

Gail F. Melson. *Why the Wild Things Are: Animals in the Lives of Children*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. 199 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00481-8.

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As the Twig is Bent

“As the Twig is Bent”

Melson’s introduction opens on a scene in a veterinarian’s office. A father and his ten-year-old son—a man’s man and a man’s man wannabe—huddle over a small black and white dog, whispering and cooing in tones unmistakably maternal. Melson’s presence on the scene testifies to her own involvement with a companion animal. However, what strikes her is as much about the boy and her own work in Child Development and Family Studies as about the sick dog. First, it strikes her that “Here was an important relationship for this child [‘Where else were boys or men to be seen displaying such gentle caregiving?’] and for many other children. Here, a child’s deepest feelings were engaged. Here, too, was a bond in which children could reassure someone more vulnerable than they. Here were mutual devotion, comfort and care” (p. 2). Second, she realizes that “in all the interviews that my students, colleagues, and I had conducted about parent-child relationships, about significant events in the family, about the child’s bond with others, we had never thought to ask about nonhuman family members” (p. 2).

As she found after researching the literature in her field, almost no one else had thought about the influence of nonhumans on the development of children either. The benefits of the human-animal bond for adult health had been amply documented. The relationship of animal abuse to criminal development and domestic violence had been well established. It followed that those connections could be made only because nonhuman ani-

mals were intricately woven into the human psyche, certainly in part by the culture story in which nonhumans sometimes fare poorly, but perhaps also because humans have been hard-wired to connect to them by evolution. But somehow that rational deduction had been ignored.

Also well-documented is that nonhuman animals have figured large in human story as long as humans have told stories—probably as long or longer than humans have been human. The strongest reminder of the bond recorded in those stories remains today in the role of animals in the culture of childhood. As Melson puts it: “Animal characters fill children’s stories and screens, both television and computer [and movie]. Big Bird, Barney, Ninja Turtles, Carebears, and stuffed animals...populate the toy shelf and decorate the playroom. Their images saturate the huge market of children’s gear... Animals real, fancified, and long gone...become a child’s ‘significant other’ for a time... Animals crowd the symbolic life of children.” Then, she concludes, they “thin out from their imaginations as they mature into teenagers” (p. 3).

Since Melson’s focus is childhood, it isn’t necessary for her to examine the “thinning out” process that occurs as our anthropocentric culture weans us from “the animal world of children” (p. 4). But here too is an equally critical developmental process in need of hypothesis and research. Could it be that rather than animals becoming less significant to us as we mature, we repress or sublimate our need for the presence of the nonhuman because we are brainwashed into believing that the definition of being adult demands finding significance only in what is

human? We are, without question, urged to put aside “childish things” and pretend (and perhaps in fact come) to see ourselves “face-to-face” in a mirror that reflects only the human. Even the title of Melson’s fine book, one I understand she objected to, suggests we are to see the nonhuman as significant only because animals may be important to human health and development. Thus objectified, they are denied importance in and of themselves. The implication is they were just hanging around useless for all those millions of years before humans appeared to give them importance!

Despite the misleading title her publisher favored, Melson herself urges a “biocentric view” of both development and of life, a view that she suggests should replace the current “humanocentric” view. Basing her position on that of E. O. Wilson’s biophilia hypothesis, Melson states: “the biocentric view assumes that [nonhuman] animal presence in all its forms merits neither facile sentimentalizing nor quick dismissal, but serious investigation” (p. 5). Toward that goal, her book consciously generates hypotheses, leaving the testing to future researchers. Melson devotes her final chapter, “Deepening the Animal Connection,” to her hopes for the future: “Rather than viewing fascination with animals as a childish thing that maturation puts aside, we might see children’s attunement to animals as nature’s gift to our species. It is a reminder that each generation of humans needs an environment of living things to thrive as surely as it needs oxygen and water. It is an alert, warning us to ensure that children not lose their sense of connection to other species as they grow into adulthood. Instead, childhood should become a time of deepening connection, a time when respectful interest builds on children’s intuitive reaching toward animal life. Children are untutored and easily corrupted ecologists, but they set out on life’s journey as ecologists nonetheless. In their intimacy

with other species, in their ease of crossing species lines, lie the seeds of their future stewardship of the planet” (p. 199).

Her first chapter is a history of child development theory and research. Reading it, I found myself constantly amazed that even the best-known thinkers in the field have either not seen or ignored the importance of nonhumans in the lives of children. And I should not have been surprised, knowing as I do how the role of the nonhumans—and not so long ago of women and children—has been ignored in other fields of study, including the humanities, for instance. As Daniel Quinn claims in *Ishmael*, what we have here is proof of the power of the culture story to shape our vision and control what we perceive and believe. Melson points to the same myopic vision in each area of childhood development she explores in her central six chapters. They examine the cultural divide between the human and nonhuman, suggesting how reestablishing awareness of the importance of animals in human life begins to bridge the divide.

Obviously this is an important book, not only because it provides a corrective lens for those in Melson’s own field of study, but because it effectively argues for the importance of correcting the myopic vision of the culture at large. “The child is father to the man” (not to mention mother to the woman) but “as the twig is bent, so grows the tree.”

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