Raining Cats and Dogs: Animals, the Anthropocene, and Literature's Action

In the present moment of Earth's history, what really matters in literary studies? This question was the springboard for a sabbatical project that concluded my 46-year academic career, which had taken me from Brown University to the University of Hawai'i-Mānoa, and then to Keio University before coming to rest at Meiji University. "Raining Cats and Dogs" marks a return to a road not taken long ago—the life of a zoologist—and a rerouting of that road toward a new academic project—science-based literary criticism of animals in fiction—that will occupy me until, as Paul Kalanithi put it, breath becomes air. Until 2025, what really mattered to me in literary studies was the effect of World War II on Asian/American literature, but I have turned from Asian American studies to Anthropocene studies, from representations of WWII to representations of animals in literary narratives. Henceforth, I intend to live with animals, as both literary critic and private citizen, with as much sincerity, knowledge, responsibility, and joy that I can bring to such a life.

My turn to animals and the Anthropocene as a literary critic was first articulated in a conference presentation in 2024, but that turn had really been ten years in the making. It had begun in 2014 as therapy for workplace burnout as I turned to E.B. White's The Trumpet of the Swan and my sizeable collection of children's picture books featuring animal protagonists, devouring them in order to detoxify and replenish my system, like Eric Carle's very hungry caterpillar munching its way through a nice green leaf. Then, wanting to keep those therapeutic animals around me, I put The Trumpet of the Swan and children's picture books with animal characters into every first- or second-year EFL and literature class I wasthen teaching, resulting in a pedagogy that gradually turned me away from an emphasis on fictional contents toward a concern for nonfiction contexts as I sought to connect fantastical and seemingly simplistic stories with the complicated reality in which my students and I actually lived.

This prioritization of nonfiction contexts led in turn to a second, but now very conscious, turn to animals. Throughout 2024 I was chasing a crow, Corvus macrorhynchos, through the pages of Ruth Ozeki's novel A Tale for the Time Being (2013). Whereas ten years ago I would not have thought it necessary to get information about real crows to assess the meaning of a fictional crow, that's what I did this time around. I began with science-based studies of avian cognition, branched out to other animals, and before long noticed the existence of a burgeoning of animal studies that was directly connected to a burgeoning of publications on the Anthropocene. Whereas I had always read and taught A Tale for the

Time Being as a narrative of Asian/American war memory, my focus shifted as a result of paying attention to the crow, whose meaning is centered elsewhere—not in war memory but in narratives of the Pacific Ocean's ecosystem, North American indigenous mythology, and the intelligence and sociability of biological crows. Because I wanted to fully understand Ozeki's crow as both a literal and literary bird, I turned to animal studies in earnest and presented my first paper on the intersection of literary fiction and animal science at the aforementioned conference. Thus, before the sabbatical, my reading had dealt mostly with particular species of birds or animal cognition in general. Therefore, to expand my knowledge base, the sabbatical reading centered on dogs, pigs, critical theory of interspecies ethics, and holistic frameworks of planetary biology.

The sabbatical took place in two parts during the fall of 2025: from 1 September to 17 October, and from 3 November to 18 December, or roughly 90 days in total. During this time, I read forty-six books and produced reams of notes. Thirty-three of the books are primary texts, all classics in their genre: Ursula Le Guin's high fantasy epic The Earthsea Quartet, consisting of A Wizard of Earthsea (1968), The Tombs of Atuan (1971), The Farthest Shore (1972), and Tehanu: The Last Book of Earthsea (1990); J. R. Ackerley's memoir My Dog Tulip (1956) and an animated film version made in 2010 by Paul and Sandra Fierlinger; E. B. White's essay collection E. B. White on Dogs that spans the years 1929 to 1984, and all twenty-six novels in Walter R. Brooks' "Freddy the Pig" series about an animal community on a farm in New York. Originally published between 1927 and 1958, the Freddy books became fully available again in print in the early 2000s and digitally in 2014. These novels by Le Guin and Brooks, as well as the classic trilogy authored by White—Stuart Little (1945), Charlotte's Web (1952), The Trumpet of the Swan (1970)—are routinely categorized as literature for children or young adults, and while many readers do in fact first encounter these books between the ages of 7 and 17, it's a mistake to assume that adult readers have nothing to gain from reading them for the first time, or the second time. Indeed, one key observation I made is that so-called "children's" or "young adult" literature, from the simplestpicture books for pre-schoolers like Eric Carle's The Very Hungry Caterpillar, to the most complex young adult philosophical fantasy like Le Guin's The Earthsea Quartet, can play a crucial role in forming a society's moral imagination, which undergirds adult responsibility in the face of crises like those collectively referred to as the Anthropocene. The remaining thirteen books that I read on sabbatical are secondary texts about the ethics of human relationships with animals both wild and domesticated, and the social behavior and cognitive abilities of dogs, pigs, and other animals. For lack of space, I list here only the authors: Marc Bekoff, Jennifer Finney Boylan, John Bradshaw, Frans De Waal, Alexandra Horowitz (4 titles), Konrad Lorenz, Sy Montgomery, Elizabeth Marshall

Thomas, Alice Walker, and Cynthia Willett.

The main research result of this sabbatical was a confirmation of the validity of turning to literary narratives of animals as a resource for political action and psychic hope in our time of the Anthropocene, a time of catastrophic degradation of Earth's flora, fauna, land, water, and air. The reading I have done shows an unmistakable interconnectedness between (1) children's literature, young adult literature, and adult literature featuring animal protagonists, (2) critical theory about the ethics of animal lives, and (3) science-based studies of the sensory apparatus, mind, and behavior of wild animals and domesticated animals. The reading I have done elicited extensive notes that henceforth will be developed and organized into a monograph with the tentative title, "Raining Cats and Dogs: Animals, the Anthropocene, and Literature's Action."