirroring influence Fern had on her, but she also notes how significant distinctions between the two gradually emerged, especially in terms of language development, leading her to continue referring to the two as “twins” but with “disparate potentials” (p. 99). She writes that Fern “seemed to develop the expectation that I would,” so that she “was already working as Fern's interpreter” at the age of three after describing how she “formed the habit of speaking for her” (p. 100).

Rosemary becomes a highly talkative girl when she wants to talk for two, as is often highlighted. Looking back, Rosemary concedes that she did, sometimes, feel a tad superior due to her language abilities. These would not only make up for other motor skills in which Fern was always superior, as she must confess in retrospect (p. 82), but they would also make up for Rosemary's sense of being overlooked and getting less attention than Fern, which makes her envious of her more and more. Rosemary, on the other hand, challenges her father's motivations for wanting Fern to converse with humans and casts doubt on the value of human language in general (p. 98).

Rosemary, on the other hand, flips the script and searches for the query, “[C] an Rosemary learn to speak to chimpanzees?” (p. 100), alternatively a much more pertinent question would be “Can humans learn to speak chimpanzee language?” Rosemary recalls the constellation and wonders what the settings were for the experiment to determine whether apes might acquire human language. She contrasts this by referring to “a secret language of grunts and gestures,” a “idioglossia,” or a “visceral” understanding (Lopii and Petkovi, 2016, p.119) that she shares with Fern and that has just been acknowledged by the graduate students serving as research assistants. In fact, modern primatology research recognizes the use of gestural and mimic motions for emotional communication that have been demonstrated in tests (Liebalet al., 2011).

In Rosemary's narrative, the younger version of herself, who “always used to believe [to know] what Fern was thinking,” serves as the source of support (p. 98). Rosemary, the narrator, has a feeling that all communication consists of mimicking and gesturing; this suspicion was at least partially verified by notable instances in her undergraduate years, such as the hand signs W for “whatever” or L for “loser” (p. 131). Another crucial aspect of Rosemary's narrative is how she strongly resembled chimpanzee behavior, which is typical of human newborns raised with chimpanzees. As a result, in kindergarten, she was called a “monkey girl” (p. 84), which led to the typical “uncanny-valley response” (p. 102) and severe bullying. Her mother had given her instructions on how to act before she started school:

Stand up straight.

Keeping my hands still when I talked.

Not putting my fingers into anyone else's mouth or hair.

Not biting anyone, ever. No matter how much the situation warranted it....

Not jumping on the tables and desks when I was playing. (p. 102)

It makes sense that Rosemary thought it was a “triumph” to be accepted as “normal” (p. 132), even if she continued to face bullying from her classmates. While the fictional Cooks’ experiment is continued for a much longer period of time and has a much stronger and ultimately disastrous impact on everyone involved, with feelings of loss, trauma, suppression, grief, and guilt, the real Kellogg's experiment at the college was stopped precisely because of this reason the human son adopting chimp behavior. These emotions don't just reflect the violence Fern encounters after being taken away from her family and locked up. They are also the antithesis of the brutality that Lowell, her brother, uses to exact revenge on his parents for deciding to give Fern medical attention, which he views as animal torture.

When Rosemary’s life is divided in two, the period following Fern's disappearance reflects the longer portion of her existence and, thus, the narration as a whole. Here, the narration’s non-linear temporal structure is crucial: The novel has a conventional six-part structure with seven chapters in each, but the recall process seems to follow the jumbled logic of a traumatized person who hesitates but is unable to stop the resurfacing of a suppressed history that bubbles up in unexpected situations and in shredded shape. It would be beneficial to examine the narrative structure in light of trauma studies; this examination should also take Fern's trauma into account. The remainder of my thesis centers on the plot's complex structure, which only emerges piece by piece, and methodically examines the chimpanzee's liminal role in human self-recognition. In doing way, the text illustrates the tangled webs of traumatizing and complicated human-nonhuman relationships.

Two instances in which Rosemary is wrongfully imprisoned, undermining prolonged repression, serve as the plot’s fulcrum. This highlights asymmetrical architecture while bringing the human and animal perspectives into alignment. The reader is introduced to Rosemary in the book's opening scene as she sits in a university cafeteria watching a young couple argue before the girl, drama student Harlow begins destroying the cafe's décor. Rosemary is detained by campus police despite the fact that she simply made the situation worse by reacting by dropping a glass of milk. However, neither Harlow nor the waitress who tries to speak up for Rosemary is heard by the police officer. Rosemary spends a night in jail before her father steps in to get her release. As a result, the story begins with the experience of unexpected detention and the necessity for a mediator to get freedom. Later, when Fern is unfairly deported to the experimental lab where her brother illegally gains access but is unable to rescue her, this will be replicated in her position.

Fern's experience with injustice and brutality has a significant impact on Rosemary's brother Low, who joins the radical ALF after discovering Fern in the lab. The F.B.I. is after Lowell during the narrative because they believe he was responsible for UC Davis' primatology Thurman lab's destruction (p. 139-40). His arrest follows a string of more violent acts, resulting in his imprisonment as well. He now fears a lengthy prison sentence because he is considered an environmental terrorist in America

after 9/11. However, in contrast to Fern, Lowell is aware that he might go to jail and, at last, regrets his choice. In the second crucial circumstance, Rosemary is waiting to be questioned about her brother in a chilly concrete room of the neighborhood police station. Ironically, it is her experience of being confined that awakens a long-forgotten memory and helps her recognize her part in Fern's abduction. When she considers how she responded to Fern's actions, criticizing her and declaring that she is "afraid of her," she feels guilty and believes that she is a traitor (p. 270). Rosemary's older brother Lowell accuses her of essentially asking her parents to choose between the two of them even though she is only five years old. Rosemary has come to the realization that despite feeling like Fern's twin sister, she has absorbed and practiced the widespread dehumanization and objectification of "the animal."

Following her complaint, her parents' choice is influenced by Fern's inferior position as a companion animal, a being with no voice and no say in the matter of its deportation, as opposed to Rosemary, who is deemed to be a legal person. This realization is further reinforced by a poignant incident in which Rosemary discovers a trapped wood louse while she is waiting for her questioning. When she is eventually let to leave the room, she is in a sympathetic mood and takes the bug with her. The little bug's rescue serves as a metaphor for freedom, which can only be attained with human help. Rosemary makes the decision to take over her brother's responsibilities during her long day in the interrogation room (p. 254) and to ultimately "take care" of her sister Fern (p. 274).

It's amazing how her new position as a responsible liberator creates a parallel between her brother and the chimpanzee. Rosemary has come to terms with the fact that Fern was the victim of violence at the medical lab because of her own fault, and she now stands by Lowell because of his acts, which made him the victim of governmental violence. When Rosemary and her mother relocate to Fern's chimpanzee estuary in Vermillion, South Dakota, the book's atoning atmosphere is complete. Rosemary accepts a job teaching young children, whose gestures and mimics she is quite familiar with, and she raises money for her brother's legal expenses by participating in TV interviews about a children's book about her own chimp-sister tale that is based on her mother's diaries. In addition to releasing her emotionally, talking about her pain provides her with a way to start a fund-raising campaign to support her chimpanzee sister and brother. Rosemary acknowledges the distinction between herself and Fern when she comes to the conclusion that she should not have accused Fern of abusing the kitten:

I'd never thought that Fern would deliberately hurt me.... But her remorselessness, the way she'd stared impassively at the dead kitten and then opened his stomach with her fingers, had shocked me to the core....

That there was something inside Fern I didn't know.

That I didn't know her in the way I'd always thought I did.

That Fern had secrets and not the good kind.

Instead I'd said I was afraid of her. (p. 270)

These phrases indicate two disappointments: On the one hand, Rosemary's chimp sister cannot share her fondness for an object of attachment. Although this may also occur between two human siblings, the second letdown is what really draws the reader in. The animal Other does not conform to Rosemary's notion of interspecies empathy. The kitten, a third animal, plays an important role in the main scene. The human girl learns that her presumption of empathy and understanding was unreliable as the chimp dissects the little cat. Both the act's savagery and the inaccessibility of the animal intellect horrify her. Consequently, this section of the book covers a triangle of interspecies relationships in addition to the human-chimp relationship (human, chimpanzee, and cat). Ironically, Rosemary's latent jealousy is released by the play of the three's harsh turn, which ultimately causes the interspecies cohabitation experiment as understood by Haraway to fail.

In contrast to Kellogg's case, Fowler's fictitious experiment is abandoned because the interspecies relationship exceeds human comprehension of non-human agency rather than because the human gets animalized through imitation. Rosemary must own that she did not fully understand the animal Other's cognitive process. Despite the fact that there are numerous studies on apes' empathy for kittens, such as Harry Harlow's experiment with gorilla Koko who raised a kitten, the interaction in Fowler's book's interspecies triangle has a different ending. Ironically, Rosemary's brother, an ALF combatant, and her closest, albeit somewhat conflicted, college buddy are both named Harlow. Rosemary recurs in this intra-species triangle as the envious individual who prefers to protect social norms against others.

In the final section of the novel, Rosemary betrays Fern once more. Rosemary recalls this exact moment by saying, "Yet I knew I had not made up that kitten" (p. 266). Rosemary views this event as a sense of difference that leads to her self-recognition: "I recognized that I did know who I was," she says, "but this understanding surely does not disprove the general potential of chimpanzees' empathy with a kitten" (p. 266). The novel examines the many drawbacks of a chimp-human experiment that involves not only empathy, community, and mutuality, but also jealousy, misunderstanding, and violence. It focuses on the wide range of similarities between humans and chimpanzees as well as their space of interrelations and interactions.

Conclusion

Finally, the article has demonstrated how the perception of uncanny otherness causes "identity shock" (Neumann, 2009, p. 101) and promotes self-conception in humans. Fern serves as a "mirror image," which may also be interpreted as the beginning of "the shock of recognition in the reader" (Lopii and Petkovi, 2016, p. 123). At the very end of this coming-of-age story, Rosemary is much more circumspect about how she reads Fern's feelings and can identify her when she comes over. The conclusion of the story, which portrays an emotional image of simultaneous interspecies communication without dissolving structural barriers and is depicted as a translucent but dividing glass panel, focuses once more on the chimpanzee's status as a liminal species. Awareness of

shame and betrayal coexists with Rosemary's self-recognition, which appears to have a good impact on her personal growth and aid in her trauma recovery. Fern was left defenseless and unable to refute Rosemary's accusation because they do not speak the same language. Fern was accused of intimidating Rosemary. The chimpanzee loses the almost person-like status of a family member and is transformed into an object before being taken away to a laboratory, whereas a human child might have been punished for a similarly heinous crime. This would have been excessive as a punishment. The comparison highlights the current animal/human difference in all of its dimensions and highlights how even primates have a lower social position and less favorable legal status.

The work also asks the reader to ponder what it means for an animal to be imprisoned because of the matching themes of Fern and the brother's confinement. It makes me consider the possible repercussions of not having legal standing, rights, or one's own voice to defend oneself, whether it be because one is a chimpanzee or not. As a result, Fowler's book delivers a narrative that is both new and critical of ideas about human superiority that simply serve to categorically separate humans from other creatures. This will be extremely oppressive to anyone with strong feelings of interspecies empathy. The story thus explores not only the interests of animals but also the social and emotional costs associated with separating people from companion species. Overall, Fowler's book encourages readers to consider the ethics and epistemologies of interspecies relationships as a component of eco-zoopoetics. A very emotional approach is implied by framing the interspecies connection as a family drama and requesting that the reader feel empathy for the non-human animal.

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