

Book Review

Death and Compassion: The Elephant in Southern African Literature by Dan Wylie

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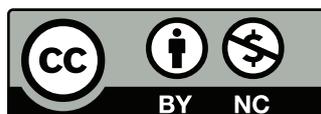
Review by *Joanna Woods*

Despite highly engaged response to our environmental crisis in literary studies and the growth of critical scholarship on anthropocentrism, the commitment to human-animal identification has been lacking. In *Death and Compassion: The Elephant in Southern African Literature*, Dan Wylie interrogates this space by considering how southern African literatures have engaged with the largest and arguably most charismatic land animal on our planet: the elephant. The book explores literary expression of attitudes towards elephants, especially those living south of the Zambezi River. Wylie ultimately asks: ‘who kills elephants and why?’ (3). The author’s textual selection spans three centuries and a number of genres, including indigenous forms, early European memoirs, novels, and poetry. Significantly, Wylie’s examination of fictional and non-fictional accounts of the elephant and the concentration on compassionate action in response to the animal broadens the purview of ecocriticism and increases the notion that ‘pachyderm personalities’ (8) are enormously important. By probing anthropomorphism within African literary studies, Wylie makes the elephant, as non-human being, the primary focus and in turn shatters the notion of anthropocentrism.

In chapter one, Wylie takes into account indigenous attitudes. Sifting through forms such as proverbs and folk tales, the author

asks if it is possible to comprehensively account for indigenous emotional response to elephants through the layers of mediation – such as translation and censorship - that pre-colonial texts have been subjected to. Chapter two moves on to document eighteenth century European traders and travellers. Showing how the publication of *Systema Naturae* (1735) by Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus and Charles Darwin’s trip to the Cape onboard HMS Beagle in 1836 influenced a century of scientific curiosity, Wylie considers the tension between empirical and emotional responses to elephants in this particular period of history. Wylie emphasizes that the imperialists’ pure scientific stance had a devastating effect on the southern African elephant population. This is taken up more explicitly in chapter three, too, through the examination of hunters’ accounts. Reading texts such as *The Wild Sports of Southern Africa* by William Harris in 1852, the author illuminates how hunters ‘penetrated the interior’ (66) of the continent, causing a sharp decline in pachyderm populations. If compassion is shown to be lacking in hunters’ memoirs in chapter three, the argument in chapter four shows that the novel form hardly assisted in a reversal of such attitude towards elephants. Going into chapter five, Wylie offers a shift in outlook, however.

Working through representations of elephants in southern African young adult fic-



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tion, in chapter five the author highlights pedagogical value and contemplates how to educate the next generation about ecological concerns. Chapter six regards memoirs written by game-rangers in the second half of the twentieth century. Again, Wylie negotiates a change in attitude towards elephants here, documenting a shift from will-to-kill to conservationism. In the seventh chapter, the author comments on 'field-research memoirs', in which elephants are perceived as intelligent, beautiful creatures deserving of protection. At this stage in the book, Wylie intervenes in the debate about human-animal relationships and explores the idea of extending our sense of community to 'megafauna as massive and awkward as the elephant' (13). Chapter eight takes on the case of the relict population of the Knysna and Addo elephant in literature. In the final chapter, Wylie emphasizes the value of poetry, suggesting that it is the best-suited genre for expressing compassion. The analysis of a diverse range of poems highlights how effectively the genre 'engages imaginatively with the non-human' (206).

Across these nine chapters, *Death and Compassion* places the concept of compassion in conversation with literary works and

calls for re-conceptualisation of our relationship with the elephant, and by extension the world's many species. Significantly, 'compassion' is neither sympathy, pity, nor empathy. It is rather a holistic term, importantly meant to benefit non-human beings. With its focus on the 'emotionality of texts' (7), *Death and Compassion* certainly provokes a collapse of the human/non-human binary and urges imaginative identification with the wild elephant. A crucial question raised is: 'Can literature help to forge senses of community that breach the conceptual barriers between human and animal?' (229).

The book outlines a historical trajectory. In some senses, Wylie has produced a text about the history of southern Africa from the elephants' point of view. Through the selection of genres in this book, the reader is offered a way through which to glimpse elephant ontology. In all its originality and sensitivity, *Death and Compassion: The Elephant in Southern African Literature* is a timely and valuable text, which will not only be a vital read for all 'elefriends' (1) but also for researchers in the fields of African studies, environmental humanities, ecocriticism, and African literary studies and ethics.