

ZOE JAQUES
**CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND
THE POSTHUMAN**

Animal, Environment, Cyborg

New York: Routledge, 2015. (271 pp.)

Children's Literature and the Posthuman is an expansive, intelligent and frequently quite delightful trek through the history of children's literature in order to uncover the myriad ways in which children's books have imaginatively sought to engage with philosophical debates about what it means to be human. Unlike other critical applications of posthumanism to children's literature, which have tended to concentrate on the impact of technology on human subjectivity and have thus focused primarily on the genre of science-fiction (a category into which my own recently published monograph, *Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction: The Posthuman Subject*, which was published in 2014, falls), Jaques' monograph offers its readers a much broader and more exploratory argument about the origins of posthumanism in children's books and films. She contends that "... posthumanism, as a discourse, both exposes and ironically establishes boundaries between the human and the non-human, to facilitate a dialogue as to how those very borders might become more fluid" (pp. 2–3) and then proceeds to demonstrate how these borders are interrogated and subverted in children's books and film through a careful analysis of representations of animals (both wild creatures and pets), landscape (trees and water) and cyborgs, a category within which she places robots and toys. The strengths of this thought-provoking study are Jacques' ability to survey a wide-range of seemingly disparate children's texts for the purpose of demonstrating the existence of a longstanding posthuman tradition in children's literature and film. This examination of the ways in which children's texts have historically participated in philosophical debates of great complexity is complemented by Jacques' extremely innovative close-readings of canonical children's texts, such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865) and *Gulliver's Travels* (Swift, 1726), which she suggests are indicative of a "tradition of proto-posthumanism in children's literature" (p. 42).

The critical analyses which Jaques offers of Carroll's "Alice" stories and Parts III and IV of *Gulliver's Travels* are a genuine pleasure to read – as well as functioning to highlight Jaques' ideological approach to her primary corpus and the theoretical framing of her argument in *Children's Literature and the Posthuman*. This first chapter demonstrates great skill in producing original interpretations of texts that have already been the subject of extensive critical inquiry (which is no mean feat in itself), and also indicates that Jaques' methodology is slightly unconventional: her aim is to take a very contemporary critical discourse – such as posthumanism – and show how it can be applied to children's texts historically, as evidence of the ways in which this literature has long-participated in philosophical debates about the ontological status of the human subject. This particular chapter – simply titled "Creature" – is a great success. It argues that both Carroll and Swift are able to deconstruct traditional (and therefore hierarchized) understandings of the human subject. Swift achieves this through the depiction of two groups of non-human individuals: the people of Luggnag (who are immortal, but doomed to age endlessly) and the people of Laputa (so intelligent that their physical bodies have become deformed because of their obsession with intellectual rather than physical pursuits). She argues that, as a result of encountering these beings, "Gulliver's sense of humanity begins to mutate" (p. 37). The narrative's thematic exploration of what Jaques terms "marginalised personhood" consequently produces a self-reflexive meditation on the "ontological mutability" (p. 38) of the term "human". A similar destabilisation of the human subject occurs in Carroll's "Alice" stories due to his constant merging of the human with animal, leading Jaques to assert that an ongoing thematic agenda in Carroll's work is to displace "the naturalized assumption of human dominion over the animal kingdom" (p. 50). This argument is extremely persuasive, but the most remarkable achievement of this chapter is the way in which Jaques draws these two writers together because of the uneasy position which they occupy in the canon. She contends that the "Alice" stories and *Gulliver's Travels* "quite obviously engage with the concerns of posthumanism but struggle to negotiate making these concerns comfortable or appropriate for a young audience" (p. 66).

While there is much to admire about *Children's Literature and the Posthuman*, it is not without flaws. One of the more problematic of these is its deployment of posthumanism as a theoretical framework. Posthumanism is an extremely amorphous critical discourse with a wide-range of applications in modern scholarship, however Jaques

does little to engage with this plurality. In fact, she spends less than a page trying to tease out a definition and differentiate posthumanism from other related discourses, such as transhumanism. This becomes a more pressing issue as the book progresses, because although she professes that her study is an investigation of identity formation in children's literature, Jaques never really pauses to reflect on the tradition of humanist representations of subjectivity in children's fiction. There is therefore little consideration of how humanist ideologies of identity (as coherent, autonomous and linear) are configured differently by posthumanism. (Jaques' textual analysis concentrates primarily on the blurring of boundaries between formerly discrete categories such as "human", "animal" and "plant" – which results in an interrogation of identity that is, occasionally, lacking in depth because it does not fully consider the role of narrative techniques, such as mode of narration and focalisation, in the textual construction of subjectivity.) Another quite frustrating issue is Jaques' constant conflation of the terms "posthuman" and "posthumanism". One refers to the subject; the other the critical discourse that has been generated to explain or theorise the emergence or existence of this subject. Further consideration of how these terms are distinct would have produced a tighter and more persuasive overall argument.

I must admit, now that this review has come to its conclusion, that I initially felt rather baffled by Jaques' statement – proffered very early on – that her study would not include recent works of science fiction. The analogy which I immediately drew was that this would be like a study of feminist ideology in children's literature which refused to consider fiction produced after the 1960s (a key period of feminist political protest which was responsible for enacting a significant shift in cultural attitudes towards gender). Although you can obviously trace the existence of feminist ideology in children's literature published prior to this time, books produced afterwards provide evidence of a new dynamic – that is, a heightened awareness (on the part of both authors and readers) of how gender inequality might be highlighted and remedied. To an extent, this remains my position on posthumanism. It still seems odd to me that an academic study would deliberately ignore contemporary texts which explicitly thematise the very issues and concepts that it professes to address and theorise. Having said this, I can also attest that Jaques has managed to persuade me of the validity of her project. The final chapter of *Children's Literature and the Posthuman*, called "Toys", brings together a range of critical perspectives on the function of toys in children's fiction to provide readers with a critically astute explanation of how

such narratives engage with the core ideas of posthumanism. In effect, her skill as a critic lies in uncovering theoretical possibilities – and writing an alternative history of children’s literature and its philosophical engagements – that have heretofore been ignored by other scholars. I am incredibly impressed by how effectively *Children’s Literature and the Posthuman* demonstrates the existence of a long-standing tradition of the “disorder that arises from contaminated, vexed, challenged and even re-established identities” (p. 237). This disorder closely accords with posthumanism’s desire to interrogate the coherent, unified subject of Enlightenment humanism – and provides substantive evidence of how children’s literature offers what Jaques terms “sophisticated interventions into what it means to be fully human, more-than-human, and, indeed, *posthuman*” (p. 239).

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