



“Better Friends”: Marshall Saunders Writing Humane Education and Envisioning Animal Rights

—Roxanne Harde

To alter the stories about animals that we read to our children will not be so easy, since cruelty is not an ideal subject for children’s stories. Yet it should be possible to avoid the most gruesome details, and still give children picture books and stories that encourage respect for animals as independent beings, and not as cute little objects that exist for our amusement and table. (Singer, Animal Liberation)

My boys, in caring for these dumb creatures, have become unselfish and thoughtful. They had rather go to school without their own breakfast than have the inmates of the stable go hungry. They are getting a humane education, a heart education. (Saunders, Beautiful Joe)

Between 1893 and 1927, Margaret Marshall Saunders (1861–1947) published twenty-four books, most of them narratives about animals written for young people. Her first book, *Beautiful Joe, a Dog’s Own Story*, was the first Canadian book to sell more than a million copies, and Saunders remains one of the best-known and favourite Canadian authors of literature for children and young adults. “With its emphasis

on the alleviation of animal abuse,” Gwen Davies contends in her introduction to the 2001 Formac edition, “*Beautiful Joe* established themes that would be redeveloped in one form or another in Saunders’s twenty-three subsequent novels” (vi). In her attention to alleviating animal suffering, Saunders closely follows the thought of Jeremy Bentham, who argues, “The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*?

but, Can they *suffer*?" To this end, her body of writing for children develops a trenchant set of pedagogies and rhetorical strategies in support of humane education. In my epigraph, animal-rights activist Peter Singer notes the importance of teaching children to consider the interests of animals. Writing several decades before Singer, Saunders worked toward this goal throughout her career as she navigated among conflicting cultural discourses about animals and developed her conclusions about the place of non-human animals in a moral system and about how to consider animals for their own sakes.

Saunders was not, however, without her own conflicts about animals and their rights, and it is in these conflicts that her fiction is most interesting and relevant. Through her body of work, Saunders tacitly organized an ethics of animal rights, an undertaking as difficult for her as it is for us and many of our leading thinkers today. For example, in "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," Emmanuel Levinas tells the story of Bobby, a dog who faithfully greeted Levinas and the rest of his unit of prisoners at work in a Nazi labour camp. Levinas details how Bobby, by meeting them morning and evening with his barking and wagging, restored humanity to the men, who "despite all their vocabulary [were] beings without a language," but he concludes by declaring Bobby "the last Kantian in Nazi Germany" (153). As Paola Cavalieri makes clear, Levinas's definition of the dog as Kantian

"derogates Bobby himself: for a nonhuman animal to be a Kantian means to accept one's status as a thing" (103). John Llewelyn is even more emphatic as he considers both Levinas and Kant on humanism and ethics and comes to the conclusion that "there is no place for direct responsibility to Bobby here" (191–92). Like Levinas, Saunders was absolutely certain about the ability of animals to bring out the humanity in humans, about their gift for making us better than we otherwise might have been. While she worked to move past valuing animals only for what they can do for us, in order to value them for themselves, Saunders often followed hierarchical western thought and depicted animals as things. In *Beautiful Joe*, she argues that cruelty to animals is never acceptable, but she also depicts animals as objects for human pleasure, "for our amusement and table," as Singer puts it (215). Saunders reconsidered that stance in her fiction in later discussions of vegetarianism and in her movements from endorsing to condemning the use of performing animals. Although other scholars have made meaningful analyses of her conflicts between considering animals for what they do for humans and becoming responsible to non-human animals, I prefer to consider the interesting developments in her thinking throughout her career. In many ways, Saunders both conformed to and resisted the codes of her culture concerning the treatment of animals. To unpack her considerations of animal rights, this essay

examines *humane education*—a term coined in 1868 by George T. Angell, founder of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals—in several of the animal narratives that Saunders wrote to encourage her young readers and their parents to respect animals as independent beings. Dawne McCance asks, “How to inherit a tradition that refuses animals speech, the prime indicator of mind, and thus pain, performance, death, mourning, joy, response, respect?” (vi). By giving animals speech and making them matter on their own terms in her writing for children, Saunders moved away from that tradition. Even as she negotiated her own culturally endorsed tendencies to see the animal as thing, Saunders offered carefully reasoned arguments for the ethical treatment of animals through appealing pedagogies of humane education, renovations of her society’s views of non-human animals as objects for human consumption and pleasure, and rhetorical emphases on cultural understandings of connections between the child and the animal.

“A Heart Education”: The Pedagogies of Humane Behaviour

Through the nineteenth century, the term *humane* shifted from its earliest meaning as the civil or sympathetic treatment of other humans to mean the compassionate, benevolent, or kind treatment of humans and other animals (*OED*). Because of this

loaded meaning, it does not seem surprising that humane behaviour, like humane education, was invested first in its benefits to humans. For example, an oxymoron like “humane slaughter” demonstrates exactly who benefits first from humane choices. Humane education movements, which began in the early-nineteenth century, were meant to improve society generally by stopping human cruelty first to non-human animals and then to one another, and it was aimed at children as the shapers of the future. Training children to behave responsibly and benevolently to all living things was intended to be a lasting societal investment. By the time Saunders wrote *Beautiful Joe*, the chief proponents of humane education were the various societies for the protection of animals. *Beautiful Joe* was, in fact, written for a contest sponsored by the American Humane Education Society. Saunders won the contest. As Davies points out, Saunders’s beliefs stemmed from her parents’ philosophies about raising children, which were “inextricably tied to the mid-nineteenth-century rise of the animal protection movement and to Victorian discussions over the ‘cousinhood’ of human and beast” (Introduction viii). Saunders’s sister Grace wrote of their parents: “They argued that if we learned to be kind and thoughtful to animals we were much more likely to be kind to other boys and girls” (qtd. in Davies, Introduction viii).

In *Pets in America*, historian Katherine Grier traces



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the development of the same animal protection movements that influenced the Saunders family. Grier defines the “domestic ethic of kindness” as a growing social trend that encouraged personal investment in kindness to animals, changed how people thought about animals, and worked to socialize children into humane behaviour (112, 130). Of course, *kindness*, like *humane*, was a term originally invested only in human behaviour toward other humans: in the early-modern era, people were kind because of kinship; good behaviour rose out of natural affection and close relationship (*OED*). Kindness toward non-human animals is invested first in enhanced kindness toward human animals. Drawing from sources like Lydia Huntley Sigourney’s parental advice books, in which an ethic of kindness is a primary goal, Grier traces the growth and social impact of this ethic throughout the century, as it made “kindness to animals one of the identifying traits of respectable folk” (*Pets* 129). Grounding the ethic of kindness in people’s growing reluctance “to accept pain as their own lot in life,” Grier suggests that, while the early ethic of kindness elided the criminalization of livestock abuse and blood sports to address the suffering of pets and other small animals, it also recognized “that animals themselves deserved special care” (*Pets* 156, 130). The domestic ethic of kindness that Grier traces gave rise to humane education, endorsed awareness of animals as worthy of consideration, and influenced Saunders’s formative years.

Historian Diane Beers summarizes the work of nineteenth-century humanitarians as grounded in the idea that humans “had to harness their power not to subordinate other species but rather to establish a new evolutionary model in which humane behaviour would supplant competition and violence. And the way to achieve this new moral state was, not surprisingly, humane education, particularly for children”

(32). Quoting Charles Darwin's contention in *The Descent of Man* that "love for all living creatures is the most noble attribute," Beers connects him to the impetus for humane treatment of animals: "In a Darwinian sense, focusing on future generations ensured that human inclinations for violence would ultimately be eliminated from the social evolutionary process. And humane education promoters could boast of support from none other than Darwin himself" (32). Lilian Carswell situates *Beautiful Joe* in the debate surrounding Darwinian thought, which "encouraged the exploration of commonalities between humans and other animals in a way that challenged long-held assumptions about human mental uniqueness and eroded traditional arguments for excluding nonhuman animals from ethical consideration" (1). In *Reckoning with the Beast*, a study of animals and pain in Victorian culture, James Turner also links the changing view of animals to Darwinian thought, in particular Darwin's work on animal emotion, and, like Grier, finds this changing view and the concomitant rise of the humane ethos to be exacerbated by a developing "dread of pain—that 'instinctive' revulsion from the physical suffering even of the other" (xii). Overall, Darwin brought human and non-human animals into new and sometimes uncomfortable relationships with each other.

Moreover, as Mark Feldman points out, these relationships insisted on a new architecture of the self,

informed humane societies and education, and led to the domestic ethic of kindness, as well as a growing abhorrence of all suffering. Near the end of *Beautiful Joe*, Joe's owner Laura, when cautioned about thinking too much about the sufferings of animals, replies in favour of close relationships between humans and non-human animals: "I am a coward, I know, about hearing of animals' pains, but I must get over it. I want to know how they suffer. I ought to know, for when I get to be a woman, I am going to do all I can to help them" (193). Laura states her case with the typical sentimentality of the period, and although today's readers might find the sentiment overabundant, this overflow of feeling fostered the roots of animal-rights movements that still exist today. As Turner points out, we may "smile at the sentimentality and anthropomorphism of Victorian animal lovers. But we cannot afford to let our amusement turn to condescension. We are their children" (140). Susan Pearson traces the ways in which the focus on cruelty conjoined the sentimental emphasis on suffering with the liberal emphasis on rights to accommodate concern for both children and animals. As she investigates the workings of liberal ideologies in the culture of the period and in the shifting understanding of rights, Pearson suggests that "animal and child protectionists used a sentimental version of liberal rights discourse to reconcile rights with dependency in ways that altered concepts of the private sphere and of the relations of dependents to

the state" (10–11).¹ For Laura, as for Saunders's young readers and their parents, knowing those particular truths about animal suffering, and empathizing with animals, functions as the major lesson of humane education.

As the speeches of Laura, Joe, and other characters in *Beautiful Joe* demonstrate, Saunders recognized the importance of humane education and worked to further its goals, but, while she understood that this ethic benefits humans, she was equally concerned with how it benefits animals. Pet keeping was a popular part of humane pedagogy, and Turner points out that, in the period, pet keeping "began the complex task of delineating a new theory of partnership between human beings and nature" (124). Early in the novel, after Joe, a mixed-breed dog, has been mutilated by Jenkins and then nursed and adopted by the Morris family, Saunders describes the pedagogy of pets in humane education. In the chapter "My New Home and a Selfish Lady," Joe, the narrator, details a conversation between Mrs. Morris and her wealthy friend. Mrs. Morris centres her philosophy of raising children in her intent to have each of her sons "do something for somebody, outside and apart from himself, every day of his life," and says, "They are getting a humane education, a heart education, added to the intellectual education of their schools" (25). Grier points out that the nineteenth-century ethic of kindness "also connected this [ethic] to other desirable characteristics

in a properly home-centered society" (*Pets* 129–30). Mrs. Morris clearly expects her children to apply their ethical consideration of animals to others in their community and society, and she has seen results: "my boys, in caring for these dumb creatures, have become unselfish and thoughtful" (25). As Feldman notes about Jack London's animal stories, in writing about the animal, he was writing about the human (169). Saunders may begin with the question of the animal, but she brings a wider heuristic agenda to what Patricia Chu calls the cultural logic of the new anthropomorphism of the period (80). In addition, Grier notes that "the ethic of kindness even gave the pleasurable routines of pet keeping high moral purpose" (*Pets* 130), a point that intersects with Saunders's many descriptions of the benefits of pet keeping.² While teaching kindness to her friend, Mrs. Morris gets the woman's full attention by telling the story of Joe's suffering. After endorsing the lessons children learn from animals, she turns Joe's story into a lesson for her friend, and directs her as to how she may do good in the world, starting with the benefits of getting a dog for her son, and then turning her attention and resources toward her impoverished washerwoman. Through Mrs. Morris, Saunders thus constructs a tacit link between reformed human behaviour toward non-human nature and toward humans.

The other mother in the novel, Mrs. Wood, also makes clear the connection humane education forges



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between respecting and helping both animals and other humans: “I notice many school-teachers say that there is nothing better than to give them lessons on kindness to animals. Children who are taught to love and protect dumb creatures will be kind to their fellow men when they grow up” (119). Saunders’s contemporary Henry Salt makes the same case in *Animals’ Rights: Considered in Relation to Social Progress*. Historian Harriet Ritvo summarizes a variety of early-nineteenth-century texts for children and highlights their contention that “the need to be kind to animals provided continual occasions to exercise self-control, and children who refused to take advantage of these opportunities were seen as likely to grow up to be dangerous to themselves and other humans” (131–32). Humane behaviour remains at the forefront of social progress, and thinkers today often are as certain as Salt that there is an intrinsic connection between the treatment of human and non-human animals. Saunders incorporates this logic into her lessons: Harry, the young man who saves Joe and later marries Laura, declares, “I firmly believe that the Lord will punish every man or woman who ill-treats a dumb creature, just as surely as he will punish those who ill-treat their fellow creatures” (193). For those who inflict suffering, Saunders creates apt punishments: the man who mutilates Joe later goes to jail for robbery and attempted murder, and a particularly vile character, a British aristocrat who leaves his animals tied up and dying from lack of food and water, comes to a horrible end by falling into a ravine: “In that lonely place, he would call for help in vain, so he may have perished by the terrible death of starvation—the death he had thought to mete out to his suffering animals” (187). Her readers would have difficulty missing the point.

Saunders also makes humane education an attractive proposition, and the ongoing pleasures of pet keeping are only some of the

pleasures offered by attention to animals. As Dandy, a dog who dies in *Beautiful Joe* and is featured in its sequel, *Beautiful Joe's Paradise: or, The Island of Brotherly Love*, exclaims, "lots of people would get more fun out of life if they would cultivate animals more" (*Beautiful Joe's Paradise* 161). In the former novel, when Laura and Joe travel by train to spend the summer on her uncle's farm, they meet a famous woman. Saunders constructs the scene in a low-key fashion: Laura and the elderly woman fall into conversation with other passengers when the train is stalled. The conversation naturally turns to the suffering of animals as Laura comforts Joe, who has been caged for hours in the baggage car without light or water. When a young man declares that "there is a great deal of mock sentiment about this business of taking care of the dumb creation," the woman and an older male passenger detail reasons for treating all animals humanely (95). Convinced, the young man agrees to be humane and, when the woman introduces herself, he "looked as if he was astonished to find out who she was" (98). The woman later tells Laura how she came to work for animal rights after witnessing intense cruelty to working horses when she was a child. With a few exceptions, the woman Saunders describes closely matches Caroline Earle White (1833–1916), who was a pioneering figure of American animal protection. White grew up in Philadelphia and witnessed the abuse of horses on Market Street throughout her youth.

While her colleagues, Henry Bergh, who founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1866, and George Angell, who founded the American Humane Education Society in 1889, continue to have much higher profiles, White's animal-rights activism remains a highly useable legacy for SPCAs, humane groups, animal-rights organizations, and anti-vivisection societies. Her Juvenile Society for the Protection of Animals, a movement for and by children, founded in 1874, predates Angell's Bands of Mercy, into which she merged her organization. Saunders's inclusion of a character who would certainly make her contemporaneous readers think of White, as well as the excitement caused by this character's celebrity and the attractive way in which the famous woman educates random young people, anticipates the central discussion of the Bands of Mercy as a leading mechanism of humane education in *Beautiful Joe*.

The day after Laura and Joe arrive at Dingley Farm, Mrs. Wood takes them to a Band of Mercy meeting, which is fun, rowdy, and crowded with children telling interesting stories of doing great good to remedy animal abuse and neglect. The early generations of children reading the novel would at least have heard of the Bands; Beers notes that by the 1890s the Bands had over eleven thousand groups and half a million members from all parts of the United States and Canada, children who pledged "kindness and justice



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to all living creatures" (89). These clubs encouraged children to learn about animals and organize activities to help them. Joe describes the meeting and relates several stories about the abuse or rescue of animals, and gives a long speech on the wide benefits of educating children in the humane treatment of animals. Pets are important and enjoyable for these children, but Saunders connects their care for their pets to wider humane behaviour. Similarly, in her later story "Jack, the Minister's Dog," Saunders connects the care and tolerance a village has for a rambunctious puppy to the growing religious and moral responsibility of its inhabitants. The Band of Mercy children in *Beautiful Joe* also show their growing concern with other suffering. Mrs. Wood continues the meeting with a discussion of how the fashion industry causes millions of birds to be slaughtered every year, most by having their wings torn from their bodies. Saunders's story "Bunny Boy" details the feather harvest through a progressive stepmother who tells her little girl, a child known for nursing the sick and injured animals of her neighbourhood and an especial friend to birds, how over five million birds are killed for fashion every year (244). Turner notes that bird-preservation societies grew out of pet keeping, and the Band meeting delineates connections between humane education, pets, and wider reform (127).


The final stories at the meeting are about how to train horses with kindness, and they circle back to the woman on the train who became committed to the humane cause because of the ill-treatment of horses. At the station, she proposes to remedy the evils of animal abuse the same way as the evils of intemperance: "Legislation for the old and hardened and education for the young and tender. I would tell the schoolboys and schoolgirls that alcohol will destroy the framework of their beautiful bodies, and that cruelty to any of

God's living creatures will blight and destroy their innocent young souls" (97). Noting that nearly all of the founders of animal-rights organizations "divided their time between diverse reforms" such as women's rights, temperance, and urban and labour reforms, Beers points out that few early animal-rights activists "drew sharp distinctions between animal abuse, child abuse, and domestic abuse, believing instead that each fed on and perpetuated the other" (93). *Beautiful Joe* equates the horrific abuse that Jenkins inflicts on Joe to the cruelty he inflicts on his family, and then to his neglectful spreading of typhoid fever in the town. Saunders teaches humane behaviour through such negative examples, but she predominantly uses positive examples to educate, like the Band of Mercy's connection of the wellness of the animal to the wellness of the child, and then to the wellness of the community.


Saunders continued to endorse the SPCA and its affiliates, like the Bands of Mercy, in other fiction; for example, *Beautiful Joe's Paradise* posits humane behaviour as a wider cure for social ills. Narrated by Sam Emerson, a San Francisco boy whose dog, Ragtime, is killed when a neighbourhood boy throws rocks at him, the novel depicts the Island of Brotherly Love, a heaven for animals where Sam journeys when he becomes gravely ill from his grief. The novel functions as a sort of extended Band of Mercy meeting, where stories of animal suffering give way to happy

endings as all tortured and neglected non-human animals, including Sam's poisoned kitten, come to paradise. There is story after story about how humans made both domestic and wild animals suffer, told by the now-whole and happy animals, many of whom are waiting to be reunited with their human companions. At the end, Joe is called to the World of the Blessed to join Laura, and Sam journeys home, wakes up in his bed, and goes on to join the San Francisco SPCA. In *Boy, the Wandering Dog*, another novel narrated by a dog, Boy details all human behaviours that need reform; he discusses many types of neglect and abuse of animals alongside drunkenness, various criminal behaviours, and fashion choices that cause animal suffering and contribute to poor health in women. Boy is a frontrunner to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, it seems, when he criticizes his mistress, "all in fur—coat, muff and cap. Several little baby seals must have starved to death, and several mother seals must have died in agony to fit her out" (97). Saunders's pedagogies of humane education point to causes far wider than treating pets well: her writing teaches children, and encourages their parents to teach them, about many types of animal abuse, and predisposes them to wider social reform.

Ultimately, however, the continued attention to how the humane treatment of animals benefits humans undermines the pedagogy of humane education. Ethical behaviour toward non-human animals needs to



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be grounded in respect and responsibility to those animals as subjects. While they were intent on benefitting the animal, humane movements of the nineteenth century, as made evident by Saunders and her peers and the observations of the researchers who study them, were invested in what their reforms could do for humans. In short, they marketed their agenda in a hierarchical fashion that kept humans in the top subject positions, reducing animals to the lower object positions.

“Made to Serve”: Animals for Utility and Entertainment

According to Lilian Carswell, who considers the dual agenda behind Saunders’s utilitarian arguments—the humane treatment of animals for the sake of the animals, but more for the sake of humans—in using animal welfare as the means to the end of the training of responsible citizens, Saunders commodifies animals. Carswell cites the examples of the Woods’ kindness to animals as a way to increase profits and Carl’s pet keeping for profit. She argues that, for Saunders, “the price of human consideration for animals is their subservience” (173), and she looks to the chapters in *Beautiful Joe* that tell the story of the Italian Bellini and his performing animal act as a further example of Saunders’s view of animals as expendable commodities. Ritvo, while noting in her study that nineteenth-century discourses surrounding animals all contain a central theme of domination and exploitation, points out that “no single pattern determined all human-animal relationships in nineteenth-century England” (4). While Saunders works hard to convince her young readers that kindness is a reward in and of itself, she also discusses how kindness can be the means for human profit, comfort, or pleasure. In both *Beautiful Joe* and “Bunny Boy,” she includes long discussions about why the feather industry must be stopped, and pity for the suffering birds is only one

reason. In the latter text, Mrs. Gale “dare not tell Diadem of the way in which the birds are killed at the season of the year when they are rearing their young, and how cruelly the young ones are left to starve,” but she is happy to tell the child, and young readers, “of places where the birds have not been protected . . . and of the consequent failure of crops and the enormous expenditure of money to get rid of insect pests” (246). “I hate to be run along the road, or have boys throw stones at me,” says Mooley the cow from the story “Poor Jersey City,” “It makes me feel bad and poisons my milk” (53). Overall, Saunders’s discussions of animals for entertainment and the table show an evolving sensitivity about human choices concerning non-human animals.

While Carswell offers an astute reading of how *Beautiful Joe* negotiates the commercial use of animals, I am unconvinced by her contention that Saunders in some ways justifies cruelty. Saunders’s negotiations of commoner forms of animal exploitation are quite problematic, although these negotiations are, of course, reflective of a meat-eating culture. Turner points out that, after 1870, organized animal protection grew more conservative: “the scope of SPCA work slowly constricted. Contentious issues like field sports and factory farming were avoided in favor of teaching children to be kind to pets and birds and caring for stray dogs and cats” (122). *Beautiful Joe* performs in the common contradiction between humane behaviour

and animal exploitation. Saunders’s negotiations take place in two areas of concern: animals for food and for entertainment. Her characters are therefore often quite self-contradictory. For example, after a long discourse on keeping her hens healthy and productive, Mrs. Wood exclaims, “There’s a good deal of sense in hens, if one manages them properly. I love them, because they are such good mothers,” but she blandly calls her husband “chicken-hearted” a little later when she notes that “he won’t even kill a fowl for dinner. He gives it to one of the men to do” (113, 154). Similarly, the eponymous narrator of *Bonnie Prince Fetlar*, a Shetland pony bought by a Canadian rancher for his American nephew, observes the family spending a morning rescuing a pet lamb from a wolf and petting him all afternoon.³ In between, they have lamb for lunch. In *Golden Dicky*, the canary-narrator watches his owners eat lamb for lunch and, unlike Fetlar, he wonders “that good people like the Martins would eat it” (23). Fetlar later sees the pet lamb wink at him in the midst of his petted bliss and comments, “I was quite surprised, for I had fancied him rather stupid-looking. I should have known better. Any living thing has some brains” (80). Fetlar’s comment might have made Saunders’s readers wonder about the thinking subject who became lunch, and the lamb-eating children have a discussion about so-called humane ways to kill livestock that underscores the point. Fetlar also echoes Mr. Wood’s discussion with Laura about slaughterings gone

horribly wrong; he promises to show her “a circular I have that tells the proper way to kill animals. The American Humane Education Society in Boston puts it out” (*Beautiful Joe* 112).

Ultimately, Saunders tries to negotiate a space between humane treatment of all animals and eating their flesh, even as she offers vegetarianism, even veganism, as viable options. This negotiation features prominently in a good deal of her work. Saunders’s contemporary, Henry Bergh, negotiates the conflict between humane behaviour and eating meat in this way:

It has been permitted to us by God, to take the lives of such animals as have been created for our food: and the necessities of civilization have demanded that many others should be sacrificed, to afford us clothing and other articles of usefulness. But this permission to kill is only granted to supply our absolute wants; and, to take the life of an innocent, unoffending animal, solely because we have the wish or power to do so, is an act of wanton wickedness, which, sooner or later, will bring upon us the punishment that inevitably awaits on sin. (6)

Saunders, like Bergh, accepted eating meat as the norm. It seems that she was as interested as Bergh in understanding that the practice involved the sacrifice of living beings and, if it must be undertaken, that it must

be conducted as humanely as possible.

At the same time, amid the discussion of humanely growing and killing animals for meat, in *Beautiful Joe*, Saunders offers an alternate view from the elderly man on the train:

If you could see what I have seen, you’d never eat another bit of meat all the days of your life. . . . Think of the cattle on the Western plains. Choked with thirst in summer and starved and frozen in winter. Dehorned and goaded on to trains and steamers. Tossed about and wounded and suffering on voyages. Many of them dying and being thrown into the sea. Others landed sick and frightened. Some of them slaughtered on docks and wharves to keep them from dropping dead in their tracks. What kind of food does their flesh make? It’s rank poison. Three of my family have died of cancer. I never eat meat. (95)

The elderly passenger delineates two choices: either make certain that the meat you eat is produced in a humane fashion that will not poison you (and remain aware that such protein comes from a living being), or give up meat altogether. Saunders included the vegetarian option in other texts. In the novel *Tilda Jane*, the orphaned protagonist comments that the food served her is not ham, but “a cunnin’, teeny white pig runnin’ round a pen, cryin’ ‘cause the butcher’s



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after him. I couldn't eat it, any more than I'd eat my brother" (37). In *Beautiful Joe's Paradise*, when Sam orders a chicken for his dinner on his first night in heaven, a young hen comes before him and stretches her neck across a rock so he can butcher her; Sam learns his lesson and enjoys his first vegetarian meal. Joe explains that humans "who are really not carnivorous could get on better without flesh food than we do—and we are perfectly comfortable without it" (89). When Sam protests, Joe reasons that fewer animals would be bred if humans stopped consuming them, and humans, who "are clever enough to invent anything" would find ways to fill the supply of all animal products, like shoe leather (89). In Joe's animal paradise, Sam provides a model for Saunders's readers because he does not eat the hen and comes to accept Joe's vegan reasoning.

Saunders's discussions of animals for entertainment also show developing thought. While Carswell accuses her of endorsing the use of animals for entertainment, I think that, even as early as *Beautiful Joe*, Saunders displays ambivalence about performing animals. Bellini, the Italian animal trainer, clearly loves his animals: he takes excellent care of them, and Joe describes them as attached to him. Yet, Saunders kills most of his animals in a hotel and stable fire caused by drunken young men. She might be using this episode to warn about the dangers of alcohol, but she might also be suggesting that hotels and theatres are not the place for non-human animals. In the late-nineteenth century, criticism of the use of animals for zoos, circuses, and other performance venues was not popular. Beers notes that "these popular entertainment ventures often proved impervious to protest and resistant to reform. They drew large crowds for several reasons. . . . visiting a zoo or attending a circus was considered a healthy pastime by most people. . . . the most egregious acts of animal exploitation and abuse

occurred out of sight" (79). Time and time again, Bergh tried to stop P.T. Barnum's use and abuse of animals; he was always thwarted because his society seemed unwilling to give up animal entertainments.

Saunders became progressively more critical of companies with performing animals.⁴ In the story "Poor Jersey City," the terrier Jersey City escapes from Bankston & Sons' Big Show, where "the public sees the sugar—an animal gets through a pretty trick and he runs to his trainer for a lump. They don't notice the long whip in the background" (53). He says, "I don't belong anywhere. I wasn't stolen from a lovely home like the dogs in the story books. I was born and brought up in the show; but I'm tired and sick of it now, and my bones ache, and I'd rather die than go back" (54). When Jersey City's new owners face Bankston, the story suggests that there may be humane show companies that treat their animals well, but it also argues that humane societies must police all shows as part of their responsibilities (73–74). In *Boy, the Wandering Dog*, Boy, another terrier, rescues a spaniel he had known, a petted lap dog stolen and worked in the show. He takes her home, and his master threatens to prosecute the owner of the show, buys all the dogs, and retires them on a farm: "Master visited the show, and was struck with the appearance of the animals"; not only were they undernourished and suffering from beatings, "he saw that they were all terrified" (186). In *Bonnie Prince Fetlar*, written near

the end of Saunders's career, the pony-narrator meets a chipmunk who hobbles about on crippled feet; a bird tells Fetlar that the chipmunk "was a performing squirrel in a show. They used to make him dance by turning on a gas flame under his cage. . . . the bars [of his cage] were charged with electricity" (67). These examples delineate Saunders's growing disapprobation of the use of animals for entertainment; while she remained willing to allow the viewpoints of both meat-eaters and vegetarians into her writing, and to entertain the occasional necessity of killing a wild creature, she ultimately denied the need for animals in zoos, shows, and circuses.

Far more problematic than her negotiations with the various commercial uses of animals is Saunders's view of non-human animals as the servants of humans. Joe emphasizes the pleasure of keeping such servants: "Miss Laura says that if men and women are kind in every respect to their dumb servants, they will be astonished to find how much happiness they will bring into their lives, and how faithful and grateful their animals will be to them" (*Beautiful Joe* 240). The eponymous narrator of "Poor Jersey City" explains it this way: "we four-legged animals were made to serve the two-legged ones, and we can't be happy without them" (56). In addition, Saunders conflates this "natural" servitude with affection. In *Beautiful Joe's Paradise*, Sam hears the story of an elephant who pines miserably for his keeper: "[H]e was born in



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captivity, and loved his keeper passionately. When he was full grown, he became ill with some hopeless disease. It was decided to poison him. . . . but it was done . . . badly, for they could not regulate the dose of poison for such a big animal. Then they tried to shoot him—anyway, he was three days dying” (45). Instead of questioning why the animal would miss a keeper who allowed him to suffer in such a fashion, Sam asks why he is so often the subject of the animals’ gaze; he is told, “the animals on this part of the Island have nearly all been used to the companionship of man. He is a divinity to them, and they will never be perfectly happy till they meet their former masters” (46). Joe makes Sam president for his stay, saying, “Human beings will always command where animals are concerned, and I am well pleased to have it so” (82). Repeated emphasis on the subservience of animals in Saunders’s fiction might suggest that animals’ place in the social order makes them, and their rights and experiences, expendable or negligible.

Yet, in both *Beautiful Joe* and its sequel, Saunders produced discussions of heaven and the question of whether or not animals have souls. In these novels and others, her protagonists are equally sure that animals go to heaven and that the people who abuse them do not. By placing animals in heaven, Saunders implied that animals do have souls and, although they may come lower in the social order, that they matter. These discussions reflect questions that concerned nineteenth-century society; both Beers and Grier reflect on the debates surrounding animal souls, and both pause over the growing awareness through the period that animals do indeed show emotion, and that this emotion indicates a soul, a thing of importance in the dominant Christian world view. Human awareness of the animal-human bond encouraged belief in animal souls and, therefore, in the ethical

treatment of animals. As Grier points out, people came to realize that not only did their pets “have the capacity to feel physical pain, but they expressed recognizable feelings—joy, distress, sorrow, and most important, devoted love—to their mates, between parents and offspring, and to people who sometimes did not deserve their devotion” (*Pets* 130). Saunders engaged fully with Grier’s last point; time and again, her narrators consider the affection an abused animal continues to have for its abuser, starting with Joe’s description of his mother and her owner: “I have seen him use his heavy whip to punish her till her body was covered with blood. . . . I soon found out that the reason she did not run away was because she loved Jenkins” (5). Joe clearly disagrees with her affection and loyalty; he later delights in Jenkins’s incarceration. Saunders saw non-human animals as lesser and subservient to humans, but she never suggested that animals should be made to suffer.

“You Can Imagine My Feelings”: Significant Otherness and the Child-Animal Connection

Writing in 1892, social activist Jacob Riis underscored the common social understanding of an intrinsic connection between children and animals: “The old link that bound the dumb brute with the helpless child in a common bond of human sympathy has never been broken” (150). Saunders used this understanding as a grounding ideology in many of

her plots and as part of her pedagogies of humane education. Her rhetoric of connection, which insists on new views of animal rights, also creates some of the troubling aspects of her work, including the privileging of pets over other non-human animals and domestic over foreign animals. The logic of these hierarchies is grounded by her ultimate privileging of human subjects, and reflects the treatment of various groups in her culture as dominant and other. Cows like Mooley can become beef and the Devering children can both eat and play with lambs, but household pets, especially dogs, are seen as almost human. Harriet Beecher Stowe voices this sentiment in “Dogs and Cats” when she points out that each of her dogs “had as much his own character as if he had been a human being” (103). Within the group of animals who are pets, there exists another hierarchy. For example, *Beautiful Joe* is a catalogue and condemnation of every way animals are caused to suffer—the violence done to Joe, the thoughtlessness that leaves Jim gun-shy, the poisoning of Billy’s mother, and so forth—but when Bella the parrot comes to the Morris house, her kidnapping by the seafaring friend of the Morris boys goes unnoticed, her exile to a cold climate and imprisonment in a house unmentioned. The multitude of tropical birds kept by Carl Morris in his attic room for pleasure and profit is left unexamined as well, and, at the end of the novel, the Morris children save a young crow, name him Black Jim, and train him to speak and do tricks.



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Unlike Bella and the other “foreign” birds, however, the children allow him to return to the wild, where he mates and raises a family. His blackness seems to keep him outside the domestic circle, yet his status as a domestic bird affords him his eventual freedom. Overall, Saunders’s connections between children and their pets both show her concern for animals and their rights and centre her humane pedagogies on human beings. She fits firmly within the middle-class impetus to act as shepherds for “lesser beings.”

Davies points out that “there are themes of humanity, conservation, and respect for nature developed in *Beautiful Joe* that are still relevant today” (“Margaret” 151). But these themes are also grounded in hierarchies that privilege human over non-human animals. Moreover, as themes in narratives written for children, they raise questions about where children are placed in this hierarchical social ordering. Saunders clearly wrote, at least in part, with the intent of inspiring children to behave more humanely and to reform their world through kind treatment of animals. Her stories of suffering animals, and those of remarkable animals like Joe, Boy, Fetlar, and Jersey City, seem meant to encourage her young readers to sympathize and act. In short, she forges connections between child and animal that make them meaningful to each other. Saunders frequently compares animals to children, to greater and lesser ends, such as when Mr. Wood makes the comparison when telling Laura, “I’m going to know the butcher that kills my animals, that have been petted like children” (236). In linking the child to the animal, humane education hopes for an improved society; in linking the animal to the child, that society defines both as under the authority of the human adult. The sentimental connection, then, might undermine its own agenda.


The child-animal connection was made by Saunders and many

others in the late-nineteenth century. ASPCA founder Henry Bergh also helped to found a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children; children and animals were paired in the minds of many reformers as the objects of oppression. Psychologist Gene Myers notes that the principles involved in these movements differed in that the earlier movement “constrained traditional claims of animals qua property, whereas protection of children entailed legal intrusion into the domestic sphere. But both extended social control to protect innocents from individual cruelty” (27). He claims that “versions of the favorable comparison of animals and children echo through much of the culture,” quoting psychologist James Sully’s contention from 1895 that “a child may be said to belong to the animal community. . . . Has he not, indeed, at first more in common with the dog and cat, the pet rabbit or dormouse, than with that grown-up human community?” (Myers 26).


Saunders explores this commonality in the one book she wrote for the very young child, *Charles and His Lamb*. The story of a little boy and his pets, the book features photographs of a white-gowned and hatted toddler with his various pets. Young as he is, Charles speaks perfect English, and has the odd habit of referring to himself in the third person: “‘It is the train,’ he cried, ‘Charles’ grandfather has come,’ and, scrambling to his feet, he trotted rapidly across the lawn, followed tumultuously by the dogs,

the cat and the lamb” (14). Charles’s clear sense of himself as subject is coupled with his recognition of the subjectivity of his pets. When Charles’s cousin Wilfred, a badly behaved older boy, kicks the lamb and denies his action, Charles, normally the soul of patience and forgiveness, “gave him a sudden, well-directed blow between the eyes,” and then denies his action (53). In Charles’s view, the cousin, the lamb, and Charles himself are equal subjects, and Charles goes unpunished, which suggests that the adults in his life share his view. Myers argues that “young children’s moral feelings involving animals, equally as those involving humans, must be respected” (15). Saunders would agree, as all of Charles’s extreme actions surrounding his menagerie are respected by his family, with the exception of Wilfred. The crisis comes when Wilfred sells the lamb to a farmer; Grandfather recovers the pet, and the story closes with Charles’s mother’s benediction that suggests Charles will conflate humans and animals for all of his life (73). Animals are Charles’s subjective others, the story suggests, and might be able to stay that way. Charles’s mother foresees him as the ideal end to humane education: an adult who continues to value and be responsible to animals, even as he improves society.

In another mode of animal-child relationship, Saunders depicted the bodily connection between them, most notably in *Bonnie Prince Fetlar*. Myers touches on the relationship drawn between the animal,



. . . Saunders offers a horse who understands how the human body works to make meaning.



the child, and the body by developmental theories from several disciplines and notes that, “if children and animals interact directly on a bodily level, then the meanings children make about animals derive from the experience of interaction. Simply put, animals may be directly meaningful to us” (45). In *Fetlar*, Mr. Devering cautions his daughter to “Love animals, but keep them second,” but the novel is narrated by a pony who thus holds the privileged perspective; he hardly comes second (103). *Fetlar* uses this perspective to describe meaningful relationships with his young master and the Devering children. Tuned to their thoughts through the bodily contact of riding and grooming, he knows when one of them plans to run away and tricks the boy into returning home. Sociologist Keri Brandt argues that “humans and horses co-create a language system by way of the body to facilitate the creation of shared meaning” (299), and, with *Fetlar*, Saunders offers a horse who understands how the human body works to make meaning. *Fetlar*’s understanding seems somewhat more realistic in light of Brandt’s ideas about an embodied non-verbal language system and research that “posits horses as sentient beings who live valuable lives of their own” (313). Saunders makes *Fetlar* explicitly connected to and concerned with the many children in the novel. It is telling that he becomes a witness to and commentator on human behaviours that are less than humane. The pony’s consistent kindness to his owners shows that he is a better friend to them than they are to him or to each other.

Starting with Joe and continuing throughout her career, however, Saunders was most concerned with the connections between dogs and children. Donna Haraway’s question in *The Companion Species Manifesto*—“How might an ethics and politics committed to the flourishing of significant otherness be learned from taking dog-human relationships seriously?”—seems to be one Saunders might have

challenged when dealing with loss and violence, and in regarding those who are excluded or oppressed. It is a connection that insists that society take direct responsibility for both.

In Haraway's terms, dogs bring together human and non-human, organic and technological, state and subject, nature and culture; her "movements for animal rights are not irrational denials of human uniqueness; they are a clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture" (152). Myers contends that connections between children and animals can expand to concern about their local habitats and wider ecologies, and that the dynamics of these bonds can foster continuity and community (180). Like Haraway's claim for kinship with non-human nature, and Myers's claim for a connection and concern that looks a good

deal like friendship, Saunders figured children and animals in mutual and richly rewarding friendships. The relationships into which she brought them are her most profound arguments for animal rights because, in those close circles of mutual responsibility, there seems some equality of subject position. Saunders is unable to move fully past hierarchical thought, to remove the human and its kin from the centre of *humane* and *kindness*; she is unable, finally, to see the non-human animal as an equal subject. Still, she sees them as subjects with emotions, souls, and inherent value, and in so doing, she at least gestures toward animal rights. At the end of *Boy, the Wandering Dog*, when she has Boy insist that "we dogs are better friends than men are to themselves" (359), Saunders points toward the need for the continued development of ethical thought about and ethical treatment of non-human animals.

Notes

¹ Noting the extent to which sentimentalism gave shape to reform-oriented fiction and reformist tracts issued by activist groups, Pearson points out that “After the Civil War, animal and child protectionists relied on sentimental tropes in their own propaganda, producing both factual exposés of suffering and commissioning works of fiction such as *Beautiful Joe*,” which employs the normative languages of liberalism and sentimentalism to ask “people to change themselves in accordance with [the protectionists’] values and vision of community” (15, 36).

² Saunders worked to benefit pets along with children. *Beautiful Joe* devotes two chapters to the training of Billy, a rescued puppy, and Saunders’s works consistently offer practical advice for children on training dogs, for the pleasure of the practice and in order to have a well-behaved dog. Later in the novel, Dandy dies because he stole food from a child and was attacked by the child’s dog; Joe observes that if Dandy had been trained, “he might not be here in his silent death agony” (225). Bad dogs like Dandy do not live long in Saunders’s work.

³ Saunders has a number of interesting discussions about nation. In one example, as a Canadian writer who sets many narratives in the United States, she often conflates the two nations into a blended English nationality that is superior to the rest of the world. In *Bonnie Prince Fetlar*, written at the end of World War I, the American protagonist exclaims, “you Canadians are so much like us Americans. We’re great friends, sir, in our two countries”; his Canadian uncle affirms, “if Great Britain and America fall apart, lad, with us go the weaker peoples of the earth” (31).

⁴ Saunders also became progressively critical of blood sports. In *Beautiful Joe*, Mr. Wood describes his boyhood hunting trips with great relish. He excuses his youthful cruelty: “there was some excuse for us Hattie. The bears ruined our farms,” but he concludes, “many a night I’ve lain on my bed and groaned, when I thought of needless cruelties I’d put upon animals” (149, 150–51). Tilda Jane declares that “men that takes little girls out o’ snow-banks don’t kill deer,” and, upon hearing that they do, promptly falls into hysterics (126).

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