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ORIGINAL PAPER

Non-Human Kids of Kiddie Lit: Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's *The Yearling* and the Cultural Construction of Animal Narratives as Children's Literature

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Abstract
This paper combines the perspectives of animal studies and reception theory to trace the audience shift of narratives foregrounding interactions between adolescent boys and animals published in the US in the first half of the twentieth century. More precisely, it argues that a text's focus on human–animal bonds can result in its "kiddification," a term explained by Beverly Lyon Clark as trivialization that leads to dismissal. We argue that the reasons for this shift include the solidification of the boy-and-his-dog convention in the 1940s as an example of formula fiction for juveniles, combined with the simultaneous proliferation of animal movies geared towards a family audience. The case under scrutiny is Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's novel *The Yearling* and its film adaptation from 1946. Despite the book's initial success among general audiences (awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1939), with time Kinnan Rawlings's novel became "kiddified" and then passed into oblivion, rarely discussed by critics who deem it undeserving of attention and unread by contemporary juveniles, who perhaps find the book difficult, long and tedious (Groff, Harper's, https://harpers.org/archive/2014/01/the-lost-yearling/, 2014). Consequently, the foregrounding of affective human–animal bonds in the book resulted in its later association with children's literature, which was amplified by the film adaptation as well as the publisher's marketing strategies.

Keywords Animal studies · Realistic animal narratives · Animals · Modernism · Boy-and-his-dog · Reception · Audience · Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings · *The Yearling*

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To call children 'kids' is bad enough – most of them are surely not the devilish little animal-like goats-in-training that 'kid' implies.
Perry Nodelman quoted in Clark, 2003, p. 2.

Introduction

The fact that the dismissive term 'kiddie lit' contains within itself the term for a young goat—possibly a fawn: young deer are also referred to as kids—is exemplary of how human childhood and nonhuman animality have been, as Amy Ratelle has phrased it, culturally conflated (Ratelle, 2015, p. 4). In Perry Nodelman's comment, this conflation is yet another strategy aimed at undermining the seriousness and validity of children's experiences and the complexity of children's literature. Animal studies scholars, both from within literary studies (Johnson, 2000; Cosslett, 2006; Hogan, 2009; Ratelle, 2015; Elick, 2015; Jaques, 2015) and representing other disciplines (Melson, 2001; Taylor, 2013; Cole and Stewart 2014) have devoted significant effort to analyzing the cultural connection between children and animals with the goal of understanding. As David Herman posits in his recent *Narratology Beyond the Human* (2018), what kinds of relatedness are brought to the forefront through this particular association? (Herman, 2018, p. 5). These scholars usually focus on how the affective bonds between children and animals—as well as the cultural representations of these bonds—have been deployed to both undermine and strengthen the Aristotelian division into *bios* and *zoe*. They largely argue that children hold a liminal position between animals and humans; children are, in a sense, humans-in-training.

The ever-growing scholarship on animals in children's literature has so far glossed over issues of audience. This is understandable, as the focus of academic inquiry has been directed at exploring the functions of the child-animal connection within the texts themselves. In order to achieve this goal, many scholars have assumed that the books they analyze are children's literature, even though others would balk at some of these texts being labeled juvenile. Kathleen Johnson and Walter Hogan list John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* (1937) alongside Kjelgaard's *Big Red* (1945) and Rawls's *Where the Red Fern Grows* (1961). Amy Ratelle analyzes Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903) without giving second thought to the book's status as children's literature. The same comment can be made about Walter Hogan, who lists *The Call of the Wild* as the founding text of the juvenile animal story genre (2009, p. 4), as does Margaret Blount in her early book *Animal Land: The Creatures of Children's Fiction* (1974, pp. 254–255). This unquestioned assumption—while understandable in this context—disregards both authorial intent and the long-standing debates about what counts as children's literature. Over several decades, scholars have put forward many possible propositions for defining children's literature—propositions in which questions of intent and audience feature prominently (McDowell, 1973; Hunt, 1994; Clark, 2003; Nodelman, 2008; Beckett, 2008; Gubar, 2011). While critics have not agreed on one definition (and sometimes question the very need for it), there is relative agreement among them that historically the labeling of books as appropriate

for a children's audience has gone hand in hand with their dismissal as serious literature. This is, in fact, the main point of Beverly Lyon Clark's *Kiddie Lit* (2003), which serves as the inspiration for the title of this article.

So far, most animal studies scholars have been interested in how animals and animality function within a text. By extension, we would like to examine how literary animals have shaped the reception of literary texts. We hypothesize, rather broadly, that a text's focus on animals and human–animal bonds can lead to its "kiddification," understood after Clark's study as trivialization that leads to dismissal. Of course, this is a very broad claim that needs to be quantified and historicized, especially in light of the recent animal turn in fiction, which is characterized by serious exploration of nonhuman subjectivity by writers and its equally serious reception by readers and scholars alike (McHugh, 2011; Herman, 2018; McHugh et al., 2021). Thus, we do not wish to posit an absolute claim but a contextualized one: in certain contexts, especially when conventions of narrative representation were in flux, the foregrounding of human–animal bonds in realistic works of fiction influenced the long-term reception of these works via "kiddification." We would like to discuss a case study from the 1930s, a period already past the point of separation between children's and adult audiences, which Beverly Clark locates, at least in the United States, at the turn of the century. The case study is Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's novel *The Yearling* (1938), though other cases from the first half of the twentieth century could be selected as well. John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* (1937), Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1907) are all texts that have been consistently classified as juvenile, despite being written for adults. Coincidentally, they all focus on human–animal relationships. What distinguishes *The Yearling* is that this novel has fallen into oblivion, while Steinbeck's and London's texts are often assigned as readings in educational contexts.

We posit that increasing emphasis on the relationship between an adolescent boy and his pet animal was a significant strategy in the retroactive labeling of Kinnan Rawlings's *The Yearling* as children's literature, at a time when the theme was becoming coded as a topic for juvenile fiction. Kinnan Rawlings was writing for a mixed-age audience, hoping to create a new *Huckleberry Finn*, but initially she was wary of having *The Yearling* marketed as a children's book. Upon publication, the novel was favorably reviewed as a piece for a general audience, and a rather highbrow one at that. *The Yearling* was recognized as a significant contribution to adult American literature—thus it received the Pulitzer Prize, not the Newbery Medal. Yet, by the 1950s it featured prominently on recommended reading lists for middle-school adolescents: appropriate as a stepping stone in one's literary education, but not complex enough to be considered satisfying reading material for discriminating adults. Here, we would like to focus on three interdependent factors that contributed to this shift. The first one is the publisher's long-term marketing strategy for the novel, which included subtle shifts in emphasizing or downplaying the book's animal hero, Flag the fawn, based on the audience which was being targeted through a specific edition. The second is solidification of the boy-and-his-dog convention as a staple of formula fiction for children in the 1940s and 1950s and the retroactive incorporation of *The Yearling* into this formula. The third is the adaptation of the novel for the screen in 1946. While the film was not explicitly geared towards a

purely juvenile audience upon release, just like the book, it quickly became a children's classic, to a large extent precisely because it was perceived as an exemplary representative of a certain visual children's genre: the animal movie.

Of course, multiple factors contribute to the cultural construction of texts as juvenile fiction, not only their association with children's audiences via animal content. The length of the books, their narrative and stylistic complexity, sexual content, use of expletives, the authors' overall reputations and other publications, even their genders—these are all contributing factors. The reason why analyzing *The Yearling* is worthwhile is precisely because these contributing factors make the case for Rawlings's novel as unique and account for its eventual disappearance from the sphere of interests of both readers and critics. While the three major factors listed above—the publisher's marketing strategies, retroactive association with the boy-and-his-dog convention, and a Hollywood adaptation geared towards a juvenile audience—can also be identified in the case of Steinbeck's short story cycle *The Red Pony*, the long-term reception of these two texts differs significantly. Steinbeck's book continues to be read, while both the public and scholars have largely lost interest in Kinnan Rawlings's novel (Groff, 2014). *The Yearling* has been unfortunate in that its association with juvenile fiction has not secured it a permanent spot on school reading lists. It truly became "kiddified" in Clark's definition of the term. The book's reclassification as children's fiction has deterred adult readers and literary critics, while some of *The Yearling's* features—largely its length, the difficulty of the vocabulary and the dense complexity of descriptions—discourage today's teachers and school boards from assigning the novel to students.

Animals and the Anxiety of Audience

While a case could be made that much of what is read today as children's literature was not intended as such, tracing shifts in audience is still a productive exercise. As children's literature began to develop as a separate publishing market in the eighteenth century, the phenomenon of books addressing mixed-age audiences diminished but did not cease completely. Some scholars use the term crossover literature to address this phenomenon (Beckett, 2008; Falconer, 2008). Sandra Beckett lists Sir Walter Scott's historical novels as crossover texts: written with a general audience in mind but beloved by adolescents (2008, p. 18). In fact, these stories, along with James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* can be seen as laying the foundation for what, in the second half of the nineteenth century, became known in the US as "the boy book" (also referred to as the boys' book): a tale of outdoor adventure that centers on an adolescent male protagonist (Gribben, 1988, p. 14). As such, these texts are a significant reference point for Kinnan Rawlings's novel, though it must be added that boys' books were usually written by male writers.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is sometimes referred to as the greatest boys' book of all time—not only because of its popularity among mixed-age audiences but also due to Twain's conscious manipulation of the genre of the boy book (Gribben, 1988, 2017), as evidenced in his correspondence with William Dean Howells on the process of crafting *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn* (Clark, 2003, p. 80). Twain was

critical of Cooper's literary offenses, as he phrased it in his 1895 essay, but he was also aware of the conventions initiated by Cooper and expanded them to suit his needs, aiming to produce a text that would appeal to both a juvenile and a more mature audience. However, as argued by Clark, the fluctuating status of Twain's work among the critics is tied to changes in the perception of *Huck Finn* as a juvenile text: the more the critics read the novel as intended for an adult audience, the more esteem they had for it. As Clark tells it, the story of Twain's literary reputation is a story of rise to stardom after breaking the association with juvenile fiction. Concurrently, Clark also provides examples of American nineteenth-century novels that experienced the reverse process in the twentieth century, for example, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). As Clark argues, these texts shifted from being perceived as reading material for adults to being seen as largely juvenile (2003, p. 63)—and as they did, they became "kiddified." While it should be added that both these texts also continue to be studied simply as American fiction, and that Stowe's reliance on racist stereotypes has played a role in the fall from grace of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the most important restorative readings of Warner and Stowe came from feminist scholars—respectively Nina Baym's reading of Susan Warner in *Woman's Fiction* (1978) and Jane Tompkins's reading of Beecher Stowe in *Sensational Designs* (1985)—intent on proving that these long-neglected texts were worthy of critical attention. Significantly, both of these novels are associated with sentimentalism, both were written by women, and both contain memorable depictions of cruelty to animals.

Notably, the animal story, as practiced in England, the US and Canada in the nineteenth century, quickly became "kiddified" even when it was intended for an adult audience: its status both as high literature and as literature for adults was simultaneously undermined. In England, Anne Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877), originally intended for an adult reading public (Dorre, 2002; Copeland, 2012), quickly became moved to the realm of children's literature and firmly remains there to this day. The slew of animal autobiographies that followed *Black Beauty* on both sides of the ocean were never held in high esteem, which can be linked to the sentimental mode in which these texts were written and to their explicit didacticism. The linkage of animal heroes to the aesthetics of sentimentality was so strong that in the first decades of the twentieth century some writers who aimed to produce highbrow fiction consciously avoided animal heroes, aware that writing about animals could undermine their position as serious writers. Such was the case of Edith Wharton, who, despite being a lifelong dog lover and an ASPCA activist, wrote only one short story with canine characters. She did not deem her life-long love affair with dogs as inspirational for writing (Haytock, 2012). Mark Twain's experiment with animal autobiography, titled "A Dog's Tale" (1903) and only slightly ironic in its reworking of the sentimental conventions of animal autobiography, was never considered a significant achievement and was referred to by contemporary reviewers as "his child's story" (Campbell, 1911, p. 43).

In addition to animal autobiographies, the second and third decades of the twentieth century abound in animal adventure stories, produced by writers such as Thomas Ernest Seton or James Oliver Curwood and directly targeting juvenile audiences (Lutts, 2001). Importantly, Jack London's popular *The Call of the Wild* and *White*

Fang are often also lumped together with these, even though London did not see these two novels as children's texts. The wild animal stories, despite the implicit goal of encouraging in their adolescent male readership a rugged type of masculinity, were still accused of sentimental anthropomorphism in their portrayals of animal characters, as documented in the so-called nature fakers controversy, a famous literary squabble that involved even President Theodore Roosevelt. A significant argument raised in the debate was that the wild animal stories did not fulfill their didactic function correctly because the animal heroes were too anthropomorphized (Lutts, 1990).

The Boy-and-His-Dog Convention

Lori Jo Oswald has noted that, as the twentieth century progressed, the heroes of children's realistic animal stories were increasingly heroic pets who risked their lives to save their human owners (Oswald, 1995, p. 135). Albert Terhune's *Lad* saga, wildly popular among adolescents in the 1920s, conflates the sentimentalism of animal autobiography with the fast-paced animal adventure story, while featuring heroic canines. Terhune's *Lad* and, of course, Eric Knight's *Lassie-Come-Home* (1938) paved the way for the gradual emergence of the boy-and-his-dog formula: a coming-of-age story which features the adventures of adolescent boys and their pet animals. The dog is somewhat generic here as stories featuring boys and horses were also quite popular in the 1940s; that is, before horse stories became feminized (Doyle, 2008). The most popular children's realistic animal novels of the 1940s incorporate danger and adventure, but usually end on a happy note, like Mary O'Hara's *My Friend Flicka* (1941), and Jim Kjelgaard's *Big Red* (1945). A darker sub-genre, one which ends with the animal's death, emerged in the 1950s and includes *Old Yeller* (1956), *Where the Red Fern Grows* (1961), *Bristle Face* (1962) and *Sounder* (1969). This convention is largely American (Hogan, 2009), though British writer Barry Hines's *Kestrel for a Knave* (1968) also utilizes its elements (Hoing, 2021). Significantly for the case study under discussion, most of these books were adapted for the screen within a few years of their publication (Russell, 2015). To sum up, while the boy and pet pairing was already quite popular in the 1930s, the conventions of what became a long-standing formula in fiction for children were still not fully established. In the 1930s and into the 1940s, stories aimed for a juvenile audience usually featured a happy ending. In this respect, *The Yearling* (1938), and also Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* (1937), predate the formula in which the animal dies at the story's climax.

The case of John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* can serve as the perfect lead-in to the discussion of *The Yearling,* not only because of the structural similarities between the two texts but also because of Steinbeck's explicit anxiety stemming from these similarities. In fact, Steinbeck is known to have demanded an intervention from his agent, requesting a change of the main character's name in the film version of *The Yearling*. In a letter to Elizabeth Otis (dated February 1941), he writes:

> To this end I wish you would read *The Yearling* again. Just a little boy named Jody has affection for a deer. Now I know there is no plagiarism on *The Red Pony*. But we are going to make *The Red Pony*, and two stories about a little boy in relation to animals is too much, particularly if in both cases the little boy's name is Jody. Will you see if we can't stop them from using the name and as much of the story as seems possible? If we don't get money, we might easily get a court order. And I want to plague them as much as I can. (Steinbeck, 1975, p. 225)

Steinbeck's plea was not successful and, in fact, it was Steinbeck who ended up changing his protagonist's name for the movie version of *The Red Pony* (1949). However, what Steinbeck's genuine surprise suggests is that the plot which a contemporary reader so easily associates with children's fiction, was not yet considered to be a formula in the 1930s.

In his insightful *Melancholia and Maturation: The Use of Trauma in American Children's Literature* (2010), Eric Tribunella recognizes the boy-and-his-dog formula as a particular expression of a broader thematics that he sees as key in children's literature: the theme of traumatic loss that is seen as a necessary element of the rite of passage into adulthood. In the boy-and-his-dog stories, the intense attachment between human and animal needs to be broken in order for the child to enter the world of adults. In other words, giving up the connection to animals is a prerequisite for achieving full humanity. Often, the connection is severed directly via the animal's heroism: the companion animal dies while defending the human from a wild animal. In extreme cases, like *Old Yeller*, the adolescent protagonist needs to become the agent of the beloved animal's death. Tribunella argues that "willingness to make sacrifices is critical to the formation of the disciplined and mature citizen" (Tribunella, 2010, p. xiv). Thus, through the experience of the emotional anguish associated with the loss, made even greater by the previous building up of the human–animal bond, the boy becomes trained in performing a version of masculinity in which the expression of emotions is considered undesirable.

For Tribunella "Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's *The Yearling* exemplifies this process in its starkest form" (2010, p. xvii). In the book, Kinnan Rawlings tells the story of one year in the life of eleven-year-old Jody, the only child in a dirt poor family living in the scrub of Northern Florida. Jody's loneliness leads him to desire a pet of his own, an idea opposed by his mother, who worries about the economic impact of a useless animal on the already struggling family. Jody does end up receiving permission to take in an orphaned fawn and develops a strong bond with his pet. As Flag the fawn matures, he ends up destroying the family's corn crop, thus threatening the Baxters' survival. Just like in *Old Yeller*, where it is Travis who has to shoot his beloved dog, here it is Jody who must kill Flag. In line with later boy-and-his-dog stories, *The Yearling* focuses on Jody's maturation through loss, though Flag's death is not just an accidental loss: it is the ultimate sacrifice.

The obvious difference between the dog stories and *The Yearling* is the species of the animal and the reasons behind the animal's death: supposedly minor discrepancies with huge ramifications for the overall framework of the story. The fact that the pet is a tamed wild animal crafts a message not about the potential for human–animal

harmonious coexistence, but about the dangers of human interference in the ways of the wild. Unlike Yeller or Lassie, or even the Baxters' dogs, Flag can never internalize and share the values of humans; he also never becomes a useful and productive member of the family. Flag's fate is foreshadowed in the stories of wild pets kept by the Baxters' neighbors. Pa Forrester tells Jody and Fodderwing—Jody's best friend, a disabled boy who has a special way with animals and who has a new baby racoon named Racket—the story of a pet racoon he had as a child: "'I had me a 'coon when I were a young un,' he said. 'Hit were gentle as a kitten for two yare. Then one day hit bit a chunk outen my shin.' He spat into the fire. 'This un''ll grow up to bite. Hit's 'coon nature'" (Kinnan Rawlings, 1947, p. 53). *The Yearling* thus resembles the boy-and-his-dog formula only on the level of the book's general narrative structure: mounting affection culminating in loss. If one goes beyond the coming-of-age paradigm, the point made about the relationships of humans and the animal world is the exact opposite of the more formulaic stories of animal heroism and sacrifice.

The Yearling and Its Intended Audience

The Yearling bears solely a surface resemblance to the boy-and-his-dog narrative, and, in fact, it was originally not intended as a children's book. The question of the novel's audience was discussed in detail by Kinnan Rawlings and her editor Maxwell Perkins over a period of several years leading up to the book's composition, as documented in their extensive correspondence, edited for publication by Robert Tarr (1999). Upon reading the draft of Kinnan Rawlings's first novel, *South Moon Under* (1932), her husband suggested that the writer should draw on her experience in the Florida wilderness to write "a boys' book" (Tarr, 1999, p. 73). At first, this idea was dismissed by the writer, largely because she saw engaging in children's literature as demeaning to a writer of her ambition: "I was as shocked as if he'd suggested I sell myself into slavery" (Tarr, 1999, ibidem). It can be assumed that the writer took it for granted that by mentioning "a boys' book" her husband was referring to a popular form of fiction describing hunting, fishing, and other outdoor adventures, often serialized and syndicated, promoting the kind of rugged masculinity that was increasingly viewed as desirable in the first decades of the twentieth century.

It was Perkins who first drew the comparison between Kinnan Rawlings's yet unwritten book and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and this analogy seems to have been the factor that swayed the writer: "Then I remembered you speaking of Huckleberry Finn (…). But I do have common sense enough to be willing to broaden its appeal if the book is not harmed in so doing. (….) I mean, don't let's purify the book for an adolescent consumption that might never materialize and ruin the book at the same time for the discriminating adult palate" (Tarr, 1999, p. ibidem). One can read Perkins's comparison to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as opening up in Kinnan Rawlings's mind a redefinition of the genre of the boys' book, from a purely juvenile adventure story to a mixed-audience book with potential for true greatness, from the realm of popular literature to the realm of high literature, the realm for which Kinnan Rawlings was aiming. The *Huckleberry Finn* analogy

can also elucidate both Perkins's and Kinnan Rawlings's ideas about the book's structure: a multitude of colorful vignettes that could be loosely strung together into an episodic novel.

Over time, Kinnan Rawlings warmed up to the possibility of writing a story of the Florida scrub, but she remained wary of addressing it to a juvenile audience. She called her novel a book "about a boy" even if not "for boys": "It will not be a story for boys, though some of them might enjoy it. It will be a story about a boy—a brief and tragic idyll of boyhood" (Tarr, 1999, p. 233). She was adamant that her novel not be marketed as a book for juveniles: "What I am concerned about, is that the forthcoming book should not be labeled a 'juvenile', because I think it will only incidentally be a book for (…) boys. I hope there will be nostalgic implications for mature people, for we never feel (…) more sensitively than in extreme youth, and the color and drama of the scrub can be well conveyed through the eyes and mind of a boy" (Tarr, 1999, p. 272). The writer clearly feared that by being labeled as juvenile fiction, the book may become "kiddified," though of course the term itself was not yet coined. It is clear that at this stage in her life Kinnan Rawlings aimed to become a major player on the predominantly male American literary scene of the 1930s, and she worried that authoring a book for children would quash that desire, largely because children's literature would almost immediately be assigned the status of popular writing. Perkins's attempts to assuage her fears can be summed up as convincing her that it was possible to create a text for a juvenile audience that would still be placed within the realm of high literary culture. It is also clear that both Kinnan Rawlings and Perkins were aware of how gender, genre and theme factored into constructing a book as belonging to one side of the high/popular dichotomy, though Perkins was more interested in sales and Kinnan Rawlings in her literary reputation.

Kinnan Rawlings's fears did not come true, at least not immediately after the novel's publication. The book did incredibly well: it was selected for the book-of-the-month club and sold 260,000 copies in 1938 alone (Tarr, 1999, p. 11). *The Yearling* was indeed a phenomenon in its ability to secure both a broad readership and favorable critical reviews. Of course, the fact that the book came out with Scribner's, at the apex of the publisher's reign in American letters—Hemingway, Wolfe and Fitzgerald were part of Scribner's crew of authors at the time—guaranteed a discriminating adult audience. F. S. Fitzgerald wrote in a letter to Perkins that he was fascinated with Kinnan Rawlings's new book, which "just simply flows; the characters keep thinking, talking, feeling, and don't stop, and you think and talk and feel with them" (quoted in Tarr, 1999, ibidem). Magazine and newspaper reviews did not mark the book as juvenile and picked up on the analogies to Huck Finn.

More importantly in light of this article's focus, the reviewers did not view *The Yearling* as an animal book. While noting Flag's death by Jody's hands as a symbol for the boy's passage into maturity, many underlined that the strengths of the book were in its depiction of the inhabitants of the Florida backwoods in a way that draws in the implicitly urban reader. In a very extensive review of the novel in *The North American Review*, Lloyd Morris identified the book's potential for becoming a timeless classic in its depiction of a story that is simultaneously particular and universal:

> One year of their [the Baxters'] experiences is crystallized in the story, and its meaning made explicit at the end. Into that year Mrs. Rawlings has compressed the irreducible events which collectively furnish a common denominator for all human existence. Childhood and adolescence, the stern business of getting a livelihood, courtship and mating, the rearing of the young, the incidence of age, the passing of the torch, and finally death. (Morris, 1938, p. 182)

What is striking in this review, and multiple others from 1938, is how—while acknowledging the significance of the ending—they almost completely overlook the presence of the fawn. Flag is viewed neither as a full-drawn character nor as a source of cute appeal: he is important only in his potential for turning the story into an almost biblical parable.

In fact, many reviewers assumed that the namesake of the novel was Jody, not Flag. In a 1938 review Laura Scott Meyers wrote: "'The Yearling' is named for Jody Baxter, a 12-year-old boy who is more child than when the story opens and more than a child when another year has rolled around. Jody has a pet fawn who grows up to be a 'yearling' too" (Scott Meyers, 1938, p. 5). The reviewer's interpretation of the title is actually in line with authorial intent: Kinnan Rawlings did not wish to include an animal reference in the title of her book and did not see the Jody-Flag relationship as the central theme of the story (Tarr, 1999, p. 275). In their correspondence, Kinnan Rawlings and Perkins considered multiple titles: *The Sink-Hole, Juniper Creek, Juniper Island, The Flutter-Mill, The Fawn* and, finally, *The Yearling*. For a long time Kinnan Rawlings sided with *Flutter-Mill*, but Perkins found this title too hermetic, as he did not initially know what a flutter-mill was. *The Fawn* was also rejected by the editor as too sentimental (Tarr, 1999, p. 237), and while it may seem there is nothing inherently sentimental in the name of the young of deer, Perkins—who as an editor had an excellent feel for literary trends—was probably wary of general connections to the sentimental genre of animal autobiography. Even the mere gesture of focusing on the animal in the title, especially in a book authored by a female writer, would have risked deterring the more discriminating audience. The dual meaning of the final title satisfied both author and editor—Kinnan Rawlings remarked to Perkins that "the boy was a yearling too" (Tarr, 1999, p. 311).

The fawn appears only midway through the text—an odd decision if one assumes the deer is the title character. Furthermore, some of the adventures that follow after Jody's rescue of Flag do not involve the deer: an escapade into town (when Flag remains tied up in the shed) and a hunting expedition (during which Flag returns to Baxter's Island on his own). Kinnan Rawlings also put little effort into describing the development of the boy-deer relationship. Jody seems to dote over Flag from the very beginning, but the deer matters in the story solely in relation to Jody's state of mind. The only expressions of Flag's agency come indirectly through the fawn's misbehavior—his destruction of the crops. In summary, surprisingly little space and attention is devoted to the deer.

"Kiddification" of The Yearling

Having succeeded in receiving critical recognition for the novel, Scribner's decided to refocus its marketing strategy in ways that would make it possible to sell even more copies of the book. Further marketing of *The Yearling*, along with the production of its film version, can be read as the "kiddification" of the text; it was made more appealing to a younger audience chiefly through an increased focus on the Jody-Flag plotline and a marked increase of Flag's significance in the text. The first step in this long process was initiated via the publication of the second, illustrated edition of the book. Scribner's commissioned N.C. Wyeth, known for his illustrations of *Treasure Island* and *Robinson Crusoe*, which were published as part of the series "Scribner's Illustrated Classics for Young Readers." The entire idea behind the series was to make the books more eye-catching and entertaining in a bid to secure the adolescent reader's interest. Even though N.C Wyeth had produced illustrations and paintings for an adult audience before his work for Scribner's, through his work on the "Young Readers" series, he quickly became associated with juvenile fiction. Wyeth thus commented on the premise of the series: "a person should be able to walk into the book store and just thumb through a book and get the idea of the story by the drama of the illustrations—very quickly" (Gannon, 1991, p. 92). As Wyeth's biographer put it, the series "became a cottage industry," while "[t]he words 'Pictures by N.C. Wyeth' came to stand for literature as it had never been pictured before" (Michaelis, 1998, p. 211)—a euphemism which stood for a colorful and hyper-realistic visual format appealing to younger readers.

Kinnan Rawlings initially objected both to the idea of an illustrated edition, knowing that such a form targeted a largely adolescent audience, and to N.C Wyeth in particular, as she associated him with a style that she found "almost ethereal" (Tarr, 1999, p. 376). Her fears were appeased by Perkins, who assured her that most of the books published in the series were intended for adults, an explanation that can be read as relating to the high/popular divide in literature. We can infer that Perkins tried to reassure Kinnan Rawlings that inviting Wyeth to prepare the illustrations would not downgrade *The Yearling*'s status. N.C. Wyeth actually visited Kinnan Rawlings in Florida in early 1939, and the illustrator made a favorable impression on the writer. Ultimately, Kinnan Rawlings was pleased with the thirteen color plates Wyeth produced.

However, it cannot be refuted that the illustrated edition, published in April of 1939, while giving *The Yearling* "a second life" (Michaelis, 1998, p. 212), also began to change its reception. When looking at Wyeth's illustrations, it is difficult to shake off the association with the mid-century aesthetics of children's fiction, where characters are depicted using vivid colors and often set against a bright blue background. The most famous illustrations depict Jody and Flag: on the cover, Jody is cuddling with Flag in front of the fireplace, an image of domestic harmony, with both the boy's and the fawn's faces illuminated with a reflection of the fire. On the inside book jacket, the boy and the fawn are running together through the scrub, Flag following a few steps behind, human and animal body in

unison, limbs extended in the delight of play, mirroring one another's motions. In all the illustrations, the fawn's head seems to be surrounded by a halo of bright light, as if suggesting some form of spirituality or metaphysical presence. In any case, the physicality of the deer's body most certainly comes alive through an aesthetic that evokes an almost physical response in the viewer, who wants to reach out and cuddle the cute animal.

A pattern seems to emerge: the older and more sophisticated the intended audience of an edition, the less emphasis there is on Flag. After receiving the Pulitzer Prize, in May 1939, Kinnan Rawlings was at the height of her recognition as an artist. In late 1939, she agreed to the publication of a Pulitzer edition of the novel with N.C. Wyeth's illustrations inside the book but with a black and white, more serious picture—featuring the swampy landscape, not the fawn—on the hard cover. In 1940, Perkins suggested publishing a school edition of the book, convincing Kinnan Rawlings that having her book on school reading lists would truly immortalize it, firmly establishing it as "an American classic" (Tarr, 1999, p. 493). Kinnan Rawlings agreed and wrote a special preface explaining the circumstances of the book's creation, as requested by Perkins. The preface is directly addressed to children ("since now *The Yearling* is to be a part of your study course," Kinnan Rawlings, 1941, p. ix). Overall, it seems that shortly after the publication of the first edition of the novel, Scribner's began sustained efforts to market *The Yearling* to a younger audience. Kinnan Rawlings, initially reluctant mostly because of her insecurity about her own status as a writer, slowly warmed up to the idea.

The film version of *The Yearling*, produced by MGM in 1946, was significant for the evolution of the book's literary reputation. The movie was well-received and won several Academy Awards; however, it also further strengthened the reception of the novel as an animal story. While the film was seen as a more ambitious animal story than the scores that were being produced in the 1940s, in the long-term this association with a highly formulaic genre aimed at a juvenile audience, solidified the novel's reputation as "a children's classic" (Burt 2004, p. 242). The non-animated animal movies produced in Hollywood in the 1940s included *My Friend Flicka* (Harold Schuster, 1943), *My Pal Wolf* (Alfred L. Werker, 1944), *National Velvet* (Clarence Brown, 1946), *Rusty the Wonder Dog* (Paul Burnford, 1945), *Black Beauty* (Max Nosseck, 1946), the eponymous *A Boy and His Dog* (LeRoy Prinz, 1946), *So Dear to My Heart* (Harold Schuster and Hamilton Luske, 1948) and *The Red Pony* (Lewis Milestone, 1949). Most of these movies were adaptations of children's literature, though two (*The Red Pony* and *A Boy and His Dog*) were based on texts not intended for a juvenile audience, and the stories of their reception share certain parallels with that of *The Yearling*. The first Lassie movie (*Lassie Come Home*, directed by Fred M.Wilcox) was produced in 1943, and a total of six Lassie franchise movies were produced by MGM in the 1940s. An animated animal movie that most certainly shaped the response to *The Yearling* was Walt Disney's 1942 *Bambi*.

One of the ways in which *The Yearling's* association with the genre of the animal story was strengthened in the film was through a very literal increase of the number of animals. By intensifying the quantity of the animal content, the film clearly plays up the aesthetics of cuteness, a predominantly visual aesthetic often associated

with animals and aimed at children—and one which was completely absent from the novel. This can be noted through a comparison of the first scene in the movie and the first chapter of the book. The film opens with a scene where young Jody falls asleep next to a spring, which serves as a waterhole for animals. Jody witnesses a group of does with their young, a squirrel, some birds and a family of furry and playful raccoons. In the book, Jody also falls asleep next to a sink-hole, but the animals are present only in the form of their tracks: Jody first builds a flutter-mill, observes its whirring in a semi-hypnotic state and then falls asleep on the ground. As he awakens, he comes to understand that animals were present while he was sleeping:

> The fresh tracks came down the east bank and stopped at the water's edge. They were sharp and pointed, the tracks of a doe (...). He looked about for other tracks. The squirrels had raced up and down the banks, but they were bold, always. A raccoon had been that way, with his feet like sharp-nailed hands, but he could not be sure how recently. (Kinnan Rawlings, 1947, p. 22–23)

In the book, the absence of animals—or rather Jody missing their presence because of his nap—is used to suggest both his loneliness and his nature-savvy: he knows which tracks belong to which animals. The effect of the film was markedly different and, especially in 1946, made the viewer draw connections with the animated Disney movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), where the princess awakens in a forest among friendly creatures and starts speaking to them.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Disney's first princess movie, was a sensation upon its release and would have been imprinted strongly in the mind of a 1940s audience, as would have been another recent animated children's animal movie, *Bambi* (1942), a film which, as argued by Ralph Lutts in "The Trouble with Bambi" (1992), conflated animals and cuteness. N.C. Wyeth's illustrations had already embedded the book in the largely visual aesthetics of cuteness, but this embeddedness became even more pronounced in the film. One of Wyeth's illustrations, the one in which Jody and Flag are running through the scrub together, does not represent a specific scene in the novel but rather constitutes a synecdochal representation of the Jody-Flag relationship. The written narrative contains no mentions of any extended individual romp—Jody and Flag's relationship is most often alluded to via the mother's complaints of Jody's prolonged absences and his slacking with chores. Interestingly, this was in line with Wyeth's general strategy for illustrating books: "Why take a dramatic episode that is described in every detail and redo it? Instead I create something that will add to the story" (Gannon, 1991, p. 93). As Susan Gannon argues in her article on N.C. Wyeth's illustrations, he saw his role as that of an interpreter of books. Curiously, this scene, invented by Wyeth and not by Kinnan Rawlings, becomes much more developed in the movie, where the interspecies bond is presented through a longer dreamlike scene in which Jody and the fawn chase one another in a field to the accompaniment of background music. Strangely, Jody and Flag's playful romp is mirrored via shots of a herd of deer engaging in the same actions: running and jumping over logs along with Jody and Flag. One of the contemporary reviewers noticed the Disney-like character of this scene: "And there is demonstrated sharp insight, for instance, in the showing of several minutes of deer

coursing across the rough land in scenes which look like real-life transcription of Disney, and which have nothing to do with the story but simply help to establish the character of the locale" (Murphy, 1947, p. 46). One may also mention that in addition to establishing the character of the locale, the genre of the movie is established as well: the herds of deer make it clear that we are dealing with an animal movie.

While the film was received as a general-audience movie upon its release, it has survived largely as a children's movie: *The Yearling* was re-released in 1971 in the MGM children's matinee series (with the meadow run scene as the trailer) and still makes it onto various lists of children's classics. While the reception of a literary text can, theoretically, be relatively divorced from the reception of its film adaptation, this is rarely the case, especially when it comes to adaptations of children's literature. As Robyn McCallum notes in *Screen Adaptations and the Politics of Childhood*, it is not unusual for adaptations to shift a literary text's audience from high (literary) culture to popular (film) culture (McCallum, 2018, p. 15). Here, however, the film version furthers a process that began with the publisher's recognition of *The Yearling*'s potential for commercialization as a children's story. The shift in audience is not radical but gradual, and the movie is a step in the cultural construction of *The Yearling* as a children's text, especially against the backdrop of the explosion of children's animal movies in the 1940s.

Conclusion

In her recent ruminations on the loss of both popular and scholarly interest in *The Yearling*, Lauren Groff observes that the book is too long to be assigned to contemporary adolescent readers: short stories seem to be the preferred literary medium of the day. Groff also suggests that Kinnan Rawlings's representations of gender—Ma Baxter is more of a villain figure in *The Yearling* than the Forresters are—are to blame for the author not being embraced by feminist scholars (Groff, 2014). To the list of factors mentioned by Groff we have added another one explaining the lack of critical interest: the book's unfortunate association with a highly formulaic children's genre through its incorporation of a plotline focusing on the child-animal bond. As Flag began to be perceived as the eponymous character of *The Yearling*, the book's audience shifted to a juvenile one. However, as time passed and teaching strategies changed, the audience did not revert to an adult one but simply shrank.

The argument we have been tracing here would undoubtedly sound more rounded and complete if it were universal: if any and all attempts at featuring animals in American realistic fiction in the first decades of the twentieth century resulted in a text's "kiddification." This is not the case, and we have been careful to point out the multiplicity of factors shaping the reception of *The Yearling* over time. Still, a pattern can be noted. Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* and Jack London's wolf-dog stories are cases in point: these have been seen as outstanding examples of the animal story genre, texts solid enough to serve as teaching material, with the animal focus adding to what Margaret Blount once identified as the supposedly "built-in appeal" of animals to young readers (Blount, 1974, p. 17). Even the most celebrated American modernist writers, Hemingway and Faulkner, are often introduced to adolescent

readers via their hunting stories (Hemingway's *The Old Man and The Sea* and Faulkner's *The Bear*), though in traditional interpretations of these texts, the animals are read as symbols or metaphors.

Many of these animal stories have enjoyed a resurgence of critical interest tied to the recent wave of animal studies scholarship. For example, London's *The Call of the Wild* has been re-read by some of the top scholars in the field (Lundblad, 2012; Shukin, 2013, 2021). In the past two decades, Virginia Woolf's *Flush* (1933), upon publication dismissed as a "trivial potboiler" (Smith, 2002, p. 348), has become a key text for animal studies scholars. Yet, this has not been the case with *The Yearling*. Animal studies scholars are largely interested in literary animal agency (McHugh, 2011, pp. 5–15), and this may well explain their lack of interest in Kinnan Rawlings's novel. There is, after all, very little of Flag in the original narrative. However, even if there actually is too little emphasis on the complexity and depth of the human–animal bond in the story to interest animal studies scholars, what matters is that potential readers have thought and continue to think of the novel as being about a boy and his pet deer. *The Yearling* thus seems to be at a double disadvantage: first, its critical reputation suffered due to the association with animal stories, and now it cannot benefit from the resurgence of interest in literary animals.

While *The Yearling* is not a prime candidate for feminist revisionary readings due to its lack of female characters, the author's gender most likely did play a role in the book's gradual fall into oblivion. It is probably not coincidental that most of the animal books that have survived as canonical juvenile texts, the ones that continue to be assigned in schools, like Steinbeck's *The Red Pony*, have been authored by men. Even though the audiences have shifted from adult to juvenile, the books enjoy canonical status within children's literature. Despite *The Red Pony's* focus on the boy's painful loss of a beloved pet, critics have gone out of their way to rescue the book from the accusation of sentimentalism. John Seelye argues that despite the plot's potential for sentimentality, Steinbeck "avoids the sentimentality that a number of the situations allow, especially regarding the suffering and deaths of animals" (2000, pp. 36–37). Matthew Langione emphasizes *The Red Pony*'s grim ending as the feature that distinguishes it from the tradition of sentimentalism (2005, p. 17). Kinnan Rawlings's book does not seem any less grim, but it has not escaped the label of sentimental. This adjective appears widely in the book's description on online sites, while poet laureate Billy Collins has even referred to it as "sentimental animal fiction" (2001). It can be inferred that due to sentimentalism's long-standing association with women, the dismissive label of sentimental is more readily attached to texts created by female writers. Warren French explained that Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* "is frequently assigned to young readers to provide one of their earliest experiences with thoughtful literature" (1990, p. 78). Somehow, the animal content in the case of Steinbeck's story cycle is seen as simply enhancing the book's significance for the juvenile audience, while in the case of the female-authored *The Yearling* it adds to the novel's sentimentalism and marks it as the opposite of thoughtful.

Most importantly, what the story of the production and reception of *The Yearling* hints at are the complexities of what can be termed, in a paraphrase of the title of Harold Bloom's seminal volume, anxiety of audience, understood as the fear of reaching a less sophisticated audience than the writer aimed for. Historically, such

fears were certainly experienced by women writers attempting to achieve recognition in the male-dominated literary marketplace. The argument does have to be properly hedged, but in the first half of the twentieth century, a focus on interspecies relationships, particularly those between adolescents and their pets, could have been associated with such anxiety. Some women writers, like Edith Wharton, may have avoided focusing on human–animal bonds, because they felt it would have threatened their literary reputations. Others, like Kinnan Rawlings, did engage such themes and have suffered long-term consequences. This is, of course, not purely an issue of the animal theme being reserved for children's genres: it is not coincidental that Clark uses trivialization as a synonym for "kiddification." It is not just the age of the readers that is in question but also their presumed cultural capital and literary tastes. The conflation of animals and children has historically undermined the cultural status of texts featuring both types of characters, and especially ones in which animals and children are paired. The current revisionist readings coming from both scholars of animal studies and of children's literature hold potential for revealing the complexity of these entanglements. However, in order to achieve that goal, they cannot continue to disregard questions of audience and reception.

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