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Environmental and Animal Rights Ethics in Children's Realistic Animal Novels of Twentieth-Century North America: A Dissertation

Lori Jo Oswald

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This study examines the rhetoric and ideology of children's realistic animal novels, particularly by tracing the appearance and applying the terminology of environmental and animal rights ethics to these works. The authors' attitudes toward animals are evaluated in three areas: animal consciousness, human and animal relationships, and predators and prey. By evaluating the authors' ideologies, it is clear that there are three separate periods in the genre: the founders, the traditionalists, and the animal rights writers. The earliest writers of realistic animal fiction, or the founders, wrote generally between the 1890s and the 1920s, and include London, Seton, and Roberts. They have been accused of anthropomorphism and have been dismissed as "nature fakers." But a close analysis of their works in light of the results of current studies on animal consciousness, as well as in light of the ideologies of environmental ethics, demonstrates that the accusations are unwarranted. The traditionalists, including Kjelgaard, Rawlings, O'Hara, and Henry, wrote from the 1930s through the 1970s. The traditional novels often promote hunting, land development, and the utilitarian value of animals. They also portray predators as bad animals and question or disavow animal consciousness. The animal rights novels, found in the 1980s to the present, promote animal rights ethics. Authors include Roy, Thomas, and Adler. Generally, the themes of these novels are in direct opposition to the themes promoted by the traditionalists. Both the founders and the animal rights writers are antihunting and antidevelopment. Both sets of writers present a human-animal bond as a better relationship than a master-pet one, and both characterize predators as amoral, rather than immoral. However, there is a surprising paradox within the novels which reverses the surface ideology. The paradox is this: While the rhetorical purpose of the animal rights novels is ostensibly the didactic one of promoting animal rights, the subtexts do not support this theme. The rhetorical effect of the traditional novels is to present a stronger and clearer elucidation of the animal rights philosophy—through plots, characterizations, and descriptions of human-animal relationships—than is found in the animal rights novels.

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