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Representing "Otherness": Animals in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Hundred and One Dalmatians*, and Beyond

Piu DasGupta

Abstract
In this article, I examine the portrayal of animals in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Dodie Smith's *The One Hundred and One Dalmatians*. Specifically, I consider the issue of the alterity (or "otherness") of animals as a category, and the extent to which this is reflected (or not) in these two texts. I then proceed to consider this question in relation to more recent children's books and my own practice as a writer. This article reflects on and develops, in the context of the specific texts cited above and my personal practice as a writer, the discussion by Mimi Thebo of animal representation in children's literature in her article 'Talking Tigers: Concepts of Representational Ethics Applied to Non-Human Characters in Writing Children's Fiction'.

Keywords: *creative writing for young people*, *animal representation*, *dodie smith*, *lewis carroll*, *animal alterity*

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In this article, I examine the portrayal of animals in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (*Alice*) and Dodie Smith's *The One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (*Dalmatians*). Specifically, I consider the issue of the alterity (or "otherness") of animals as a category, and the extent to which this is reflected (or not) in these two texts. I then proceed to consider the problematics of this question in relation to some more recent children's books, concluding with a reflection on my own practice as a writer. This article reflects on and develops, in the context of the specific texts cited above and my personal practice as a writer, the discussion by Mimi Thebo of animal representation in children's literature in her article *Talking Tigers: Concepts of Representational Ethics Applied to Non-Human Characters in Writing Children's Fiction* (Thebo, 2023).

Victorian literature, influenced by the tradition of the animal fable established by Aesop, typically used animals as a trope to convey some moral or utilitarian purpose, or alternatively as an illustrative tool within the educational context to exhort children to "be humane" or "kind" (Feuerstein, p. 134). Such animals had no alterity: in fact, the very point of the exercise was that animals existed not as an independent or autonomous "other", but rather that their individual characteristics and behaviours served as examples of good (or bad) conduct to human beings. Thus, in Isaac Watts' poem *Against Idleness and Mischief*, the purpose of the "busy bee" is to illustrate the merits of industry, of useful contribution to society, as opposed to indolence or aesthetic enjoyment (Watts, pp. 65-66). The joylessness and constricting effects of this utilitarian approach were satirized by Dickens in his 1854 novel *Hard Times*, where the inability of the Gradgrind children to individuate factory workers is implicitly linked to the utilitarian treatment of animals in their education, their reduction to component cogs in a machine, a narrative bereft of playfulness or imagination:

> No little Gradgrind had ever associated a cow in a field with that famous cow with the crumpled horn who tossed the dog who worried the cat who killed the rat who ate the malt, or with that yet more famous cow who swallowed Tom Thumb: it had never heard of those celebrities, and had only been introduced to a cow as a graminivorous ruminating quadruped with several stomachs (Dickens, p. 12).

Lewis Carroll's *Alice* turns this didactic and utilitarian use of animal tropes on its head in the subversive world of Wonderland. Alice's attempt to recall Isaac Watts' poem about the busy bee turns into a satire, where a crocodile indulges in the act of preening itself in the waters of the Nile to "improve", not his moral wellbeing, but "his shining tail" (the linkage of decadence and the Middle East conveys a hint of Orientalism) (Carroll, p. 15). In the anarchic world of

Wonderland, animals are not subservient to humans, rather it is the other way around: "How queer it seems," observes Alice as she runs an errand for the White Rabbit, "to be going messages for a rabbit!" (Carroll, p. 28). She wonders what would happen if her pet cat Dinah started ordering everybody about, but then realizes that in the non-Wonderland world, animals are subservient to humans and she doesn't think "that they'd let Dinah stop in the house if it began ordering people about like that!" (Carroll, p. 29). The animals in Wonderland can be contrasted with Dinah, the non-Wonderland animal, in that they don't have names conferred by humans (naming being an exercise of power/control). In fact, the reversal of power is underlined by the White Rabbit mis-naming Alice as "Mary Ann", the kind of thoughtless error a master might make in mistaking the identity of a servant. Nor are the magical animals examples of "kindness" in the sense of the typically improving Victorian morality tale: Wonderland is full of acts of senseless violence and gratuitous cruelty, from the Madhatter putting the Dormouse in the teapot, to the croquet game where flamingoes are used to hit hedgehogs. The presence of the Dodo, extinct since the seventeenth century, is a stark reminder of Darwinian evolution, with its implacable process of natural selection negating any moral sense or teleological purpose as imposed by the traditional Victorian animal fable.

The link between the surreal world of Wonderland and that of books is underlined by Alice's fall through a tunnel lined with bookshelves, before landing at the bottom of the rabbit hole. It is as though Carroll is taking us back to the surreal, nursery rhyme world of the cow with a crumpled horn, who jumps over the moon: the anarchic territory where the animals of children's imagination should be. And yet the ending of *Alice*, with Alice waking from a dream and her elder sister's recollections of a remembered childhood, makes it clear that the Wonderland world – the world which subverts animal and human hierarchies – is one of the imagination, fleeting and unreal. In Alice's sister's musings, the Mock Turtle's "heavy sobs" give way to the "confused clamour of the busy farmyard" – herd animals, kept on the farm for a utilitarian purpose, making indistinguishable noises (Carroll, p. 111). This is the real world, and the radical subversions to the world order in Wonderland are contextualized as a fanciful story told to future generations of children.

The animals in Wonderland, while granted a dominance and autonomy unlike those in the real world, are not however truly "other" in the sense of being respected or understood as a different species of sentient creatures. They speak the language of humans, and wear human clothes: the White Rabbit with his waistcoat and pocket-watch, the Dodo with his cane and human hands (as illustrated in the original edition by John Tenniel, see Figures 1 & 2). Their dominance is not a characteristic in its own right, but symbolic of Carroll's wish to subvert Victorian conventions and hierarchies. We are not at any stage invited to infer that this is how real rabbits, flamingoes, or dormice behave. Their role is to serve Carroll's ideology, and to that extent they are a human projection serving an ideological purpose.

Figure 1: The White Rabbit (Tenniel, J (1865), Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, London: Macmillan)

Figure 2: The Dodo (Tenniel, J (1865), Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, London: Macmillan)

By contrast in *Dalmatians*, the alterity of animals is taken some steps further than in *Alice*. Animals in Smith no longer wear human dress, and there is a recognition that dogs have a language of their own, independent of humans, which humans cannot understand: "Dogs can never speak the language of humans, and humans can never speak the language of dogs," observes the narrator, "But many dogs can understand almost every word humans say, while humans seldom learn to recognize more than half a dozen barks, if that." (Smith, p. 53). Barks, tail wagging, snuffling, the pricking of ears, eye expressions – all these constitute a sophisticated canine non-verbal language, which humans are incapable of deciphering. This leads to many humorous misunderstandings and frustrations, as when Pongo and Missus try and fail to convey to the Dearlys by tail wags and barks that the lost puppies are in Suffolk. The superiority of canine networks of communications over those of humans is implied by the efficacy of the Twilight Barking, the relaying of information by dogs from London

across the country, which succeeds in revealing the location of the puppies where the human networks (newspapers, telegraph) fail.

Nevertheless, despite this growing recognition of and respect for the alterity of animals, they remain in Smith (as with the earlier Carroll) essentially a projection of the human world. Wild or liberated animals do not appear at any point in *Dalmatians*, even when the dogs make their perilous journey over remote countryside, where one would expect them to be in evidence. The animals in the world of the book are all domesticated and ultimately dependent on humans to survive, whether farm animals or pets. The canine world of Pongo and Missus replicates the class, race, and sex biases of the human world they inhabit. Thus, Missus is patronized by Pongo and the Spaniel when she mixes up right and left paws, the male dogs "laughing in a very masculine way" at her inability to remember directions (Smith, p. 84). The gypsy dogs that Pongo and Missus encounter cannot understand them as "they barked only in Romany", implying that canine communications are distinguished by the same race and linguistic demarcations that separate human languages (Smith, p. 133). Working-class dogs such as the good-natured Staffordshire terrier belonging to the van owner who rescues the group of dogs at the end of the book, speak with working-class familiarisations such as "mate." The various dogs that feature in the book are frequently described according to "purity" of breed and physical characteristics that render them more or less valuable in market terms – the pup Patch, for example, is born with a large black patch over one eye, which is "a bad fault" in a Dalmatian and means that he will never be "valuable" as a pedigree.

In some of these instances of subjection to the values of the human world – notably that of breeding criteria – animals in *Dalmatians* are seen as victims of exploitation. Patch and the runt of the litter, Cadpig, will never be valuable in monetary terms, but the Dearlys love them best of all because they started life "with a bit of bad luck" (Smith, p. 22). The Twilight Barking is carried out by dogs that are purebred and mongrels, but "none the worse for that, and all of them bright as buttons" (Smith, p. 48). In other instances, however – notably that of the working-class animals, the "outsider" gypsy dogs, and even the patronizing treatment of Missus – Smith does not adopt a critical or condemnatory stance. Instead, she seems to consider the dog world in these cases to be a reflection of the natural order of things. The conventions of the animal world both reflect the prejudices of the human world but also support a subtext of playful questioning, or "queering", of traditional human relationships. Perdita and Missus, for example, swap maternal roles in the feeding of the pups; just as the two nannies, Nanny Cook and Nanny Butler, swap gender roles and take "a great liking to each other", sharing the attic bedroom (Smith, p. 5). Whether or not this hints at same-sex orientation, it does at the very least represent a queering of traditional relationships and gender roles (Baker, p.346).

In a sense, *Dalmatians* presents a progressive (or retrogressive) view of the changing relationship between animals and humans over time. The book is haunted by the ghosts of Dalmatians past: proud "carriage dogs" which, from the eighteenth

century onwards, would trot alongside coaches helping to clear the path and guard against highwaymen. The British Carriage Dog Society still has as its emblem the Dalmatian dog within a wheel (see Figure 3), symbol of its original breeding purpose, its distinctive spotted coat making it easily visible, and its natural affinity for horses making it well-suited for this role (there is a humorous reference to this historical affinity in the book, where the gypsies' horse – unlike their dogs – is bilingual and can speak English Dog as well as Romany).

Figure 3: Emblem of British Carriage Dog Society (available at http://www.britishcarriagedogsociety.co.uk/, accessed 15th January 2024)

Pongo was traditionally a Dalmatian working dog's name, which is why Sir Charles, the ageing owner of the crumbling mansion in which the Dalmatians take refuge, mistakes Pongo for the ghost of his dog Pongo. The nostalgic picture of a pre-industrial past, where man and dog worked together in harmony and dignity, is set against the diminished role of the twentieth-century Dalmatian, reduced to the status of a household pet entirely dependent on its owner's whims, its striking visual characteristics (the spots) no longer serving a useful purpose as a working dog, but merely as an aesthetic function of "breeding." Yet even this reduced status as a pet is preferable to the horror of a future glimpsed through Cruella de Vil's evil plans: being butchered and marketed on a mass scale as fur coats. The association of Cruella de Vil with a destructive and hellish capitalism, that has destroyed a rural economy in harmony with animals and nature, is underlined by the repeated connections between Cruella and Hell. There is her brash and vulgar love of clashing and unnatural colours in home décor, and her ultimate decamping to America with her husband to start a business selling plastic raincoats ("plastic" being the ultimate product of factory/consumer culture, and interestingly this being the only use of this word in the book). It is as though, in *Dalmatians*, we see a snapshot of the degenerating relationship between animals and humans through time, a growing imbalance whereby an initially fruitful and mutually productive relationship of co-workers in harmony with nature gives way, via a gradual assumption of increasing dominance and exploitation through industrialization, to owner of chattel and – finally – marketable factory product.

In a sense, it is impossible to escape an element of human projection in writing about animals, precisely because it is not possible to become a bat even though we may

study their habits and imagine ourselves into the position as best we can (Nagel, p. 163). The most honest animal writing makes no attempt at verisimilitude, making clear its fantastical basis – as is the case with most examples of animals in human dress, which in today's children's books are mainly found in texts for the very young (see, for example, Jill Murphy's Large Family series of picturebooks featuring elephants). However, in other cases ostensibly mimetic animal representation can arguably be misleading. In Hannah Gold's atmospheric and powerful 2022 Middle Grade book *The Last Bear*, for example, a 12-year-old English girl discovers a polar bear on an Arctic island and feeds it peanut butter, subsequently riding on the bear's back. This is not a Pullman-esque fantasy, but a book set in the real world. Thebo notes that the idea that a starving predator would eat from a child's hand (as opposed to eating the child itself), or allow her to ride on its back, is not credible, and does little service to the child who might later encounter such a beast for real. Nor does it, albeit a poetic and powerful call to action, present an accurate picture of the reality of human-polar bear relations in the Arctic regions, increasingly fraught by the savage attacks on Inuit and other human settlements by bears driven by hunger and retreating ice caps, to hunt outside their usual zones (Hager).

From *Born Free* to *Free Willy* (the latter connecting a wild orca with the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest), critics have noted an implicit parallel between the Eurocentric/"white saviour" narrative as applied to animal stories, and that applied to stories featuring other oppressed or marginalized groups (women, racial minorities). As Thebo observes, "Habitat destruction and colonialism are co-dependent processes of exploitation. One of the assets stripped during the colonization process is the natural world of the colonized place." (Thebo, p. 3). The "white saviour" narrative, with its themes of struggle against the odds and personal redemption, is a subset of the "hero's journey", the classic trajectory that underlies the European storytelling tradition (Campbell, p. 13). It has been queried whether this archetype is appropriate or desirable in climate fiction, where the actions of the individual, however sincere, are ineffective to implement change, and progress is only likely be to achieved by collective political action (Caldecott).

Nevertheless, the need for global co-operation to help solve the impending climate crisis suggests that narratives which "radically accept difference" may be useful for child readers (Thebo, p. 3). Thus, carefully-researched stories that strive to capture the "otherness" of animals, even if that alterity is ultimately a subjective projection, may still be valuable in fostering empathy, a "window" as opposed to a purported "sliding door" (Bishop). In *Charlotte's Web*, Charlotte the spider is not romanticized but rather presented in her eight-legged, many-eyed, scuttling creepiness – an "otherness" which prepares a child for an encounter with a real spider, which should not therefore be as frightening or shocking as might have otherwise been the case. Similarly, in *A Kestrel for a Knave*, the bond between a child and a kestrel is depicted with painstaking and careful attention to detail, the "otherness" of the bird depicted in the main character's painstaking training attempts.

I myself encountered the problem of depicting the alterity of animals while writing my own Middle Grade novel, *Secrets of the Snakestone*, which features a number of "animal side-kicks." The mixed-race heroine, Zélie, befriends a starving pigeon who comes to visit her on the roof of the attic in which she is confined. She names the pigeon Rodolphe, after her favourite character in a book. She also later befriends a baby sloth, whom she rescues from being captured and stuffed by an evil secret society, and whom she names Titicaca.

I intended, by including the animal characters along with other minoritized groups, to adopt an intersectional approach to different types of oppression (linking domination due to race, gender and class, with that of animals). However I am aware that, in my treatment of Titicaca the sloth in particular, there are elements that are anthropomorphized/human projections. For instance, Zélie wraps the baby sloth around her neck and carries it around like a winter ruff. While I did, during my research, find photos and video footage of children at a South American animal sanctuary hugging tiny sloths to their chests, it likely is stretching belief for a child to carry an animal in this fashion around Paris, without anybody noticing! Does this anomaly matter? I decided that on balance it did not, principally because *Secrets of the Snakestone* is a magical-realist book, where a cursed stone with supernatural powers is unleashed on a semi-fictional Paris. I therefore concluded that the portrayal of animals, broadly speaking, falls within the "fantastical" end of the spectrum, and is not to be taken literally. There would not therefore be the same need to capture and/or respect the "otherness" of the animal characters, that a realistic portrayal would require.

To conclude, the depth of research, critical thought and self-reflection entailed in my study of the alterity of animals both in children's writing generally, and my personal practice as a writer, underlines the importance of careful reflection and research before including animals in any children's book, especially in a non-fantastical context. Of asking myself questions such as, *Why am I doing this? And should I?* Because, if I am not showing their radical difference, their essential unknowability; if I am not presenting insights that will help children understand them better; or ways of collective action to fight their possibly impending extinction; then, perhaps, I should not be writing about them at all.

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Author Biography

Piu DasGupta was born in Kolkata, India and grew up in India and the UK. She studied at Oxford University where she obtained a First Class Degree in English Language & Literature, and holds an MA in Writing for Children and Young People with Distinction (Manchester Metropolitan University). Her first children's book, *Secrets of the Snakestone*, was published by Nosy Crow in 2024 and was a *Times* Children's Book of the Week.