

Touching Trunks: Elephants, Ecology and Compassion in Three Southern African Teen Novels

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Summary

Nothing may be more crucial to the future of animals within ecology than appropriately educating our children. In this article, the author explores the question “How do we educate children about wild animals?” through an examination of three teen novels about elephants. All three novels are set in southern Africa, and so can be contextualised (indeed, contextualise themselves) tightly within quite specific socio-political, racial, economic and ecological conditions. Two of the novels – Dale Kenmuir’s *The Tusks and the Talisman* (1987) and John Struthers’s *A Boy and an Elephant* (1998) – are set in Zimbabwe’s Zambezi Valley. The third novel, Lauren St John’s *The Elephant’s Tale* (2009), was written by an ex-Zimbabwean but it is set in Namibia and South Africa. While all three novels are richly grounded in ecological specifics, and evince awareness of the geo-political dimensions of the region’s elephant management programmes, the relationships between children and elephants also owe something to the “fairytale” human–animal relations so often portrayed in readers for younger children. Central to such relations is the question of *communication*, and this article focuses on the role of communication between child and elephant as a basis for a specific mode of compassion. The stories reflect, in effect, on philosophical questions of animal “mind” and emotions – now extensively discussed in ethological, philosophical and even neurological disciplines – of the place of fiction in attitudinal education, and of the role of language and of physical embodiment. Finally, the author questions to what extent such individualised contact (what Acampora calls “corporal compassion”) is sustainable – as opposed to the pursuit of more abstract ecological or “management” goals – and returns to the ambiguity of the opening question: not only how we have taught our children up to the present, but also how we ought to teach them in the face of an ecologically insecure and increasingly non-wild future.

Opsomming

Niks is noodsaakliker vir die toekomstige welsyn van diere as om ons kinders toepaslik op te voed nie. In hierdie artikel verken die outeur aan die hand van drie jeugromans oor olifante die volgende vraag: “Hoe leer ons kinders oor en van wilde diere?”. Al drie romans speel af in Suid-Afrika, en kan derhalwe stewig gekontekstualiseer word binne spesifieke sosiopolitieke, ekonomiese en ekologiese

omstandighede. Twee van die romans – Dale Kenmuir se *The Tusks and the Talisman* (1987) en John Struthers se *A Boy and an Elephant* (1998) – speel af in Zimbabwe se Zambezi-vallei. Die derde roman, Lauren St John se *The Elephant's Tale* (2009), is deur 'n voormalige Zimbabwiër geskryf, maar word ruimtelik geplaas binne Namibië en Suid-Afrika. Al drie romans is ryk aan ekologiese besonderhede en vertoon 'n bewustheid vir die geopolitiese dimensies van die streek se olifant-bestuursprogramme. Die verhoudings tussen kinders en olifante in die tekste kan ook toegeskryf word aan die “sprokiesagtige” mens-dier-verhoudings wat so dikwels in jeugletterkunde uitgebeeld word. Sentraal tot sulke verhoudings is die kwessie van *kommunikasie*, en hierdie artikel fokus hoofsaaklik op die rol van kommunikasie tussen kind en olifant as grondslag vir 'n spesifieke vorm van deernis. Die verhale laat die leser nadink oor filosofiese vrae rondom die “verstand” en emosies van diere, wat tans breedvoerig in etologiese, filosofiese en selfs neurologiese studieverdele bespreek word. Dit opper ook vrae oor die waarde van fiksie in die bepaling van houdings, asook die rol van taal en van fisiese beliggaming. Die outeur bevraagteken die omvang waartoe sulke geïndividualiseerde kontak (wat Acampora “liggaamlike/tasbare deernis” noem) volhoubaar is – in teenstelling met die najaag van meer abstrakte ekologiese of bestuursdoelwitte. Ten slotte word daar teruggekeer na die dubbelsinnigheid van die openingsvraag: die vraag is nie slegs hoe ons ons kinders tot nou toe opgevoed het nie, maar ook hoe ons hulle behoort te leer in die lig van 'n ekologies onseker toekoms.

Once again, elephants across the globe are in trouble. They are vulnerable giants – uniquely vulnerable *because* giant. A recent issue of *Africa Geographic* (April 2013) redlined an “ivory apocalypse”. Renewed ivory poaching is decimating elephant populations throughout West- and central Africa; habitat destruction continues to hamper elephant viability in Asia; elephants continue to be abused in Indian temples and Western circuses and zoos. In southern Africa, despite the near-elimination of elephant populations by imperial hunters by the late nineteenth century, the situation is healthier; indeed, as is well known, so healthy that certain regions are deemed overpopulated and “culling” is employed as a “management technique”. This has engendered a particularly intense, and particularly ethically interesting, debate between animal rights advocates, politicians, economists, and the managers of national parks and similar but private reserves. The obverse of vulnerability then is protectiveness, and various modes of protectiveness have been extended to elephants over the last century or so: legal, spatial (as in national parks or orphan sanctuaries), and even violent (rangers risking their lives in gun battles with syndicated and well-resourced hunters). Reasons for being especially compassionate and protective towards elephants are now almost a cliché: their high intelligence, rich emotional lives including a capacity for mourning, caring matriarchal societal structures, that strangely charismatic grace. Additionally, current ecological philosophies and sciences focus on elephants' role within viable ecosystems, an angle gaining further importance from gathering awareness of anthropogenic global warming and climate change. In sum, an especially fascinating nexus of the “animal vulnerabilities” question emerges.

Texts on the elephant issue, ranging from specialist scientific articles to sentimental memoirs, must now number amongst the thousands. The more “literary” kinds of text – poems, novels and stories – have received little critical attention, though such are arguably as important as any in disseminating and affecting people’s attitudes towards animals and ecosystems.¹ In particular, fictions play an important role in conveying scientific discoveries and thinking to a wider populace – perhaps especially novels for children, who are both the most impressionable of readers, and those most in need of an ecologically sound education. Without their constructive engagement and ultimately action, the future for themselves and for fellow creatures like elephants looks bleak indeed. Hence I am asking the question, “How do we educate our children about ecological and animal concerns?” – meaning, partly, “How have we educated our children up to the present?” but also “How should we educate them for the future?” In this article, I focus on the educational or pedagogical values embedded in three southern African novellas aimed at teenagers. Two of the novellas – Dale Kenmuir’s *The Tusks and the Talisman* (1987) and John Struthers’s *A Boy and an Elephant* (1998) – are partly set in Zimbabwe’s Zambezi Valley. The third, Lauren St John’s *The Elephant’s Tale* (2009), is written by an ex-Zimbabwean but set in Namibia and South Africa.

One way of assessing the possible value of such fictions is to set them against southern African educational practice within schools. In both South African and Zimbabwean secondary-school textbooks and syllabi, the emphasis is on systemic ecology or environmental issues: weather systems, water security, agriculture and forestry, health and pollution, land use and soils, biodiversity, urbanisation, and climate-change science which emphasises the global and statistical above the local and individuated. Zimbabwe’s Grade 7 environmental science textbook mentions neither animals nor wilderness conservation at all. At the junior level of South African syllabi, the “Life Skills” courses do incorporate sporadic attention to animal welfare, but this component disappears at more senior levels, which are dominated by the “sustainable development” and “ecosystem services” models. There is, in short, no room made in the syllabi at present for consideration of an ethical or compassionate response to the individuated animal, and none whatsoever to the possible role of imaginative literatures in the development of compassion or related ethics. Even at tertiary level, the infiltration of ecological concerns into humanities studies remains embryonic; even more so animal studies. So there is a further question for consideration here: What is the role of the humanities, particularly imaginative literature, in promoting ecological and animal ethics?

1. Almost alone in this area of study to date is the work of Elwyn Jenkins (2004).

A second important area of contextualisation is the historical practice of conservation in southern Africa, whose features inform and literally structure these novellas. The allocation of “natural” resources was, and largely remains, skewed by racialistic elitism allied with a global philosophy of “fortress conservation” – the preservation of notionally “pristine wilderness” in enclosed areas, effectively exclusionary and instrumentalist. Globally, this is now recognised as deeply problematic, indeed in serious danger of failing. In many countries, Kenton Miller notes,

[e]xisting reserves have been selected according to a number of criteria including the desire to protect nature, scenery and watersheds, to promote cultural values and recreational opportunities. The actual requirements of individual species, populations and communities have seldom been known, nor has the available information always been employed in site selection and planning for nature’s reserves.

(Miller quoted in Westra 1998: 251)

Nowhere is this failure more obvious than in Zimbabwe: at present, economic mismanagement, corruption, land hunger, political uncertainty, international ivory poaching, and other factors have meant that in the last decade 90% of white-owned private conservancies have been obliterated, and most national parks placed under severe strain from illegal human settlers, subsistence hunting, commercial-scale poaching and government-approved mining operations. Most distressing recently was the poisoning with cyanide of dozens of elephants in Hwange National Park by impoverished villagers in the employ of ivory syndicates. Mana Pools, the north-Zimbabwean setting for two of our novellas, is one of the few national parks still relatively untouched. Yet much public discourse in the region continues to valorise wilderness reserves as a self-evident good. These novellas require to be read against this backdrop, and indeed grapple with some of its problematic aspects.

A third necessary area of contextualisation is the ongoing debate concerning the precise quality of elephants’ consciousness and emotions. All three novellas offer imagined states of “elephant mind”. The debate, and its effects on management and conservation, have been intensively discussed by environmental ethicists, biologists, philosophers and animal-rights advocates.² To oversimplify radically: on the one hand, zoological scientists

2. To cite just four relevant discussions bridging these disciplines: Whyte 2002 (biology and environmental ethics); Lötter 2001 (management and philosophy); Pickover 2005 (animal rights); Wise 2003 (animal rights, neurology and law). Wise, assuming that we can know nothing directly of animal thoughts, resorts to a purely quantitative formula, the “encephalisation index” (brain size as proportional to body mass) to locate species on a sliding scale of qualification for rights. For broader treatment of animal cognition,

and some philosophers eschew such imaginings as empirically vacuous and unprovable, relying instead on species-specific, repeatable behavioural patterns or neurological evidence. On the other hand are those who insist on animal sentience broadly, and in particular on elephants' emotional sensitivity, communicative intelligence, and culture, assuming individual subjectivity and agency. These roughly antithetical positions can even be entertained by a single person: G.A. Bradshaw writes, in *Elephants on the Edge*, "I have felt wedged between two worlds and struggled to bridge the chasm between the collectivity of science and the personal nature of suffering – between my role as objective scientist and the subjective experience of a living, feeling, sentient member of the animal world" (2009: xix). While those who infer emotional and even rational intelligence from elephant behaviour find themselves charged with unverifiable speculation and "anthropomorphism", even when not producing overt fiction, the "objective" thinkers also run into problems. The difficulties may be briefly exemplified by ethologist Marc Hauser's discussion of elephants' response to the death of a family member, often interpreted "as evidence of empathy and an understanding of death". Hauser continues:

Although this is one possible interpretation, there are alternatives. What can we actually infer about an elephant's feelings and thoughts about death from its response to a dead or dying elephant? The first step is to work out the kind of objects and events that elicit the particular response observed. Thus, do elephants respond in the same way to a sick but living member of the family? Would they attempt to prop his or her body up? ... Do individuals with special social relationships to the dead show different kinds of responses to the bones than unfamiliar individuals? Until we have answers to these questions we can't say much about an elephant's feelings or thoughts about death, although it is certainly possible that they feel grief and a deep sense of loss.

(Hauser 2002: 226-227)

Hauser appears not to have completed his research here, since the answers to his questions about behaviour have been amply answered by observers. Elephants *will* generally respond similarly to a sick member that happens to survive as to one that ultimately dies (wouldn't we do the same, being seldom gifted with complete foresight?), but never to the point of "burying" a living comrade. This would indeed indicate an "understanding of death" (whatever such "understanding" means; do we "understand" death any the better for our intricate knowledge of the physiological breakdown involved? What is important is understanding the attachment to *life*). Hauser presents no alternative interpretations, and seems torn between the scientist's desire to define "kinds" of response (those which can be "verified" by repetition in

see Lurz 2009; and "Animal Cognition" in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cognition-animal/>>).

observation and experiment), and recognition that there *are* “individuals” and “special” relationships which presumably deviate from those “kinds”. Observations are legion that elephant responses to death can be highly individualistic. Such individuality seems *prima facie* evidence for discriminations that must perforce be of emotional, cultural or thoughtful kinds, since they are evidently not merely automatic or instinctual. Having somewhat undermined his own case for objectivity, Hauser concludes: “Given the lack of evidence for self-awareness³ as well as the capacity to attribute mental states to others, my own hunch is that no animal will be found to have a system of beliefs about death” (Hauser 2002: 227). Apart from abruptly shifting the criteria (from *having* mental states to being able to *attribute* mental states to others, and from having not just “responses” to having a “*system* of beliefs”), Hauser resorts to a “hunch”! What his book at large demonstrates, in fact, is that the sundry behaviourist experiments he describes are intrinsically incapable of demonstrating anything useful about “what animals really think”, as his subtitle proclaims. Nevertheless, his point in one sense stands: we can only *imagine* what is going on in an individual elephant’s brain. Fiction manifests precisely that imagining, and it arguably carries precisely the ethical inquiry and freight of which Hauser’s brand of science is patently, even proudly, empty. Of course, for us, *representation* is the key. What fiction provides, in ways unavailable to all other discourses, is a tool for representing such subjectivities, and thus opening up at least the potential of intersubjective communication and compassion.

Accordingly, all three novellas are structured as journeys by the human protagonist in conjunction with an elephant; each journey breaches the borders of the human/animal divide, the “civilisation”/“wilderness” divide, and the local/international divide, and to some degree the racial divide. Such didactic values they evince, however, remain securely if problematically attached to the ideals of fortress conservation, both in the manner in which “wildness” is described and in the outcome of their plots. In their dating, too – 1987 to 2009 – they echo wider shifts in attitudes and the progression of eco-philosophical knowledge.

3. This is simply wrong: there is increasingly convincing evidence for some forms of self-awareness in animals, including elephants – though experiments are narrow in scope, and based on limited conceptions of “self”. Recent reconceptualisations of self, less as some unverifiable “bounded inward sense of a cohesive identity” than as a product of complex inter-relations with network-dependent “others”, cast a different light on the question. Some aspects of our novellas arguably press, even inadvertently, in this direction, insofar as inter-species communication assumes some kind of co-production of meaning.

The Tusks and the Talisman

Dale Kenmuir's *The Tusks and the Talisman* (1987) is particularly interesting in the influence of genre on the depiction of human-elephant contact. The earliest, most realistic, and most unremittingly masculinist of the three novellas, it is in many respects the established hunting-account turned to conservationist ends: a book-length contest between a ranger-turned-ivory poacher named Dirk Cronjé and an incumbent ranger, Cronjé's erstwhile pupil, Tom Finnaughty, over the fate of one particular tusker, M'tagati ("bad magic – the Devil" (Kenmuir 1987: 6)). While Cronjé, cutting increasingly illegal deals with an obnoxious and incompetent American hunter named Sneddecor, tries to kill the tusker, Finnaughty strives to save him; the two bush-wise men battle it out as M'Tagati is harried, wounded, radio-collared, and shot at all the way from Mana Pools on the Zambezi River, past the settlements alongside Lake Kariba and across it to the mountains of the haven of Matusadona National Park. If the final stratagem Finnaughty employs to outwit Cronjé is just a bit implausibly elaborate, the contest, with its plot twists, technologies, bushcraft and hand-to-hand combat, is well designed to appeal to the youthful male reader, and on the whole competently achieved. The description of Finnaughty is archetypically heroic, indeed archetypically "Rhodesian": "bare ankles, worn veldskoens, khaki shorts, a shirt with the sleeves cut away, no hat ... cool, relaxed" (pp. 12-13). While Cronjé is a tough and worthy but unscrupulous opponent, the reader is unquestionably meant to identify with Finnaughty and his ideals. Conservation values are a given.

If actual *sympathies* are invoked, they are for the elephant: Finnaughty is admirable but heroically rather aloof. We learn more about M'tagati's birth, youth and early traumas – many violent contacts with humans that explain why he is so aggressive a loner, "branded a rogue and a crop raider, dangerously intractable" (p. 6) – than we do of Finnaughty's. The two are nevertheless inextricably linked: both are highly independent rebels with "lone wolf ways" (p. 68), and Finnaughty symbolises his passion for the animal by making a wrist bracelet of M'tagati's tail hairs in indigenous quasi-magical fashion – the "talisman" of the title. He muses on this charm's non-lethality by comparison with tusks as trophy; it forms a "tangible bond" even as he hears Cronjé's mentoring voice in his ears: "Don't be a sentimental fool" (p. 36). This is as close as Finnaughty gets to corporeal companionability, however: though M'tagati becomes habituated to his constant presence, and Finnaughty acknowledges his own "strong sense of affection", he does not seriously think it might be "mutual", however intelligent, with "some very human traits", elephants might be (p. 33). The narrative situation is also complicated by a discernible gap between author and character. Though Kenmuir's free indirect style of narration allows him and his reader access to both Finnaughty's and Cronjé's inner thoughts, it is to M'tagati's

consciousness the reader is given the greater access. The elephant is portrayed possessing fears, pleasures, pain, confusion, anger, revenge, thoughts, desires, inchoate intuitions, embedded urges. Kenmuir is particularly strong on the centrality of scent to the elephantine *Umwelt*. It is nevertheless a less thoroughgoing attempt at such interiority than, say, Barbara Gowdy's in her novel *The White Bone* (2008), and the narration is shot through with narratorial judgement (the aesthetic judgement of "hideous scars", for example (Kenmuir 1987: 6)) or information (a companion elephant is blown up by a "landmine"). Whilst not overtly sentimentalised or anthropomorphised,⁴ when M'tagati is felled by Sneddecor's bullet, we are undoubtedly meant to feel the shock – and the relief that it's not fatal. The generation of sympathy is of a somewhat distanced kind congruent with the story's generic strategies and literary antecedents.

Amongst those antecedents are the nineteenth-century hunting accounts, amongst them the relatively early *Recollections of William Finnaughty, Elephant Hunter 1864-1875* (whose name Kenmuir is presumably echoing). The genre's southern African manifestations developed throughout the century as exemplified by Gordon Cumming, Cornwallis Harris and William Baldwin, and consolidated in the 1890s by H.A. Bryden, Frederick Neumann and Frederick Courtney Selous, amongst many others. The increasingly self-referential conventions of the genre provided the foundation for two other emergent genres: fictional hunting accounts from Rider Haggard onwards; and, once the conservation ethic began displacing (or paralleling) sport-hunting, game-ranger memoirs, starting with that of James Stevenson-Hamilton's *South African Eden* (first edition 1937) on the establishment of Kruger National Park. The hunting accounts generally expressed no compassion whatsoever for the hunters' victims, even when they acknowledged that there was an ethical argument already under way about their activities, or acknowledged that they were implicated in precisely the destruction of animals, to the point of extinction, that stimulated conservation efforts. Their focus was – even more than on the act of killing – on the detailed quasi-militaristic manoeuvres taken to approach the ivory-laden targets, on the stories of near-masochistic derring-do that confirmed the adventure, and on the projection of the hardy, resourceful, cool, bush-wise, plain-speaking and self-deprecating adventurer at the maverick fringes of empire and civilisation. Something of this persona is preserved in the ranger memoirs (and Finnaughty's brush with an angry buffalo, which he escapes with a "Tarzan-like" leap (Kenmuir 1987: 23), is straight out of the genre), as well as the stylistic narrative trait of intricately detailed movement

4. For discussion of this perennial shibboleth, with specific reference to Gowdy's elephant-view novel, see Wylie 2002.

through bush and geographical space. Kenmuir's novella represents the filial obverse of the hunting account.

Though all of those hunters pursued ivory – the heavier the better, because most profitable – the cultish, single-minded pursuit of the gigantic, personally named tusker, amounting to an extended human-elephant duel, is largely a fictional invention. Such pride as hunters took in their exploits was subdued rather than triumphalist. Of course certain men did track specific tuskers: Kenmuir cites the hunt for the tusker Ahmed of Marsabit in Kenya as a source of inspiration, among others (p. i). Cronjé tempts Sneddecor with the prospect of having his “bag” “immortalised” in the boast lists of Rowland Ward trophy records (p. 41). The hunt's transmutation into extended narrative duel is exemplified by John Gordon Davis's *Taller than Trees* (1975), inspired by the real-life Dlulamithi of Kruger, also mentioned by Kenmuir. But the fond naming of tuskers becomes a product of conservationists rather than hunters, and the presence of tuskers becomes, paradoxically, an index of the conservationists' success.⁵ In short, *The Tusks and the Talisman* draws on and echoes all these generic antecedents, contextualised within the particular dilemmas of modern conservation.

A number of those dilemmas and issues are explicitly broached in the novella (one does not expect a story for younger readers to explore them more thoroughly). International commerce and American hunter-pride is pitted starkly against locally loyal conservation values. Sneddecor's egotistical prancing about on M'tagati's recumbent body and insistence on his triumph being filmed is portrayed as repugnant even to the unscrupulous Cronjé. As for Cronjé, he is a traitorous “poacher” – a particularly judgemental term in the context – and, as Kenmuir states in his Author's Note, is of that ilk who believe “if I don't take it, someone else will”. In contrast, Finnaughty embodies the philosophy “once gone, gone forever” (p. i). His ethic is refined later in the tale, as he gazes across the Zambezi Valley:

A wilderness paradise lay beneath his gaze, where animals roamed in freedom as they had done for thousands of years. It was a remnant patch of wild country in a shrinking world. He knew that if the valley was to be preserved in a land-hungry country it had to pay for itself, and animals like M'tagati were the drawcards that helped the valley pay protection money to society.

(Kenmuir 1987: 71)

5. One manifestation of the conservationist tusker cult is the coffee-table book, written by Anthony Hall-Martin and illustrated by Paul Bosman, *The Magnificent Seven and Other Great Tuskers of Kruger National Park* (Human & Rousseau: Cape Town, 1994). For another, see the recent outpouring of grief at ivory hunters' killing of Kenya's biggest tusker, Satao (<<http://africageographic.com/blog/kenyas-biggest-elephant-killed-by-poachers/>>. 20 July 2014).

Though mavericks like Cronjé and Sneddecor “threatened the whole system” (p. 71), hunting is not excluded as a legitimate revenue earner, bringing in “hundreds of thousands of dollars on hunting safaris” (p. 70). There are nascent ironies and irresolutions here; indeed, Kenmuir is careful to show that Finnaughty’s own views are not universally accepted even within his own Wildlife Department. His boss, Sutton, insists, “It’s not just looking after wildlife anymore. We’re not zookeepers, Finnaughty. *People* are involved. It’s a people business, too” (p. 66). Amongst those people are tourists; others are neighbouring farming and fishing settlements vulnerable to elephant crop raids – and also capable, as the novella depicts it, of exaggerating such losses to the authorities. While these complexities are not fully worked through in the story, at the very least the young reader is being alerted to their existence. On the whole, though, the language of emotion is suppressed beneath both the manly ruggedness of Finnaughty’s persona and the rhetoric of pragmatic economics.

Love of place and its charismatic denizens can, of course, be expressed in different ways. One prominent feature of *The Tusks and the Talisman* is the descriptive and educative display of natural knowledge. A typical passage:

With the coming of the annual rains the game had dispersed, and for a while he saw only a few scurrying mopani squirrels. Then he saw a knot of impala rams who snorted and pranced away defensively. A little further on a troop of baboons shambled and cantered off as he approached. There must be water nearby, he thought.

(Kenmuir 1987: 22)

There is much more of this kind of detail throughout. If it seems a touch gratuitous at times, anyone who has spent time in the Zambezi (as I had just a few years before *Tusks* was published) will recognise the accuracy and indeed affection of the descriptions of not only animal-, but also plant-, bird- and insect life. While that notion of a “wilderness paradise”, free of human influence, is nowadays much disparaged, including within ecocriticism, it still holds powerful, if idealistic, symbolic currency, even as its limits and vulnerabilities are obvious, as this novella shows. Furthermore, Kenmuir is careful to depict the dangerously predatory nature of that world, what he calls (as his hero hears a leopard taking a baboon in the night) its “awful pathos” (p. 32). Ultimately Kenmuir’s values are evident in the poachers getting their legal comeuppance and in the tusker’s final survival and move to the safe confines of Matusadona National Park. Fortress-conservation values are not left entirely unquestioned, but they certainly are preserved.

If, as in Kenmuir’s novella, national parks are social structures designed to keep animals and humans in a state of, as it were, suspended alterity (“Do not feed the baboons”), what happens when that carefully constructed distance is breached? When animal and human find a commonality, a means to trust one another, even to communicate, face to face? Jacques Derrida is

frequently quoted nowadays, especially his critical response to Emmanuel Levinas's discussion of the *face* as ambivalent locus of contact with the other. Levinas wrote that "the other ... can be an other in respect of whom or which I have responsibilities only on condition of its having a face" (quoted in Acampora 2006: 87) – the face being, as Derrida summarises,

not only what is seen or what sees, but also what speaks, what hears speech, and therefore it's to our ethical responsibility it is addressed, it's from a face that it receives something from the other [F]rom a face ... I receive the imperative: "Thou shalt not kill".

(Derrida 2009: 317)⁶

Levinas hinted that the face may be extended the whole length of the body – how inadvertently appropriate to the elephant, whose hand is at the end of the nose! This may be to (as it were) efface the face; hence, though a facial-response ethic is persuasive up to a point, Ralph Acampora finds the concentration on the face ultimately too limited, too anthropocentric. In *Corporal Compassion* (2006), Acampora argues densely for the ethical force of modes of compassion derived more widely from what he calls "inter-somaticity" – a frankly non-rational, visceral, phenomenological recognition of shared "whole-body" encounters between animals and humans (Acampora 2006: 88). This recognition is neither conventional empathy nor simple identification, neither anthropomorphic nor transcendent (our language is ill-equipped to express such phenomena): "Cultivating a bodiment ethos of inter-animality is not a matter of mentally working one's way into other selves or worlds by quasi-telepathic imagination, but is rather about becoming sensitive to an already constituted "inter-zone of somaesthetic conviviality" (p. 84). It is instructive to lay this approach alongside the following fictions, in exploring the problems of representing a "somaesthetic" trust between, say, a boy and an elephant.

6. This occurs in the context of Derrida's reading of D.H. Lawrence's poem, "Snake". When asked if the animal could have a face, Levinas replied, "I don't know ..." and countered, "Would you say that the snake has a face?" (Derrida 2009: 317). While provocative, Derrida's treatment of this aspect, especially in his famous nude encounter with his cat in his essay "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" (2002), focuses on seeing/being seen and on speech-as-response, to the exclusion of almost all other possible forms of interchange between "human" and "animal" (designations Derrida is nevertheless at pains to efface).

A Boy and an Elephant

In John Struthers's *A Boy and an Elephant* (1998), aimed at rather younger readers than of Kenmuir's novella, the lineaments of compassion are based more fundamentally on a boy-elephant relationship of unquestioning fidelity. To summarise: the young elephant (named, childishly, "Gerry") is left alone and bewildered by an authorised "cull" in the Zambezi Valley; the boy is left alone and bewildered when his father is killed by ivory poachers. Having found one another in mutual vulnerability, the two forge an intimate communicative relationship, and walk some 200 km to the capital Harare to talk to the President himself about the whole elephant plight – and back again. Response breeds responsibility. The novella does raise a number of issues such as the reasons for ivory poaching, the justifications for culling, the suppression of traditional modes of respect by modernity, human overpopulation, and government corruption. Again, plot constitutes authorial sympathy: the elephant and his boy disappear happily back into the jessebush of the more-or-less safe Zambezi Valley.

The novella's plot is clumsy, its style even clumsier, but it is of particular interest for my purpose because it incorporates several levels or vectors of explicit education. First, the elephant, a very "humanised" narration of, whose interiority also opens the story, learns how to live from the other members of his herd, and as he grows becomes mentor himself. Secondly, this is obviously paralleled to the education Jamie receives from his father and from a series of hard life knocks, including the loss of his mother in a car accident and a brain-damaging or mind-altering fall (which, it is hinted, ultimately makes it possible for him to communicate with the elephant). Thirdly, then, the boy and the elephant learn a great deal of and from one another in the course of their journey. Fourthly, Jamie's uncle Lou, who turns up from England to find the lost boy, instructs him in the evils of the modern world as he escorts him back to the haven of the bush. This character is most obviously a mouthpiece for Struthers's own feelings, including this statement:

"Educators everywhere," Lou spat out, "they think knowledge is everything! Teach the people, and all will be hunky-dory ... fine! Education, our last, best hope? Pah!" ... [Rather] every individual has his or her reason for being. No less than does every species have a place, ecologically justified, on this earth. Fathers. Mothers. We don't need education – learning – to understand such things."

(Struthers 1998:113-115)

As Jamie begs not to be sent back to school, Lou responds, "No, you'll be teaching us". Somewhat incongruously, Lou's own educative interventions are laden with scientific language and a global perspective which could only have been acquired by "learning", yet it is evident to Jamie that this man

“cared just as deeply about all living things as he himself did” (p. 113). This dissonance – or attempted reconciliation of modes of learning-and-caring – sharply points up the questions: *What does this “caring” actually consist in?* and *What is it that Jamie, the “unlearned”, can teach us?*

Clearly, though the novella contains numerous irresolutions, Struthers wants to counter the government’s stated doctrine of “use them or lose them” (p. 75) with what Acampora calls *symphysis*, that is “cross-species compassion ... mediated by somatic [bodily] experiences” (p. 23). Struthers provides several concrete examples. In the following passage, their first encounter initiates what I consider the crucial confluence of bodily presence, communication and compassion:

When Jamie awoke, he thought it was his mother’s soft hand exploring his face. Already so shocked, his system was slow to grasp the fact of it. This was the tip of an elephant’s trunk exploring the contours of his head. Moving down the body, slowly, to scent the groin area.

Only gradually did his eyes focus beyond this rough, dark, sinuously-bending thing, upward. To a curving white tusk and the long lashes of an eye, behind. A great ear lifted, cutting out even more of the early morning light. And, into his newly aroused consciousness, the giant seemed to be soundlessly speaking.

“Doing here, what, little brother?” he thought he heard the elephant say, “Happened, what?”

“My father ...” Jamie began.

Then, realisation of what had happened hit. And, with it, the agony of it all began to flood through his system.

Instantly, Gerry’s exploring trunk stilled, as his senses absorbed these new messages of the boy’s distress.

“Yes?” he seemed to ask solicitously.

Jamie put a hand up. Heedless of what he was doing – somehow, without fear – he grasped the roundness of it, pulled himself up onto his feet. For a moment, he rested his forehead against the wrinkled skin. Then, his arms went around Gerry’s long, immobilised nose, and he clung to it tightly, sobbing.

“Little one, right, all,” Jamie heard in his mind, after a while. “Too, loss, know I”

(Struthers 1998: 19)

This kind of mental telepathy, if it is that, which Struthers tries to capture in this sort of stuttering pidgin, is developed through the novel until they communicate more easily. Yet it is *not* depicted as English language as such, though this must be the manner in which Jamie utters his thoughts; it *seems* to be such words but is more akin to the infrasonic rumbles and waves that are received by the boy’s whole body, rather than by any conscious thought pattern or translation. As a narrative device, this is awkward and ultimately unworkable, but locating the basis for compassion in *some* form or forms of

communication, including, absolutely crucially, the trustfulness of touch, is I think a profoundly important conjunction. It also seems to me – having myself been raised in bodily contact with innumerable animals, wild and domestic – blindingly obvious that such contact potentially generates a form of compassion quite different from one that might develop in its absence. Struthers seems to be indicating that “caring” for animals in some kind of distant, abstracted sense, however scientifically, ecologically or economically supported, is deeply inadequate. Uncle Lou comes to this realisation late in the novella, when he in turn is tenderly touched by Gerry’s exploring trunk, and experiences a near-epiphany of companionability. (Struthers would agree with Acampora’s observation that “bodiment is submerged in status and topicality by the dominant intellectualist mainstream of Western philosophy”(Acampora 2006: 119)). The somatic commonalities between man and elephant are seen to be greater than their differences or, to put it in more paradoxical Levinasian terms, it is precisely at the surface of alterity that a new sociality can emerge. Difference and communication are ever in a kind of paradoxical dance. Practically, only the suppression of embodied compassion makes something like a mass cull, or a poacher or hunter’s kill, “ethically” possible. Throughout the novella, Struthers is insistent that an elephant’s mental and emotional life is no less complex than the human’s: indeed, the crucial questions *he* wants to address to humanity he places in Gerry’s mind: “People. Killing animals, so many. Why?” (Struthers 1998: 25).

Struthers implies that somatic interchanges like Jamie and Gerry’s are vital to saving the animals. But of course this quasi-domestication and bodily contact with compassionate after-effects is available to only a very few. It’s even potentially silly and dangerous. Acampora allows for a “secondary symphysis” founded on *observed* rather than experienced somatic contact, but this requires a different conception of “compassion”. Further: that Struthers writes a novella advocating symphysis, shows at least some faith that an *imaginative* identification with Jamie’s experience might be conveyed, such that compassion in other ways (financial support for parks or rescues, or just leaving animals alone) might be stimulated in his readers. When Jamie relates to the President “the empathy that started to flow, when he learned Gerry’s own *story*” (p. 71; my emphasis), it is surely a flow Struthers hopes the book will carry beyond the confines of its covers. Following Acampora’s all-too-brief acknowledgement of this possibility, we might call this “tertiary symphysis”. What Struthers’s and other novelists’ efforts imply is that this imaginative element is as important as, is already involved in, even the most intimate levels of somaticity: how the imagination is formed in the first place, within what forms of narrative, is predeterminative of the experiential quality of touch, and hence to our animal ethics – not the other way round. This is, finally, the primary justification and role of literatures such as these novellas.

An Elephant's Tale

My most recent example, Lauren St John's *The Elephant's Tale* (2009), is the only one of the three novellas to feature a female protagonist, the bold and vivacious Martine. Having lost her parents to a fire, she and her grandmother are trying to save the family's wildlife sanctuary in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province from commercial acquisition by a sinister buyer named Reuben James. The sanctuary, named Sawubona (Zulu, "health"), bears some resemblance to the late Lawrence Anthony's Thula Thula, as he relates in his memoir *The Elephant Whisperer* (2010). Both sanctuaries house orphaned and traumatised elephants; in St John's case, a particular elephant named Angel shows both her vulnerability to abuse and her elephantine memory by attacking Lurk, Reuben James's nasty assistant who (it turns out) once hurt her. Following James and Lurk's disconcerting visit, Martine smuggles herself and her friend Ben aboard James's plane, ends up stranded in the Namibian desert, but is rescued by a young Bushman named, appropriately, Gift. Gift is himself something of an orphan, his father having gone inexplicably missing. It turns out that the latter is the archetypal elephant whisperer, and has been blackmailed by Reuben James, who has created an artificial Eden in a desert crater, using water diverted from local communities. There, he is experimenting on Namibia's desert-dwelling elephants in order to develop an animal that will better resist looming climate change. This partially laudable ideal is, however, being manipulated by nasty commercial forces bigger than James himself, who emerges a more ambiguous figure than first suspected: for instance he, along with Gift's father, had originally rescued the elephant Angel from starvation and abuse and transported her to faraway Sawubona.

There are many more twists and layers to this short but rich novella than I can explicate here. Suffice it to say that it conforms to thriller-adventure conventions more than the other examples addressed above, including some rather stereotyped characters, some intricately unlikely coincidences within a swiftly-moving plot, and little in the way of heavy description or didacticism. Such didactic elements as there are – information on elephant behaviour, climate change, or the petroglyphs of Twyfelfontein – are neatly and naturally delivered via conversations between characters. In the end Martine wins out, of course: Angel is reunited with her elephantine twin and Gift with his father Joseph; James and his thoroughly evil backer are rumbled and arrested; and the sanctuary and its animals saved.

For all its brevity, *An Elephant's Tale* economically raises a number of issues and dimensions arguably crucial to a twenty-first-century ecological sensibility. These issues overlap with those raised by Kenmuir and Struthers, but also update them. One aspect is precisely its integration of ever more pertinent questions ignored by the earlier works, notably water shortages exacerbated by global warming, with species extinction a tragic corollary.

As pollution eventuates in more extreme weather, Reuben James states, “more wars will be fought over water than have been fought over oil or religion throughout history The people who control the water supplies will control the earth” (St John 2009: 185). As Martine accuses, such control is all too easily commandeered to self-serving international capital, becoming more “about money and power” than about conserving wildlife or water. James’s mealy-mouthed response that “it is possible to do both” (p. 185) is not borne out by St John’s portrayal of the suffering of elephants trapped in James’s efforts to engineer drought-resistant animals in his artificial oasis. When Martine intervenes to help a fallen elephant, the portrayal of suffering is thoroughly humanised, and focused on the eye: “The elephant’s thick lashes lay flat against her rough grey-brown cheek. Her whole body trembled. When Martine touched her tenderly, a tear rolled down her face” (p. 177). Here, as in Struthers’s novella, the advent of corporeal touch, the implication of eye contact, and the recognition of a *face*, is culmination and confirmation of more conceptual reasons for compassion – the recognition of elephants’ complex communication abilities (p. 209), or the notion that they are “supremely evolved beings – far smarter than people, in Martine’s opinion” (p. 210).

A second contemporary aspect, then, is the portrayal of a particularly self-humbling empathetic sensibility, one historically contingent upon a long development – scientific, philosophical and legal – of human responsiveness to animal mind and *Umwelt*. This sensibility is embodied primarily in Martine, who “couldn’t bear to see any animal suffer” (p. 31), but also in her friend Ben Khumalo, and in the Bushman elephant-whisperer Joseph. St John is careful to ameliorate possible charges of oversentimentalising this attitude by “educating” Martine into recognising the dangerous quality of independently wild animals, and by deliberately flagging some of the issues. Ben, for instance, notes how he himself wants only to protect from harm animals “cute and cuddly and small, like a Labrador puppy”, or gentle like a dolphin or a giraffe, but finds it more awkward to respond in this way to the radical alterity of an elephant: “They’re so big and their hides are so thick that it’s never occurred to me they might be able to reason like us or have similar emotions” (pp. 123-124). And it is Ben who has to prevent a distraught Martine from wanting to intervene in a vicious fight between two oryx: “You shouldn’t interfere with nature” (pp. 91-92). It seems clear from St John’s overall presentation, though, that neither complete non-interference nor its opposite, James’s experimentation, is realistically possible any longer; perhaps Sawubona exemplifies a kind of halfway solution, a necessary sanctuary for whatever is left behind by human depredation.

In the service of this “solution”, St John develops in Martine a sensibility of compassion in excess even of that of Jamie in *A Boy and an Elephant*, one that spills over into the mystical. Martine has an unquestioned gift for

healing and communicating with animals: she has connections with her white giraffe Jemmy, and with a rehabilitated leopard (both characters in parallel novellas by St John) that can only be termed spiritual. At points, her gift for communication resembles Jamie's:

Martine had a strong feeling the animals were trying to tell her something. She put a hand on Angel's trunk and the elephant's unspoken words came to her as clearly as if they'd been written on her soul with indelible ink: 'Bring me my sister. Bring me my sister.'

(St John 2009: 178)

The point to be made here is not so much that this kind of messaging may be regarded as intrinsically implausible, but that it obliges the reader to *consider* non-rational modes of living with animals as essential to holistically ethical behaviour. Indeed, St John takes this much further than either of our other two writers, by incorporating elements of indigenous mysticism or magic that are, in fact, essential to the plot's progression. Amongst Martine's several surrogate mother figures is a part-Zulu, part-Haitian woman named Grace, who provides potions, *muti*, that Martine can use to near-miraculously heal a buffalo or an elephant, as well as cryptic prophecies which Martine has to unriddle and act upon at crucial points in the story. The sage's ambiguous presence allows her to postulate that there is "no such thing as a coincidence" (p. 65), further allowing St John to effect simultaneously a critique of scientific realism and its lack of ethical content, and a resolution to the plot in a manner consistent with the norms of fantasy-adventure. This is, indeed, the (so to speak) bewitching persuasive power of fiction.

Importantly, this "mystical" element is inseparable from a valorisation of indigenous knowledges missing or merely nascent in the earlier novellas. St John studiously elides the rigid racial divisions and conflicts that structure so much southern African literature: she relates to Grace, or to Ben Khumalo, her contemporary (and yet another orphan), as simply another child, omitting all obvious markers of race such as skin colour and linguistic differences. Only in the case of the Bushmen – Gift and his father, Joseph – is such ethnicity noted. The Bushmen – that oversimplified icon of autochthony ubiquitous in our literature – have, especially since Laurens van der Post, been regularly romanticised for their supposedly more ecologically sound life-ways, but St John complicates this somewhat. Gift and Joseph speak like everybody else, and Gift defies the archetype by being a lousy tracker and a thoroughly modern career photographer. Joseph is, nevertheless, the "elephant whisperer", the result of a strange childhood abduction, as Gift relates:

"When my father was four years old, the San camp was raided by desert elephants. There was a drought and they were looking for food. During the

raid, he was snatched by one of the elephants. My grandparents assumed he'd been dragged away and killed, but three months later he was found alive and well and living with a herd of elephants. They rescued him with great difficulty, and were shocked to find he was reluctant to come home.

Ever since, he has been able to communicate with elephants”

(St John 2009: 101)⁷

Elephants are, Joseph explains, “family” to him, “brothers and sisters and uncles”. He represents compassion in its deepest form: “Do you know what it’s like to watch them die slowly in their hearts because the freedom of the desert winds has been taken from them; because they are confined? Elephants lose their minds in such a situation. They become so desperate to be free of captivity that they have been known to take their own lives” (p. 191).

Sentimental and idealistic, it may be objected. Nevertheless, the novella suggests, some such manner of empathetic engagement is necessary not only to saving the elephants, but ourselves. Ironically, the “elephants need us”, as Martine says; but, in the words of the *sangoma* Grace, it is also they who might lead us to “the truth”. In her canny admixture of narrative realism and fantasy elements, well judged to appeal to younger readers, St John in effect gives fictional expression to what anthropologist E.N. Anderson has termed “ecologies of the heart”. In Anderson’s view, rational science, governmental institutions, and monetary pragmatics notwithstanding, “[p]eople work on an emotional economy of love and hate, acceptance and rejection, help and hurt. That is not discussed in the ecology texts, but it is actually the wellspring of all our actions Love, including aesthetic delight, is necessary for any broad strategy for environmental management” (Anderson 1996: 183). These fictions for the young seem readier to accept and enact this truth than “adult” portrayals and studies; we live in a culture in which adulthood is constructed as somehow emotion-free, as if we are only moneymaking rationalists, strategists and self-serving exploiters.

7. The evocation of Anthony’s *The Elephant Whisperer* is unavoidable here; it is worth noting that although Anthony finds himself unable to explain quite how the understanding between himself and his orphaned elephants develops, and even uses the word “mystical” at one point, his gradual habituation of the animals seems to me eminently practical, and he is overtly derisory of the hapless interventions of a self-proclaimed “psychic”. Inexplicable by conventional science such senses of cross-species connection may be, but there is nothing esoteric there. It does, however, illustrate the limits of conventional science which, as Rupert Sheldrake has argued in *The Science Delusion* (2012), should be trying to expand its repertoire of exploratory tools rather than dismissing the “inexplicable” as intrinsically unworthy of investigation.

Ecologies of the Heart

The three texts explored here can hardly be said to be fully representative of the extensive array of children's literature on elephants, and I do not wish to draw grand conclusions from them. Yet in their historical progression, I think they do provide some touchstones for directions being taken in environmental education for younger readers. If their bias towards a defence of what has become conventional "fortress conservation" may or may not be found agreeable in the present democratising climate, their value lies in raising crucial questions of human-animal, society-environment relations, and presenting imaginative *possibilities* for ecological connection, heroism, and action. Amongst those questions are the nature of animal consciousness (especially elephants) and the possibility for meaningful communication, the nature of cross-species compassion, and the troubled relationships between global capital, local loyalties and governmental institutions. In their divergent ways, the three novellas exemplify Anderson's overall approach:

Human society – specifically, as a resource-managing institution or set of institutions – depends on the ability of people to provide ways to maximize *correct empirical knowledge, emotionally involve therein, and educate children in the tradition*. To the degree that this is accomplished, the society succeeds. To the degree it fails, the society fails.

(Anderson 1996: 176; original emphasis)

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