



Fear, Voice, and the Environment in Sonya Hartnett's *Forest* and *The Midnight Zoo*

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Abstract

Subtle is not a word that is normally associated with Sonya Hartnett's style. Rather, she is known for her stark, bold approach. However, when it comes to the Australian environment, Hartnett is indeed subtle in her approach. Hartnett has set in play a new, almost posthumanist style of writing about the nonhuman. The Australian landscape and environment has always figured prominently in Australian literature for both adults and children but Hartnett has taken this writing in a totally different direction. This article looks at two of Hartnett's novels, *Forest* and *The Midnight Zoo*, and examines how Hartnett offers new and exciting avenues of thought regarding the place of humans in that environment.

The Australian environment has always figured prominently in Australian literature for both adults and children. In much of this writing the environment is far more than a setting or backdrop against which the plot takes place. In many works it has become a menacing character and Marcus Clarke's 'weird melancholy' (cited in Birns 2005, p. 131) has become almost an embedded metaphor in descriptions of the environment within Australia. Nicholas Birns explains that 'weird melancholy' is about a 'melancholy of displacement and a sense of not belonging in the environment' (2005, p.131). Peter Pierce (1999) writes of this fear in connection with children in *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety* and describes the fear that once you enter Australia's unbounded landscape you may never return—no matter how innocent you may be: 'the notion is shocking: that Australia is the place where the innocent young are especially in jeopardy' (p.xi). Pierce, like Birns suggests this early fear formed the foundation of Australians' behaviour towards the environment and this fear continues to resonate in much Australian writing. Fear of the Australian environment is magnified further if one considers Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's point that: 'throughout western intellectual history, civilisation has consistently been constructed by or against the wild, savage and animalistic, and has consequently been haunted or "dogged" by it' (2009, p.134). The environment and all the nonhuman creatures that inhabit it are set up as being in opposition to the human. However, this is largely a non-Indigenous concern as it is the settler communities that have struggled with feelings of not belonging, despite their (often belated) celebration of their environment, and desire to conserve it and the animals that reside within it. In order for humans to

gain some sense of control, this sense of celebration or protective feeling towards the nonhuman is always constructed through a human-centred lens. Nonhumans and their environment become devices for humans to use and it is humans who decide what is worthy of protection. The question then arises as to whether or not it is possible to write about the environment and the nonhuman in a way that shifts these divisive binaries, human versus nonhuman. One writer who begins this dismantling of binaries is Sonya Hartnett.

Sonya Hartnett is well-known as an Australian author who questions and dismantles many social barriers and boundaries and this is also the case in relation to her writing about the environment. Hartnett's novels reject the binary structure evident in many other works that focus on the environment. Instead, I suggest, Hartnett's work manages to raise environmental concerns in a way that gives her young adult readers choices and alternatives to consider. Hartnett is able to achieve this effect through her use of a number of narrative strategies: point of view, focalisation and narratorial voice. The combination of all of these strategies attempts to position her young adult readers to view the environment from a non-human perspective. She still uses fear to drive the plot and narrative, but she uses this sense of fear to motivate her readers to drive change. Through her stories, her readers may begin to see that they can change their perception of the environment and the nonhuman. This article will concentrate on two of Hartnett's novels, *The Midnight Zoo* and *Forest*, to demonstrate how these texts use non-human perspectives.

The Midnight Zoo is the story of two young brothers and their baby sister, journeying across an unnamed country in search of a safe place to call home. Through acts of war, their entire family was murdered in front of their eyes and their home was destroyed. Along the way the children meet animals who have been imprisoned in a now neglected and forgotten zoo. The story revolves around the relationships that develop between the children and the animals. *Forest* is also a story of loss and a search for home, however, the protagonists in this story are all animals. A group of cats has been abandoned at the edge of a forest, tossed out from a moving car and left unwanted by the side of the road. The story tells of their desperate search to return to the safety of their (human-made) home. However, along the way they learn that the safety they imagine may not exist.

Parallels can be drawn between Hartnett's work and Australian Gothic fiction, which, in many ways, also follows the haunting landscapes and weird melancholy that Marcus Clarke describes. Gary Turcotte (1988) suggests that in Australian Gothic fiction, the characters are usually 'trapped in a hostile environment, or pursued by an unspecified or unidentified danger (p.10). This sense of danger is evident in many of Hartnett's works. *Sleeping Dogs*, for example, has the dark foreboding that Turcotte suggest is in much Australian Gothic fiction. *Sleeping Dogs* begins with the slaughter of a sheep in a country environment filled with unknown shadows and past histories: 'Applegrit watches him close the door and inside the shed it becomes suddenly dark; Edward crouches unmoving by the body of the sheep until his eyes adjust and the only sound comes from the blood running into the bucket, for the dead sheep has her head rested on the rim as if using it for a pillow' (Hartnett 1995, p.4). There are certainly dark undertones and the sheep is definitely used as a symbol for the danger that the Willow children will face. In much Australian Gothic literature there

is the sense that the environment is working against the human and the story is told from a very (threatened) human perspective. Everything that is not human is seen as 'other'. However, Hartnett's work is not as simplistic as these binaries may suggest. In the two novels chosen for discussion it is not the environment that is sinister and haunting, instead the roles are reversed. It is the environment and the nonhumans that are constantly being haunted by the humans; or more precisely by the humans' inability to hear other (non-human) surrounding voices. Hartnett suggests that there may be more to the world than a human-centred viewpoint and while the human voice remains the dominant voice in much environmental fiction, it may be possible to shift the parameters of that dominance. John Stephens (2006) finds that human subjectivity is still central in much environmental writing but it is possible to construct this as 'intersubjectivity with an environment that includes flora and fauna as well as other humans' (p.44).

Much contemporary literature on the environment that is written for children either has a lesson for children to learn or offers a practical, 'how-to' approach. These how-to books play an important role in teaching children environmental skills or knowledge, raising environmental awareness, and giving children a sense of agency. Tim Winton's (1997) *Blueback: A Fable for all Ages*, for example, while not a straight-forward, 'how-to' book, highlights ecological responsibility, and at the same time shows how each of the child protagonists can make a difference: 'The three of them mended nets and bottled fruit and smoked fish and told long, ludicrous stories as they worked. Abel and Stella supervised the bay and kept an eye on the summer visitors. They wrote papers on the breeding habits of the abalone' (Winton, 1997, p.139). Despite the good environmental intentions of the text, it still has a human-centric focus. Winton successfully creates a sense of urgency and shows why the nonhuman world is important to the human world. Winton also discusses the idea that, perhaps, animals can think. At the very beginning of *Blueback*, Winton quotes Robinson Jeffers' *Carmel Point*: 'As for us:/ We must unhumanise our views a little,/ and become confident/ As the rock and ocean that we were made from'. Winton goes some way to achieving this goal by offering a less human-centric perspective. Sonya Hartnett's work can be seen in the same vein as Winton's, but she pushes the boundaries further. By giving the nonhuman a consciousness, Hartnett positions her readers to renegotiate or reconsider the nonhuman/human binary. Anthropocentric texts such as Winton's have the capacity to raise environmental awareness and give readers a sense of agency. However Hartnett's texts may enable young readers to begin to question whether the structures of language they have inherited from adults are the only structures that could work.

Australian ecofeminist, Val Plumwood (2008), presents 'an ethic of nature' in her writing about the environment. She contends that there is an underlying attitude in Western thought that it is only human beings that matter—and if humans choose to conserve nature, rather than exploit it, this choice is driven by the utility it may have for future human generations. The division between humanity and nature remains even when humans seek to look after the environment: 'the philosophical and theoretical frameworks used by humanism to try and make good on those commitments reproduce the very kind of normative subjectivity, a specifically human concept, that grounds discrimination against nonhuman animals . . . in the first place' (Wolfe 2009, p.xvii). This is the type of environmentalism that can be seen in Tim Winton's work; humans are still thought to be essentially different than the

nonhumans—and this difference is interpreted as human superiority. Kate Soper (cited in Coupe 2000, p.125), an eco-philosopher, finds that discussions about the environment are grouped around three dominant concepts: the first concept is metaphysical, that nature is used for humans to compare themselves to all other beings as a means to interpret what it means to be human. This philosophical approach constructs the world into binaries—all things are categorised as either human or nonhuman. The second concept focuses on the structures and processes of nature, and their cause and effect on humans. Soper labels this second concept, the Realist understanding of nature: humans are aware that they work within the confines of the laws of Nature. The third concept focuses on the features of nature as observed by humans. She calls this the lay or surface approach to nature, which concentrates on the immediate experience of nature. Soper suggest that much writing on nature comes from the lay approach, but is grounded in the metaphysical. Soper uses the term ‘Nature’ rather than ‘environment’ to highlight the binaries evident in human thought. She finds that Nature automatically gives connotations of primitive, and as being separate from the human. Although, she stresses that humans have always had a direct relationship with, and impact on Nature. Like Soper, Hartnett’s texts invite her readers to recognise this relationship between humans and nature and to question its underlying dynamics of power.

Sonya Hartnett writes with a green consciousness, almost a posthumanist approach, that decentres the human’s perspective as the most important or only perspective. It is not that Hartnett has set out to write an environmental novel or that she is an ecocritic, but rather that environmental concerns are embedded within her writing. She is writing with Plumwood’s (2008) notion of ‘an ethic of nature’, or at least she highlights that there are other consciousnesses at work. In describing Hartnett’s writing as posthumanist, I am using it in the sense that Cary Wolfe (2009) puts forward in *What is Posthumanism?* Wolfe focuses not so much on the mechanical, or the perfecting of human traits, but rather on the idea of decentring the human: ‘posthumanism as engaging directly the problem of anthropocentrism and speciesism and how practices of thinking and reading must change in light of their critique’ (p.xix). Hartnett has moved beyond traditional Gothic elements into a new and different style of writing, a writing that does not privilege the human above all other species. Her writing does not set up binaries where each side is working against the other. Instead, she creates a space where different voices can be heard, including nonhuman voices. Thus, *voice* is one of the narrative strategies that Hartnett uses very effectively in these two novels. In each of these novels the nonhuman voice is strong and autonomous allowing readers to gain a very different point of view. In *Forest*, the total absence of human voice makes many of the non-humans’ actions appear irrational, because human interpretation is not provided. In *Midnight Zoo* there are very few adults, although the results of the adults’ actions are being felt by the children and animals. However, as in *Forest*, the absence of adult human voice does not allow these actions to be explained as rational and necessary. The difficulty of stepping outside of one’s own subjectivity means that it is also difficult to create a voice that is nonhuman-centric. Hartnett recognises this difficulty and instead of creating a ‘new’ language she creates a new space for that language, a new direction from where the voice is emerging. Instead of humans seeing themselves as the only species with a voice, Hartnett offers the possibility that humans just need to learn to listen to these

other voices; as Timothy Clark says ‘why should the peculiarities of human consciousness be the narrow standard by which other creatures be judged?’ (Clarke 2010, p.54).

Voicing the Unvoiced

In the 2010 Redmond Barry Lecture, Hartnett explains the difficulty with capturing voice when she was writing *Forest*: ‘I was writing a story about talking cats, something I knew would be received with scepticism’. Hartnett is identifying the reluctance to accept the existence of other consciousnesses and other voices. Although talking animals are also in *The Midnight Zoo*, the animals are speaking in a human language and it could be argued that Hartnett still has a human-centric focus, but this aids in making readers realise the power that is given to human users, or as Derrida asks ‘what is this non-power at the heart of power?’ (quoted in Wolfe 2009, p.24). In *The Midnight Zoo* language is seen as power, and adult human language as the most powerful. This is made explicit when the boar in Hartnett’s story says:

Nothing is as important as what humans want is it? Nothing is as important as what humans do. . . Humans are all exactly the same. Each of you lives in a fever of selfishness and destruction. You persecute the creatures that you fear, yet the species you should fear most is your own

(p.154)

By having the animals speak with human language, Hartnett emphasises this imbalance of power, for if the animals were speaking in their own ‘animal’ language they would not be heard or understood by the humans. Instead, Hartnett has presented the viewpoints of the animals in such a way as to shift the focus from the human to the suffering of other species and to the idea that there are other imaginings in the world that do not spring only from human imagination. The idea that nonhumans can have a language, or more specifically can speak a language, has been a point of much contention; but as Jeremy Bentham says ‘the question shouldn’t be “can they talk? Or can they reason? But can they suffer?”’ (quoted in Wolfe, p.xxvii). There is no doubt, within both these novels, that the animals suffer and remember their suffering. In *The Midnight Zoo* the readers learn of the memories that each animal carries with them:

She stood where she is standing now and watched them pushed onto a truck and driven away, she heard them calling until the road unrolled far enough to take even their voices from her. And now she’s a lioness locked in a zoo, and at night she looks at the stars and wonders if the tribe has, in fact, forsaken her, though all her life she’s been true.

(p.153)

As in many of her works, Hartnett manages to create a sense of unease and foreboding. I suggest that in *The Midnight Zoo* and *Forest* the uneasiness, in part, stems from the realisation that the *fear* created throughout each novel has changed place with the idea of safety and the assumed safe-havens have turned out to be the real places of terror. At the end of each of these novels there is a shift in focus. There is certainly fear in these two works but the fear stems from human action and not from any evil that resides hidden deep within the environment itself. This is not to say that the

environment is on the side of the characters or is protecting them, but more that it is not bound up with human ethical concerns. Hartnett has, in many ways, moved away from the notion of a vengeful landscape seen only through a human lens, to offering an alternative lens. In both of these novels, what should be feared is closer to home than expected—it is, in fact, the human home. This is in contrast to other views of homeliness or safety. In his famous essay ‘The Uncanny’ Sigmund Freud highlights that one of the uses of the word ‘heimlich’ (tran. homely) is to describe tame animals as opposed to wild animals: ‘of animals: tame, companionable to man’ (quoted in Leitch 2010, p.826). Untamed animals are seen as ‘unheimlich’ or unhomely. The homely is associated with the human and the unhomely with the nonhuman; there is no indication that the nonhumans may feel a sense of displacement in the human home. In her article ‘Ghostly Children: The Spectre of Melancholy in Sonya Hartnett’s *The Ghost Child*’ Michelle Preston (2009) suggests that ‘from a Freudian perspective, *The Ghost Child*, constructs desire as loss/lack that unconsciously and unknowingly informs the development of individuated identity’ (p.41). *Forest* and *The Midnight Zoo* extend this to make readers question not just the construction of individual identity but the lens through which other identities are continually viewed. In *The Midnight Zoo*, the loss that the children and the animals experience is shared and in their shared desire to reach a safe home, they begin to realise that this desire is one that crosses species. A sense of home is just as important to the animals as it is to the children.

Throughout the early sections of the focus texts there is the presumption that if the young children in *The Midnight Zoo*, and the dumped cats in *Forest*, can just reach an ordered structured and urban setting, then they will be safe. However, order is only an illusion of safety in both books and it is the ordered, built world where the ‘true’ fear actually resides. In *Forest* the journey ends for Kian (the cat) when he is fatally wounded by a gunshot. He has travelled so far to reach the safety of the urban zone and escape the wilderness of the forest only to be killed by a man out shooting. The fear set up through the novel is of the dark, dangerous forest and of the unknown of what lies ahead deep in the forest: ‘He didn’t know what there was worth fearing in the forest, but it sounded hideous’ (p.14). The city cat does not fit into the natural environment and needs to return to the safety of his home and owner:

Kian had been born and raised a suburban cat, and his life, until this evening, had been lived amid glass and brick and steel. He had known a garden of fruiting plants, lawns crossed by stepping-stones, flowers staked neatly in terracotta pots. A forest was not something he had ever even dreamed of, and though his ancestors might recognise it Kian knew with certainty that a forest was not his home.

(p. 5)

Kian believed his home with the humans is his safety zone. A very striking point is at the end of the novel when readers realise that the real danger was not in the natural environment. Nature may not have noticed or cared about the existence of the cat but it did not set out to harm him. Kian believed that his human family loved him and would welcome him back home. The cat’s understanding of his importance in the human world was very much mistaken.

Kian begins to understand that his perception of the world had been through a human lens when ‘he looked at the sky and at the stern monarchical trees and saw how insignificant he was, how tiny and inconsequential in the workings of the world’ (p.205). Kian had always put so much faith in the human world. He was convinced that he was dumped by mistake and if he could get ‘home’ he would be protected. He realises there is a world beyond the human world but he does not realise until the very last moments that the real danger was the built environment or more precisely the people who built it. There is no reason, no rational cause why the man should raise his gun and shoot at a defenceless cat and yet he does; the cat dies because of an irrational act: ‘The air boomed again, a sound like a land-slide, and Kian, running, fell in the grass’ (p. 202). From the animal perspective, the human world offers no sense. It destroys for no other reason than momentary pleasure. Kian, would have been far safer to stay in the forest and in his last moments he ‘thought of the sun, of water, of earth and air’ (p.202) In his attempt to reach home and safety Kian is shot and killed by men who see him as nothing more than a pest—a wild cat to be destroyed. Perhaps because of this, the other two young kittens return to the forest with an understanding that the forest is their true home. ‘Jem and Cally walked without hesitation, into the shade—it did not occur to them to bask awhile in the weak heat or even glance back the way they had come’ (p.202). Their sense of displacement has shifted its boundary. The human world is now the place they see as unsafe.

In *the Midnight Zoo*, the children’s lives are uprooted because of a human-made war. This story is not set in Australia as such—it is an unnamed place—a place of turmoil. However, even though the story is not set in a named part of Australia, it is still very much an Australian setting. Like much writing about Australia this is a story of dispossession and ‘othering’, and as stated earlier, this sense of displacement is very much part of the feeling of weird melancholy: ‘people jeer at those who are different from themselves—those who look different, or think differently, or live in different ways. They do it because difference is a frightening thing—sometimes, an enviable thing’ (p.136). Two young boys and their baby sister escape a massacre of their community. As the three young children journey, they find a dishevelled zoo filled with un-exotic animals, one of the animals is a kangaroo and another is a boar. The children discover that the animals can talk: ‘You’re talking! Andrej says. “So what?” “Why shouldn’t we? Don’t you think we’ve got anything worthwhile to say?”’ (p.46). The story takes a dramatic turn at this point as there is a shift away from a human-centric view to include the idea that other nonhumans could possibly have a consciousness, not a consciousness allowed to them by humans, but an actual thinking and dreaming consciousness of their own. The idea that animals could imagine is a huge shift in perception. This is not to suggest that Hartnett is the first author to give animal characters agency. As far back as the Aesop’s fables animals have been given agency in the world of texts. However, this agency is often present in fables where the animals’ experiences are read as analogies for human lives. Hartnett does not place her characters into her stories to illuminate human behaviour, rather, these thinking, talking, feeling animals are part of humans’ everyday lives. *The Midnight Zoo* could be read as a bildungsroman (coming of age story) because the young boys gain maturity as the story progresses. As Bradford et al. (2008) note: ‘children’s texts remain constrained by the intrinsic commitment to maturation narratives... This tends to ensure than any environmental literature remains anthropocentric in emphasis’ (p.91). Hartnett goes some way in addressing this

problem by aligning Andrej's point of maturity with the point at which he questions his human-centric focus. He realises that there are alternative consciousnesses.

The Midnight Zoo highlights what can happen when humans are not inclusive. The animals are imprisoned because of human desire and have reached a point where 'none of them, whatever their history, would be able to survive without bars' (p.61). The animals are in cages and unable to escape and, in a sense, so too are the children. Andrej says 'No, I'm not in a cage, but—I don't feel free. If you're free, you should be safe. And I don't feel safe. I always feel... hunted' (p.140). Andrej has no sense of safety and recognises that this feeling of fear is one that the animals have lived with every day—he begins to recognise a strong connection with the animals. His entire world has become one of fear:

Andrej remembered the boy he'd been such a short time ago—a boy who had trusted that the world was strict but fair. Since then he had seen this faith upended and made laughable. In this new world, a kite could betray the children who played in its skimming shadow. A soldier was not an honourable warrior, but one who chose his victims from among the innocents... This wasn't a world that made sense to Andrej: it was a hard wintry shell of a world, bare of compassion.

(p. 156)

One of the most memorable sections of the novel is when Andrej learns that each animal has an empty space waiting for its return; a present absence that is waiting to be filled:

Somewhere out there, there's a gap in the water, a place which is hollow because the seal isn't there. . . Andrej thought about it—the notion that the world was riddled with holes where certain people and animals were meant to be but weren't.

(p.87)

Andrej imagines the life each animal could have if they were freed. They finally gain their freedom but only through imagination: 'Andrej shut his eyes, and thought of all the things Uncle Martin had taught him. . . In the dark, he saw the world revealed before him. In his mind, he turned the keys' (p.175). At the end of the story the animals and the children are rescued by imagined saviours. This ending is striking as it puts into place the idea that the animals have faith and imagination:

They would not find the key: the children and the animals knew it. But they also knew that they had no need to. They had journeyed to the final edge of life, beyond which there were no walls. The iron bars of the zoo fell away, and in their place forests sighed and sand-dunes shifted, rivers flooded and mighty herds ran.

(p.184)

The nonhumans as well as the humans are imagining an afterlife.

There is a scene very similar to this in *Forest*. However, the difference is that Kian, the cat, still placed his belief in the human world—in the belief that there was a gap in the human world, now that he had gone: 'Jem asked "Is that place still real? Maybe it's gone. Maybe it's gone—to nothing, and this place is here instead." "No." Kian looked through the canopy to the scattering of stars. "It's

still there, where it was.” (p.9). However, there was no longer a gap in the human world. Kian had been easily replaced, filled by another human desire: ““Kian,” she said, “why did the man put us in the box? Why did he leave us here? Why did he take off your collar? And, Kian—where is Ellen?”” (p.11). Plumwood (2008) says attention is needed in the examination of home places and the gap between the celebration of a place and the recognition of consciousness of place. Environmental concern needs to be more than just loving and or respecting your own home place, rather what is required is the ability to live in a way that does not degrade other’s home places and the recognition that other species may also have home places. The human who took Kian and the kittens to the forest had no understanding that Kian had a home place. The human thought he could just dump Kian and because Kian was a cat he would feel at home anywhere. Hartnett’s two stories suggest that other species do have a sense of a home place and they may also have dreams and imaginings about these home places.

These two novels allow a decentring of human consciousness and a shift from the idea that all ethical considerations stem from a human focus. Plumwood (2008) suggests that the human nature dualism sees the human as part of a radically separate order of reason, mind and consciousness. The human is different to the nonhuman and the human species remains superior. The nonhuman is lower and non-conscious and non-communicative and it is all these ‘nons’ that set the human up as the superior species. For Plumwood (2008), humans have been reluctant to accept that other beings may have a consciousness, because this admission would demand a serious restructuring of their sense of superiority. Hartnett has moved away from an ecological crisis of reason and beyond human centredness that reduces nonhumans (animals and the environment), to their usefulness to humans. She raises the notion that nonhumans can have a consciousness, they may be communicative, and they do experience suffering not just pain. Hartnett’s two novels emphasise that the animals’ existence should not be dependent on their utility to the human species. Rather, animals have their own agency and their own understanding of home.

One of the strongest points that these two novels highlight is the possibility that nonhumans may imagine. In both these novels Hartnett’s use of point of view of shifting constantly between the human and the nonhuman reinforces and revitalises the interconnectedness between all species. The texts can also be seen as small community-based stories even though they are dealing with huge issues. As John Stephens (2006) suggests, community-based narratives place less unrealistic expectations onto their readers and offer ‘attainable visions’ (p.43). The narratives of these stories may make smaller demands on readers but they are important demands. The stories offer the idea that the readers can make a change by readjusting their focus from one that is human-centric, to one that is more inclusive. While these novels are not practical, how-to books on how to fix or help the environment, they can still be seen as environmental novels in the sense that they may shift the readers’ focus of understanding, and it is this shift in understanding that may result in change. As has been stated, human action and human centric-thinking are the cause much of the fear in these novels. Perhaps then, if humans change their actions as well as their perspective, then the sense of fear may begin to disappear.

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