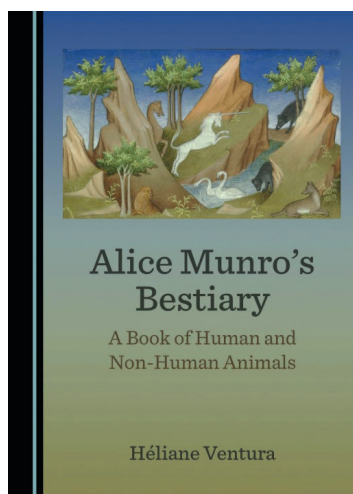


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Elena Bastianoni

**Alice Munro's Bestiary: A Book of Human and Non-Human Animals**

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*Alice Munro's Bestiary: A Book of Human and Non-Human Animals*, by Héliane Ventura explores the interdependence between the human and the non-human through the lens of Alice Munro's fiction.

Building on Ventura's previous work and her long-standing expertise in Canadian literature and women's short fiction, the volume completes her research into the presence and function of the animal imagery in Munro's writing. Structured as a bestiary, the book catalogues the many animal representations in Munro's work, including literal animal characters as well as symbolic and linguistic allusions to the animal world. The organizing principle of the book is relationality, as each entry is selected for its resonance with the human characters.

The animals – both real and mythical, literal and metaphorical – from Munro's entire body of work offer a rich depiction of cross-species relations and symbolic interactions.

Rather than arranging the sixty-three entries in chronological order, Ventura presents them alphabetically, a strategic choice that highlights non-human agency and improves the accessibility of the book. Visually evocative, each entry begins with an illustration of the animal and a quote from Munro's writing referring to that creature. The images evoke a series of synaesthesias underlining the intertextual nature of the images, enriching the reading experience by mediating between the literary representation of the animals and the broader historical and social context affecting their symbolic value.

This book fills a gap in Munro's criticism by highlighting the fluid boundaries between humanity and animality, emphasising the reciprocal bond between the human and the non-human. Ventura demonstrates that Alice Munro's references to animals are marked by liminality and ambiguity, evoking a kinship between the self and the non-human other, and suggesting a non-anthropocentric understanding of the human experience. Although other critical studies have suggested ecocritical readings of Munro's fiction, none of them has investigated the representation of animal subjectivity so thoroughly as Ventura's book. Munro's fiction emerges as a universal narrative interlaced with intertextual and transnational references to poetry, prose, visual arts, and Canadian cultural memory. Ventura interprets the animal figures as rewritings of the literary canon drawing on myth, classical literature, and even Early Christian texts.

Ventura's investigation into the intersection of humanity and animality is both engaging and insightful, offering close readings of Munro's short stories. The book opens with a powerful subversive image: the "ADDER". Though absent in physical form in the short story "Rich as Stink", from *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998), the snake is evoked through an anagram, proving Ventura's argument that animal imagery serves as a tool to challenge androcentric and anthropocentric norms. Munro's use of alliteration, onomatopoeia and subversive metaphor strengthens the blurring of ontological boundaries between humans and animals, revealing the complexity of human identity. In line with Donna Haraway's posthuman ethics, Ventura's book reveals the kinship between humans and animals as a bond shaped by indeterminacy, as the non-human references range from realism to the uncanny.

The volume also uncovers a web of interspecies relations built on reciprocity and mutual dependence, in contrast to hierarchical modes of life. Ventura traces parallels between the fictional characters and the animals referenced in the stories. One significant example is "Boys and Girls" from *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), which appears in multiple entries. Ventura highlights Munro's critique of speciesism by aligning the oppression of the female protagonist with the subjugation of her animal counterpart, the horse Flora. This ethical stance, grounded in the "reversibility and the interchangeability of opposites" (xix), is further explored in "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" – *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) – where the metaphorical links between humans and animals disclose the ambiguous nature of human subjectivity.

Ultimately, Ventura unveils Munro's "poetics of allusion", a literary mode deeply informed by intertextuality and what she defines "a poetics of relationality". This poetics is grounded in reciprocity and symbolically rendered through animal figures. For instance, in "The Shining Houses", from *Dance of the Happy Shades*, a group of Plymouth Rock hens

serves as a metaphor linking private concerns to larger issues of colonial exploitation, stressing the intersectionality between self and other, local and global.

*Alice Munro's Bestiary* makes significant contribution to Canadian literary studies by offering an original perspective on Munro's representation of interspecies relationships. By combining Posthuman theory with close textual analysis, Ventura challenges normative conceptions of otherness and invites readers to reconsider human identity in terms of reciprocity and ecological entanglements. The volume paves the way for future research on cross-species kinship in Canadian literature, a framework that could be adapted to other literary traditions. Ventura unites tradition to innovation by adapting the form of the bestiary to our posthuman present, encouraging the development of a deeper critical engagement and understanding of complexity.

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**Elena Bastianoni** is a PhD candidate in English Literature at the University of Pisa. She graduated in Euro-American Languages, Literatures and Philology in 2022 at the University of Pisa. She is specialising in Anglophone Literature with a dissertation centred on Anglophone Pandemic Fiction. Elena Bastianoni is currently focusing on the narrative production of Margaret Atwood, Emma Donoghue, Cherie Dimaline, and Meg Mundell, with a special attention to the interplay between damaged ecology and the pandemic phenomenon in dystopian fiction. Her research interests range from Postcolonial Literature to Ecocriticism, Trauma Studies, and Northern American Indigenous Literature.

[elena.bastianoni@phd.unipi.it](mailto:elena.bastianoni@phd.unipi.it)