

Life and Death with Horses: Gillian Mears' Novel *Foal's Bread*

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Abstract: Gillian Mears' novel *Foal's Bread* (2011) invites an examination of horses in fiction, opening a platform for exploring the horse in Australian literature from a zoocritical perspective. This paper argues that writing horses into stories involves addressing, indeed flouting the 'sin' of anthropomorphism. The problems and paradoxes of ascribing subjectivity to fictional equine characters are discussed. The death of the main equine character, Magpie, is framed as a site of disregard, an example of human disconnection from the lives and deaths of animals. Using excerpts from the award-winning novel, *Foal's Bread*, as well as examples from other equine literature, the essay discusses representation of the horse as cultural subject and how writing fiction about animals opens possibilities for exploring relationships between humans and non-human animals.

Keywords: Horses subjectivity in fiction, Zoocriticism, Animal Agency, Gillian Mears, *Foal's Bread*

I. Introduction

Gillian Mears' award winning novel, *Foal's Bread* (2011),¹ invites an examination of several interrelated questions about horses in fiction and about humans' relationships with these animals. Are horses given subjectivity and/or agency in the novel? This question can be explored by examining how a crucial horse in the text, Magpie, is represented at her moment of death. A key question here is, is Magpie's death a site of disregard? More widely, can a zoocritical reading of this text gesture towards a redemptive relationship between the horses and humans in *Foal's Bread*? Mears' representations of various equine characters provide opportunities to examine the ways that horses, in life and in death, may evoke affect as fictional subjects.

A contentious pitfall in examining the relationships between animals and humans in fiction is the 'sin' of anthropomorphism, or invalidly attributing human-like characteristics to the nonhuman. I argue in this essay that Mears' depictions of equine characters are an important 'sinning'. The merits of giving voice to non-human animals, and here I discuss horses in particular, and of 'sinning', in terms of testing the limits of anthropomorphism, follow Val Plumwood's suggestions in her essay 'Nature in the Active Voice' to intentionally re-animate and depict non-human agency (2009). Similarly, Jane Bennett, in *Vibrant Matter* (2010), argues that a 'touch of anthropomorphism' can 'catalyze a sensibility' that enables perceptions of 'resonances and resemblances' of materialities, including human and non-human animals (99). I analyse the death of the horse, Magpie, in terms of how Mears' description of this event ascribes subjectivity and agency to the horse, but at the same time, through this death, Mears has constructed another disposable animal death, another site of disregard. What might a zoocritical reading of this novel reveal, in the light of 'literature's ethical force', and the power of fiction to connect readers to 'ethically charged events' (Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* xii)?

Mears is a highly regarded contemporary Australian novelist, whose work has attracted critical acclaim. *Foal's Bread* (2011) is her long awaited third novel, following *Mint Lawn* (1991) and *The Grass Sister* (1995). She has four short story collections, *Ride a Cock Horse* (1988), *Fineflour* (1990), *Collected Stories* (1997) and *A Map of the Gardens* (2002). Critics note Mears' reputation for crisp and surprising imagery in her earlier novels and short stories and she is also

commended for her portrayals of strong female protagonists (Dooley, ‘Portents Everywhere’; Dyer; Sorenson; Tucker). Rather than adding to such critique, here I examine new terrain, namely how Mears depicts the lives and deaths of horses. I ask what is to be learnt from the many contradictory and exposing nuances in Mears’ depictions of the human-horse relationship. I also explore the capacity of horses to take humans closer to understanding aspects of our animality, particularly in relation to death.

Foal’s Bread is an intergenerational story about a rural Australian family’s corrugated relationships with each other and their horses. For Mears, horses are totemic, magnifying the love and conflict in the Nancarrow family’s struggles through the 1940s to 1950s. The protagonist, Noah, her husband Roley, and their two children Lainey and George, each have their own ways of relating to their horses. Set in a bucolic Australian landscape, humans’ and horses’ lives are often precariously close to death. World War Two flickers as a background candle throughout. The plot of *Foal’s Bread* unfolds within a post-war recovery period, when the role of horses continued to change from functional tasks (transport, farming, war) to recreational roles, in this case show jumping competitions.

I start with the premise that humans’ increasing alienation from the natural world² and our ongoing damage to the environment make efforts to understand the development of ethical relationships with animals more urgent than ever. To right the wrongs done by humans to animals, and here I concentrate on horses, includes ‘writing’ the wrongs in the first place. Gillian Mears’ depictions of wrong-doings to horses, and the horses’ responses create a place to examine the agency of these animals, and their potency as literary trope.

From Mears’ writing of the equine protagonists, Magpie, Gurlie, Seabreeze and Landwind (Landy), it becomes possible to broaden our understanding of these animals and our relationship to them. *Foal’s Bread* provides insights into human and horse behaviours by highlighting the entanglements that occur when horses physically carry humans into the natural world, and into the highly unnatural world of show jumping. To see ourselves as animal and to see animals as having agency, with their own capacity to live and die with distinctive relationships to humans, is to learn to respect difference and indeed to celebrate it. Mears

contributes to the discussion of animal agency not only by representing horses as cultural subjects in fraught relationships with various members of the Nancarrow family, but also by asking readers to consider, through the death of the horse, Magpie, the enmeshment of horses and humans (Kohanov, *The Tao of Equus*; Landry).

II. Horses as Cultural Subjects

Descartes' dualisms constructed impermeable distinctions between what is considered body or mind, what is 'natural' or 'cultural', what is human and what is merely a biological automaton (as he constructed nonhuman animals to be) (Slater). Such thinking underlies much of the twentieth- and twenty-first century compulsion to control and change nature and animals (Oppermann). Many writers have however challenged the idea of an irrevocable division between humans and animals. A full review is beyond the scope of this essay.³

Zoocriticism analyses writers' representations of animals in fiction. This approach to literary criticism, with roots in animal studies and philosophy, proposes that the ways writers portray animals, as sentient beings or otherwise, offers significant insights into the potency of relationships between animals and humans (Donaldson and Kymlicka; Huggan and Tiffin). Zoocriticism, otherwise known as literary animal studies, has a clearly articulated political agenda, aiming to expose the ways animals in literature are under bombardment from human domination and abuse, and through literary critique to highlight possibilities of more inclusive and compassionate relationships (Calarco).

Reconceptualising animals in fiction according to their capacity not just to act as mirrors to human meaning, but also to materially affect cultural formations by means of their agency and their relations to each other and to humans is an important zoocritical endeavour (Armstrong). Armstrong seeks: 'A reconceptualization of agency, ...[which]... might facilitate a mode of analysis that does not reduce the animal to a blank screen for the projection of human meaning, and might offer productive new ways of accounting for the material influence of the nonhuman animal upon humans, and *vice versa*' (3). As one example, Armstrong's discussion of Jonathan

Swift's Houyhnhnms and Yahoos in *Gulliver's Travels* shows how Swift turns on its head the 'superimposed binary oppositions: reason/passion and human/animal' (8). In another example, J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2004) explores 'animal lives', through the fictional writer/character, Elizabeth Costello's lectures. Coetzee ascribes to Elizabeth Costello several significant arguments about how humans understand and treat animals. Costello says, 'You say that death does not matter to an animal because the animal does not understand death' (111). Via Costello, Coetzee goes on to question philosophers who make divisions between humans and nonhumans, challenging Cartesian deference to reason alone as the key missing attribute of animal behaviours. Coetzee has Costello state, in reference to such thinking, 'Throw it out, I say. What good do its piddling distinctions do?' (111). For all Costello's protests, however, a dichotomous view of nature-culture persists and is usually based on an unjust assumption of dominance of human-centred subjectivity over nonhuman animals.

In much western literature, depictions of 'the human' depend for effect on the presence of nonhuman animals portrayed from a masculinist, rational or reason-centred cultural perspective (Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*). Plumwood's ground-breaking criticism of Western, masculinist and entrepreneurial perceptions of 'nature' and animals as 'passive, as non-agent and non-subject' (4) underpins my considerations of Mears' novel. Plumwood argues that the marginalising of animals' cultural subjectivity has been reinforced by Christian specifications of who can and cannot possess a soul (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*; 'Nature in the Active Voice'). This point of view effects how we treat animals when they die, which I discuss later in this essay.

To suggest that nonhuman animals can communicate or have agency risks the charge of anthropomorphism. The 'sin' lies in seeing 'soulless' animals in the likeness of 'man' (Tyler and Rossini). While it has been convenient for humans to assume that animals are not sentient beings, growing scientific evidence indicates animals' subjective experience of the world and that they experience pain and a range of emotions. Peter Singer contributed early to the debate around human/animal relations with the 'principle of equality', whereby animals and humans are entitled to 'equal moral consideration' because of their capacity to suffer pain (Singer,

Rethinking Life and Death). Many writers have followed and developed various perspectives on human-animal relations. Of relevance in this discussion, Erica Fudge builds on Derrida's questioning of the term 'the animal' to propose that this universalising expression elides a multiplicity of experiences. Fudge prefers to '[lay] bare the concept 'animal' as a cover-all for a disconcertingly wide range of relations, [and underlines] the discomfort, the variety and the limitations of those relations' (165). She assesses the paradoxes of living with pets, eating animals, using them for scientific experimentation, but ultimately acknowledges the limitations in human language for the boundaries it creates in our relations with animals. Armstrong, by contrast, explores numerous novelists' expressions of animal lives, and their use of language to reflect the meanings of human and nonhuman relations in different cultural contexts. A thorough review of the fast-growing literature about human/animal contingency cannot be included here.⁴ In my analysis of how *Foal's Bread* flouts the 'sin' of anthropomorphism, I search for the ways that Mears ascribes agency to horses, how she shows the horses' influences on human lives.

Fiction writing that highlights the conundrums of human-animal relations enables readers to focus attention on the cultural subjectivity of nonhuman animals. Armstrong's numerous fictional illustrations of human and nonhuman animal relationships explore why fiction matters in creating meaning with animals. Drawing on the work of John Simons, Armstrong locates 'the "tracks" left by animals in texts, the ways cultural formations are affected by the materiality of animals, and their relationships with humans' (3). Mears' representations of domesticated horses allow readers to probe whether fictional horses can be ascribed subjectivity or agency. By showing humans treating horses as things, and at the same time portraying their sentience, Mears' novel illustrates many of the problems and paradoxes of an anthropocentric viewpoint when writing stories featuring animals. A zoocritical viewpoint enables the social, cultural and political complexities of how humans consider or disregard the domestic animals in *Foal's Bread* to be unpacked (Parsonson).

Mears writes about the show jumpers, Magpie, Seabreeze and Landy, in one breath, in terms of human ownership and domination. She writes as if we, as humans with consciousness

and understanding of mortality, are authorised to determine the boundaries of animal subjectivity and the boundaries of their lives. For example, when the thirteen-year-old, Lainey rides Landwind in the high jump at the Wirri Show, the horse tackles the enormous obstacle in a winning leap, ‘climbing up and up so that Lainey, aware of the leap connecting her to Landwind and out to something even bigger, just for a moment let go of the reins, and in the manner of her father, won the jumping competition with her arms outstretched’ (279). The ties to an anthropocentric viewpoint appear at first glance to be difficult to displace.

In the next breath though, Mears’ portrayal of horses in *Foal’s Bread* unsettles the ‘insuperable line’ between humans and nonhuman animals by constructing the equines as subject, capable of sentience and their own communication, rather than as a silent, passive ‘other’. At the start of the jumps event, Landwind, the young grey gelding, ‘as if in full possession of the knowledge that it was all up to him’ gives ‘one of his big curvaceous pig roots’ that Lainey rides ‘like it was no more than a merry-go-round horse unexpectedly going up and down’ (275). With this ‘as if’, Mears dilutes the opportunity to re-imagine the connections between humans and animals without assumed dominance, without cruelty and with a search for new ways of communicating with nonhuman animals. Creating fictional animals as subjects, giving them voice and a capacity to act, is one way writers can not only challenge the Cartesian dichotomy between humans and animals, but evoke affective incursions into improving human-nonhuman relationships (Armstrong; Shepard).

III. Writing Horses with Agency

Cultural representations of the horse appear across many millennia, from cave art through to ancient Greek and Roman depictions of warriors’ horses, which typically show the power and terror of horses in warfare. Through each ensuing century, horses were either exalted or exploited in war, transport, agriculture and in human competitions. In Victorian fiction, romantic portrayals of horses maintain the expectation that humans will discipline and dominate them. Gina Dorré argues, in her discussion of horses in Victorian fiction, that ‘the horse is a liminal form that inhabits the margins of texts, important precisely because as an omnipresent

other, it both agitates and consolidates the boundaries of ideological certainty' (163). Dorré also argues that fictional horses remain 'powerfully ambiguous and indeterminate', resisting reduction to a 'chronological and knowable formula' (162). In contrast, Mears' equine characters are deeply knowable and have a determined presence. Horses may at times be unpredictable, with a propensity to shy at shadows, yet the equine characters in *Foal's Bread* are purveyors of a cultural ideology that strains to hear the horses' perspectives.

The horses in *Foal's Bread* are written at one level as the beautiful object, as the silently suffering beasts of the anthropocentric 1940s. Mears' horses represent both stability and change in the human narrative. The Nancarrows' dreams that their show jumping team will bring glory and income provide glimmers of hope in hard times, but often result in pangs of failure. However, at another level Mears articulates horse's subjectivity, giving them a 'voice', a place in the narrative, which communicates as much about them as about the humans with whom they interact. Complex dilemmas, contradictions and tragedies of the intersections of human and nonhuman animals' lives weave through the narrative. Mears reveals the difficulties in the Nancarrow family's relationships with their horses by showing the nonhuman animals in *Foal's Bread* to be capable of considering each other as well as *their* humans – showing that they think, communicate, and exercise affect and agency. I use the possessive pronoun purposefully, as the ownership of horses as domestic and competitive companions, as beasts of burden, and as signs of social success, is a potent anthropocentric thread not often given reciprocation nor explored by reviewers or critics of *Foal's Bread*. Such a viewpoint reveals the potency of horses in fiction to illustrate wider concerns about the ways humans currently relate to animals.

Mears depicts horses not merely as cultural objects, but as affective literary subjects. Mears' horses are shown in ways that moved me to tears, to laughter, to rage. In this sense, the literary subject has agency, the capacity to create affect. By giving my attention to the affects of Mears' fictional horses, I pursue an idea presented by Derek Attridge 'that the impulses and acts that shape our lives as ethical beings – impulses and acts of respect, of love, of trust, of generosity – cannot be adequately represented in the discourse of philosophy, politics, or theology, but are in their natural elements in literature' (*The Singularity of Literature*, xi). The

power of fiction to wrench readers' attention from everyday life and create visceral affects is an important task of fiction writing (Attridge, *The Work of Literature*; Dooley, *J.M. Coetzee and the Power of the Narrative*; Mulhall; Felski). Whether Mears' fictional horses have such capacity remains debatable, as I discuss in the next sections.

Writing horses with a degree of agency to move readers, as well as their riders, toward places of understanding and compassion illustrates not only literature's ethical force, but also infers the ways we can think about the agential capacity of nonhuman animals. When Noah is shoeing Magpie, the piebald mare, and ends up 'kicking her in the guts' for being restless, there are no alcoholic excuses, simply her loss of patience. Noah's 'temper bust, and like red air, now the anger filled everyone up... The thumps and thuds landing on the horse sounded so violent, like all the heads in hell banging together when the fires had gone out' (170). It is Lainey who reads the signs of her mother's anger on the dogs, the birds and even the leaves scuttling on the wind over One Tree Hill. Magpie breaks the hobbles and gallops free, jumping a high fence, 'taking it at the highest point when there was no need', an indication of the agency ascribed to this mare (171). Jane Bennett's concept of 'distributive agency' places attention on 'vital assemblages' of human and nonhuman interactions. Reading Magpie's active response to Noah's flogging reminds me that not only are domesticated horses sentient, but that they participate in 'heterogeneous assemblages', to use Bennett's term, able to determine aspects of their lives amidst a plethora of 'throbbing confederations' of energy and matter (23-24). By taking the attention momentarily away from human agency and subjectivity, the lives of Mears' horses, creak open a doorway to understanding contingency between human and nonhuman animals.

Writers have the capacity, perhaps even the responsibility, to describe the 'animality' of their subjects with impunity. Les Murray's poem, 'The Cows on Killing Day,' exemplifies an expression of animal being where 'all me' is both an individual cow and the herd combined, all reacting to an old cow's death by the man's 'stick'/gun. One line in the poem, 'All me make the roar' transports readers into the grief of cows (Falconer). Their/our response to the death of one of the herd illustrates the shared agency possible through certain forms of literary expression.⁵ The Nancarrow's paddocks on One Tree Hill are mostly bare, the stock thin from

lack of grass. Mears invites readers to feel for the hungry horses as much as for the humans struggling to feed them. Through Mears' perspicacious narrative voice, we get to know and become affected by Landwind and Magpie, Seabreeze and Gurlie's hunger.

Animal communications with humans may indicate their agency. Horses' gestures and characteristic actions are described by Mears in ways that evoke their subjectivity. When Lainey chats to the piebald mare, Magpie, while riding her homeward bareback after the mare had jumped the fence to avoid Noah's flogging, 'The horse's ears flicked back and forth then straight ahead Here was a horse she could really talk to about anything' (175). Mears suggests Magpie was at least listening to Lainey's contented chatter. She depicts a relaxed horse, who despite Noah's violence, is willing to carry the child, Lainey, safely homeward.

Placing the horse as subject rather than object also enables equine characters to display their 'horseness', their own agency. Laurens Van der Post's memoir, *About Blady* (1991), beautifully crafts his connection to his friend's horse, Blady. He visits her in her stall after she wins a jumping competition. Van der Post comes to see the qualities of 'being' in Blady, describing the essence of the mare as a 'waiting for readiness' (248). He observes her capacity to act, to wait without external constraint, to wait for an internal place of illumination (249). In this intimate encounter, the horse 'spoke' to Van der Post, illuminating his understanding of her 'horseness', expanding his aspirations to be a better human being. Similarly, Mears shows her human protagonists observing the 'being' of Magpie, Rainbird, Seabreeze or Landwind, by conveying the mightiness of their bodies, and the subtlety of their nature. She utilises imagery-filled descriptions of their eyes, their glossy coats and their flared nostrils. She describes Magpie's character: 'From the very first the horse had needed to be boss... she'd hunted every other horse away from the feed buckets... pinned back her ears and squealed, striking old Breeze such a blow with her front hoof that the scar was even still a black line on his shoulder (336-7). Magpie communicates with both Noah and her equine companions with characteristic force. Mears uses her extensive understanding of horses to enable readers to come to understand them as beings, perhaps to love them.

Horses carry many of the aspirations of the Nancarrow family, acting as a source of social status and emotional comfort, as well as a vent for the family's frustrations and competitive aspirations. The Nancarrow's place in the community is cemented by their success or failure in show jumping, specifically high jump competitions. Show jumping is a powerful conduit to illustrate the degree of communication and trust possible between humans and horses. Family relationships are also deeply influenced by their activities on horses. Noah and Roley's meeting, courtship and marriage occurred either on horseback or was inextricably linked with the equine characters. Roley's gift of the foal's bread, the heart-shaped piece of tissue from the mouth of the newborn Landwind, links their love to the potency of the horse's life. Mears reveals human characters by their interactions with horses, and by their similarities to the characteristics of horses.

Her human protagonists would be less known without readers seeing their relationships with horses, their care and cruelty to horses. As an example, a scene at the Port Lake Show where Noah's drunken father, Cecil Childs, belts the unsuccessful high jumper, Rainbird, with a pitch fork till he 'had wounded the horse. The fork blades had gone into the rump. Also nearside, a shameful sight, all its ribs running bright with blood' (38). Assumptions that animals don't feel pain may have been dispelled as philosophers argue for the moral consideration of animals (Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death*; Fudge; Calarco). Gripping fiction, however, brings to life our knowledge that animals suffer pain. Through Mears' portrayal of Cecil's moral decrepitude in flogging Rainbird for knocking a rail in the competition, we know Rainbird's pain. We also know Cecil's human bankruptcy.

Mears' representations of her human characters behaving at times 'like animals' illustrates contradictory attitudes to animals, which may be seen as collusion with the Cartesian dualistic view of humans as separate to animals. The idea that it is acceptable to treat animals cruelly, but not to treat people as if they were animals emphasises the species boundary. Paradoxically, Mears' human characters are treated at times as badly as the nonhuman animals. Mears twists anthropomorphism to paint paradoxical pictures of the relationships between the animals and the humans in this book. Humans treat each other, and themselves as they do their

animals. George is tied up like a dog, or a horse, to keep him from trouble; Roley beats his own legs with a stick, in anguish at their diminishing capacity; Noah castrates Uncle Owen, and flings the testicles ‘with a growl’, in retribution for Uncle Owen’s sexual advances towards Lainey, her fourteen-year-old daughter. Remaining true to the time and setting of her story, Mears conspires to keep animals at an arm’s distance, as a different species. At the same time, she shows the similarities between human and nonhuman animals, our sentience, our meanness, our courage, our attempts to express emotions, clumsy and inaccurate as these efforts may be. The agency of horses is more easily understood when their ‘horseness’, their qualities as sentient beings, is shown (Shepard). If readers understand horses from the potency of her descriptions, Mears’ work makes a contribution to enhancing human-animal relations, despite her making meanings from a prevailing anthropocentric positioning.

IV. Figurative Meanings of Horses — Prevailing Anthropocentrism

The human capacity to impose figurative or metaphoric meaning onto animals for our own benefit is exemplified in this novel. Mears illustrates the enduring capacity of horses to provide similes for the turbulence, complexity and abuse of power in human relationships. Horses stand up to this task well as they in many ways epitomise distinctive human attributes. For example, when Noah was told of Lainey’s success in the high jump at Wirri Show, which Noah had missed due to a drinking binge, her ‘jealousy was leaping like a horse over a jump lit with kero’ (286). Len Cousins thought she had ‘taken on the look of a scrub mare about to open its mouth and, with a screaming neigh, seize you up in its old yellow teeth’ (287). Soon afterwards Noah’s jealousy is described as ‘like a front hoof crack grown so steep and dark where was its wondering ever going to stop?’ (289). Mears picks the critical parts of a horse’s anatomy to graphically plot the meanness, the creeping debilitation, the out-of-control insipience of Noah’s jealousy. Five months later, still suffering the grief and ignominy of repeated sessions on the bottle, a chance of reconciliation between Noah and Lainey slips sadly away in the kitchen: ‘Then Noah was just like a lone horse, looking across the land to where the other horses were together in a paddock; as if God had cut her away from the herd’ (294). Describing these

features of horses may figuratively deepen understandings of the human characters in *Foal's Bread*, but they don't necessarily disrupt Mears' anthropocentric positioning.

In another example, when Uncle Owen is cajoling Lainey, Noah's fourteen-year-old daughter, towards sexual activity down at the creek side, Mears writes, 'Uncle Owen looked like he was walking on eggshells. Like a horse about to go navicular.'⁶ The tentative creeping of Uncle Owen is captured in this image of a lame horse, just before Noah snaps at him with her stockwhip to protect her daughter. These representations of humans' moods and characteristics as like horses illustrate Mears' capacity to bridge our animal connections.

Mears denotes the pigs knowingly eyeing Noah's labour in the opening scenes. Smell and sounds invoke their porcine presence. Farmyard dogs and cats are also sketched sensitively. Beyond the main equine character, Magpie, perhaps more specific articulation of the horses' characters, giving them more to 'say', more to do, than remaining the subservient recipients of human foibles, would have unsettled Mears' anthropocentric positioning further. Analogies, metaphors and similes illuminate the interactions between horses and the human protagonists, but on their own don't necessarily conjure aspirational, ethical relationships. Mears fictional portrayals of horses demonstrate her writing skills but do not unsettle the dominance of her anthropocentric positioning. How Mears handles the death of Magpie enables another way to look at the questions of human relationships with animals.

V. The Death of Magpie

The death of an animal in reality, and as often depicted in fiction, is what I call a site of disregard. I use this term to encapsulate the complacency of humans towards the deaths of animals. The rotting remains of roadkill, the use of animals in scientific experiments and cosmetics production, killing animals cruelly in factories and abattoirs are among the litany of sites of disregard.⁷ Mears' depictions of animal deaths at the hands of humans in *Foal's Bread* illustrate at one level the view that animals are indeed passive objects. Animal deaths are described as matter-of-fact events in *Foal's Bread*. Minna, Roley's mother, has a reputation for

drowning kittens. As the effects of drought hit the district, Roley euthanizes his old mare, Gurlie, with a gun, ‘the exact right shot just above the level of the eyes, ... before she got any more wasted away’ (233). Killing domestic animals here is based on humans’ inability to feed them, or care for them.

I am wary of inconsistency in endorsing emotional sentimentality in relation to cruelty to an individual, named animal, while ignoring our overall disregard and abuse of animals, particularly those we eat (2004). Disregarding the animal as an individual agent in life and in death diminishes the ethics in our relationships with animals (Freeman, Leane and Watt). An animal’s death is rarely seen to demonstrate their subjectivity or their connection, as beings, to human beings.

The death of the horse Magpie, the ‘itchy piebald’, in *Foal’s Bread* is both a potent site of disregard and a way of showing the connections between Noah and Magpie. The mare is asked by Noah to leap, almost surely to her death, over the flood-damaged bridge from Flaggy Creek. Magpie’s jump is the vehicle for Noah’s suicidal death, linking them inextricably in death.

The death of a horse at human hand is not unusual. By having the death of the human protagonist coincide with the death of her horse, Mears constructs both these deaths as tragic. Yet at the same time, Magpie remains another horse killed at human bidding. Magpie’s death becomes another site of disregard, fulfilling human emotional need at the cost of the animal. Using horses to vent human emotional needs is not a new pattern. Classically *Black Beauty*, written in 1877 by Anna Sewell, is a story told from the horse’s perspective, showing the heartless disregard of humans that led to his friend Ginger’s death. Sewell’s descriptions of horses’ feelings and communications has been called anthropomorphic, but it also provides an example of increasing understanding of animal sentience and played a role in critiquing and outlawing the use of the bearing rein on carriage horses. It is not new territory for Mears to similarly enable readers to empathise with animals. High jumping was banned in Australia in the early 1960s, well before Mears’ novel, but jumps-racing remains a ‘sport’ with higher mortality rates than the horse racing industry in general. We have much to learn to improve our relationships with horses.

The suicidal scene in *Foal's Bread* illustrates, without sentimentality, Mears' capacity to create a site of disregard, yet one where horse and rider are intertwined. In this scene Mears wrestles with the dilemma for novelists faced with the legacy of creating 'interspecies sympathies' and at the same time maintaining a modernist 'distaste for sentimentalism' (Armstrong 220). Magpie has been portrayed as a character we know and admire, yet in the end, she is an object, merely conveyance for the protagonist, Noah's death. Again, I tread cautiously because evoking an overly sentimental response to death of an individual animal may foreclose acknowledgment of the animal's subjectivity (Fudge; Huggan and Tiffin). As Delia Falconer explains, 'The more we sentimentalise, the more we brutalise: we either try to force them to be like us, or see them as so unlike us as to be aliens, undeserving of any rights at all'. If we weep too much for an individual, the animal's experience, and I argue its potential for subjectivity, is lost.

We would hope to see that the animal's death matters. Mears straddles two positions. The remaining Nancarrows appear to disregard Magpie's death, leaving her unburied. At the same time, because the reader knows Magpie so well from previous discussions of her face, her character, her moods, we are shocked at the horse's demise. Magpie has been given a sliver of agency, yet is ignored in death. We know Magpie from such descriptions as; 'Although the mare had the Queensland itch so bad it had gone and rubbed half its mane out, the forelock was thick and long enough to give the appearance of a half-shy, half-wild girl, peeping out' (168). The mare is still referred to as 'it'. When Noah is contemplating jumping the Flaggy Creek bridge she knows 'the mare was mad enough to do it for her (337). Mears suggests in one breath that Magpie remains unaware of the risk of her own death, in the next that she is 'mad enough' to relinquish not only her vestige of agency, but her own life in submission to Noah. Magpie is revealed and betrayed in the same gesture.

We find out in the Coda that Magpie was left to rot near the bridge, sending wafts of death over the household on One Tree Hill for weeks: 'blowing into the Main House kitchen, straightening George's curls. Upsetting all of them in their own different ways. The cows bellowing more. A sow eating all its babies' (347). There is no explanation, no blame placed on

the 'mad' mare; it appears as just the Nancarrow way of handling grief. Human deaths provide significant markers throughout the plot, from the ever-present death of 'Little Mister' in the opening scene, to Roley's slow demise, to Uncle Owen's death by bleeding from castration. Little Mister was floated away in the creek, but we can safely assume that the other humans were buried.

It is consistent with the overall tone and perspective of the novel that the remaining Nancarrow family members leave Magpie to her inglorious end, unburied and rotting in the creek. It epitomises the tragedy of human oversight, their disregard for animal death, an animal they own, an animal implicated in the death of Noah, their daughter, mother, neighbour. While Magpie leaps to her own death, it is at Noah's wishes. We may propose basic universal rights for animals, arguing that as conscious or sentient beings they should be viewed as the subjects of justice (Turner and D'Silva). Does this mean burial? Domestication of animals brings many nuanced responsibilities (Parsonson).

Paradoxically this 'disregard' in not burying Magpie, highlights the subjectivity the horse has been given in the novel and gives potency to Magpie's death. One part of me wished that Mears had described Magpie's 'beingness' by exposing more of the mare as she cantered towards the bridge. Yet the tragedy of the horse's death, alongside Noah, speaks more loudly through being left as a decomposing corpse. Perhaps I need not be affronted by Magpie's lack of a burial, as an example of 'disregard' of an animal, because in her 'natural' place, in the wild, horses are not buried (Burden).

Mears engages in the modernist struggle with death, not attempting to avoid its harsh reality, but showing her human protagonists' conflicts with ideas of an afterlife. Noah and Roley reject the church, yet God is often called upon in times of hardship. As Noah prepares for her suicidal leap, God is attributed for placing the bridge so well, so inviting to jump. Then, 'although, Noah hadn't been in the church since Roley's funeral, now the way the light was landing on the piebald's neck made her believe that He was on her side at last' (337). Magpie is associated with Noah's God, and given the capacity to link life and death.⁸

Mears has created an animal character we know and understand. At the same time, she maintains authenticity to the period by having her human characters treating Magpie with contradictory disregard. Magpie is both object and subject in relation to Noah's death wish. The anthropocentric conundrums continue. I grieve for Magpie's demise and lack of a burial. Magpie's incredible death leap and ignominious abandonment reveals Mears' capacity to straddle such conundrums.

Writing of fictional animals from a zoocritical viewpoint entails remaining critical of anthropocentrism, yet true to contradictions of life. The paradox of writing harsh animal deaths appears unavoidable. The task of writers is to span the paradox, attempting to maintain the subjectivity of the animal, and to describe the death of another being, within the conundrums of natural life cycles. Portraying the realities of human disregard for animal deaths is one part of 'writing' the wrongs. Ecologically, death is the ultimate link in the life cycle. How literature approaches the death of humans and nonhuman animals provides common ground, another place in the 'natural' order that we share (Mulhall). 'Nature' is often harsh; death is eventually inevitable, and at human hands it is rarely dignified.

VI. Conclusion

The Coda portrays Lainey's return to One Tree Hill as a grandmother, assuring the reader of her resilience and survival. She rides a hired pony to visit old family haunts, reflecting on her life. She shares a biscuit with the horse. We are left with the endearing image of Lainey gathering the reins and repeating what she always did: 'put their ponies into a gallop and fly for home' (352). The magpies are swooping and calling. Lainey is, as always, closely conscious of the natural world. The horse remains her vehicle to that world.

I have suggested here that Mears succeeds in representing horses as cultural subjects, with both the capacity for agency and the ability to generate affect. In places, perhaps she does not go quite far enough as to evoke the full beingness of the horses of One Tree Hill. The anthropocentric viewpoint is held, trembling, until the end. The potency of literature's ethical

capacity to highlight human-animal enmeshment is partially evident in this novel. The question as to whether ‘the horse’ in *Foal’s Bread*, illustrates a redemptive place, a pivotal link exemplifying compassionate human relationships with nonhuman animals, remains in tantalizing abeyance. The animal deaths in *Foal’s Bread* remain ‘sites of disregard’, yet at the same time they focus our attention on human responsibilities to animals.

Horses help us know who we are: mortal, sentient, cruel and empathetic all at the same time. Animals, in many ways, make us human. Gillian Mears has placed horses in relationship to human characters on and around One Tree Hill in ways that illuminate human and equine frailty and strength, and our shared mortality.

An anthropocentric view of horses is partially unsettled in this novel by the subjectivity ascribed to the equine characters. Mears enables readers to see relationships between horses and humans and illuminates a wider potential for ethical relationships between them. Through her close knowledge of horses, Mears’ capacity to imagine their lives allows readers to begin to imagine horseness. In the process our human exceptionalism is challenged, so that a compassionate relationship becomes more possible.

Notes

¹ Winner, 2012 Prime Minister's Literary Award for Fiction; 2012 The Age Book of the Year Award Fiction; 2012 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Fiction; 2012 Colin Roderick Award. Also shortlisted for National Book Award 2012, and eight other awards, including the Miles Franklin Literary Award 2012.

² I note the conundrums of the term 'nature', as discussed by Kate Soper (1995) where the intersections with culture and politics are blurred. Likewise, Timothy Morton (2007) invokes us to 'let go of the idea of Nature, the one thing that maintains an aesthetic distance between us and them, us and it, us and "over there"' (204). I use the term 'natural' here to invoke the more-than-human world, places on the margins of anthropocentric positionings.

³ For example, works by Jacques Derrida (2002), Peter Singer (1994, 2002), Kate Soper (1995), J.M. Coetzee (1999), Val Plumwood (1993, 2007, 2009), Erika Cudworth (2011), Erica Fudge (2004), Deborah B. Rose (2011), Philip Armstrong (2008) and Matthew Calarco (2008) to mention a few.

⁴ Some fiction examples include, Karen Joy Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* (2013); J.M Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (1999); Charlotte Wood's *Animal People* (2011). Non-Fiction texts include, to mention a few, Derrida's essay, 'The Animal that Therefore I Am.' (2002), Donna Haraway's seminal text *When Species Meet* (2008), Cudworth's *Social Lives with Other Animals. Tales of Sex, Death and Love* (2011), Freeman, Leanne and Watt's collection of essays *Considering Animals: Contemporary Studies in Human and Animal Relations* (2011). Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) add significantly to debates of animal rights in *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights*.

⁵ Delia Falconer, in her essay 'All Me Make the Roar: On Animals in Australian Writing' (2015) uses Murray's poem to illustrate the capacity of writers to make compassionate representations of animals.

⁶ The navicular bone is a small bone, just behind the coffin bone, in the horse's lower front leg, near the hoof. A horse with navicular disease has painful heels of the hoof and tends to tiptoe and points their hoof forward for relief.

⁷ See Anna Krien's *Quarterly Essay*, no. 45, 2012, 'Us and Them: The Importance of Animals' for discussion of the harsh things humans do to animals – sites of disregard.

⁸ Linda Kohanov's books *Tao of Equus: A Woman's Journey to Healing and Transformation through the Way of the Horse* (2001) and *The Power of the Herd* (2015) are among several texts that explore the mystical nature of the human-horse bond.

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