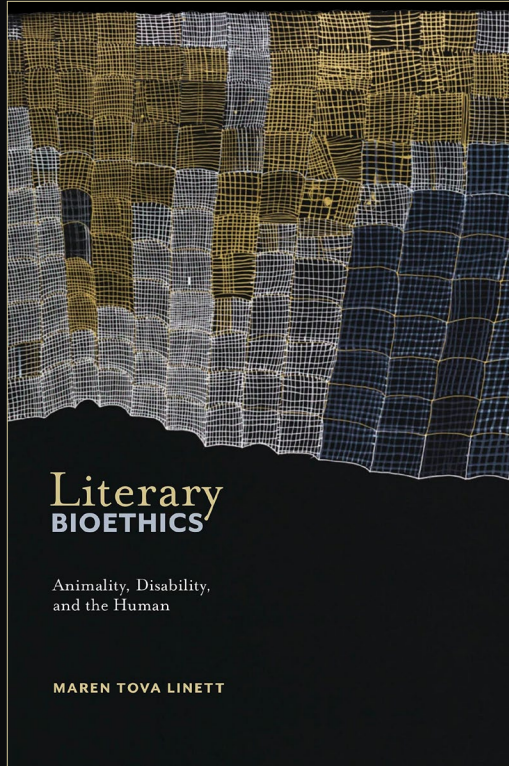


Can Literature Save Lives?

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Review of:

Maren Tova Linett, *Literary Bioethics: Animality, Disability and the Human*. Crip: New Directions in Disability Studies. New York: NYU Press, 2020. 224 pp. \$89.00 (hb), \$28.00 (pb).

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In late 2016 the *Fiction and Human Rights Network*, based at the University of Oxford, in collaboration with the Oxford Law Faculty's Medical Law and Ethics Discussion Group, hosted a seminar focused on Kazuo Ishiguro's 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*. The premise of the event was to bring together the insights of law and literature, with scholars from both departments offering position papers providing their thoughts on the novel as informed by their distinct disciplinary perspectives. From law, we were told how the events of the novel—which sees cloned children farmed for their organs in a dystopic vision of 1990s Britain—would fit within existing British property law and notions of legal personhood. From literature, we were told of the significance of the novel's genre, form, and language in creating effect. While admirable in its interdisciplinary ambitions, the event had the unintended effect, for me, of emphasizing the relative incompatibility of the two disciplines and the difficulty of inciting meaningful conversation across their starkly different approaches to reading. One was interested in the formal application of the novel to existing legal precedent while the other embraced the novel's ambiguity and uncertainty. One treated the text as possessing characters that could be considered in relation to contemporary legal frameworks while the other focused on its fictionality, on the value of the form of the text in and of itself.

This tension between the ways in which law and literature approach fictional texts exemplifies the difficulty of reconciling literary scholarship with the legal regulatory work of bioethics, particularly as it functions in the realm of public policy and the procedures of ethics review boards. It is exactly the presumed incompatibility between the two disciplines that Maren Tova Linett's *Literary Bioethics: Animality, Disability and the Human* attempts to reconcile. Linett's text is interested in how we might recognize literary texts as valuable resources for bioethical debates. From the outset, she insists that she is not instrumentalizing literature and invests instead in how an embrace of the very nuance, ambivalence, and complexity valued by literary scholars can be of value to bioethical considerations. Literature is considered in relation to bioethics not to provide definitive answers to bioethical questions but to provide more subtle

and complex ways of thinking about such questions than provided by conventional rationalist thought experiments. Key here is her distinction between the normative idea of the thought experiment and what she considers the literary thought experiment. For Linett, rationalist “thought experiments can be flattening” (89), reducing individuals to isolated traits, in the logic of ‘all else being equal.’ By contrast, the imaginative power of literature is seen to allow for a more complex form of thought experiment that allows us to view others as something more than abstract entities. The complexity offered by literary thought experiments is a vital intervention for Linett who is passionate about the need to challenge the devaluation of a range of lives under the influence of humanism. As noted in the epilogue, the book aims to promote and inspire the reader to continue to “work against exploitation, abuse, and murder for all beings who are conscious, who are capable of experiencing the world, who are capable of suffering” (158).

Linett concedes from the outset, however, that there is little evidence that literature can change people’s behaviour, admitting that “bioethical inquiry may not lead [...] to practical outcomes, whether that inquiry is the result of philosophical argument or literary analysis” but sees it as nonetheless important for “democratic debates about values” (9). This latter statement is in keeping with the ambitions of literary scholarship more broadly, as a way of expanding minds by allowing for the consideration of a range of different perspectives, even if we must battle with the seeming futility of our work in making discernable change. It is this sense of the futility of literary abstraction in the face of ongoing suffering and oppression that led to the formation of Critical Animal Studies in distinction from Animal Studies, with the former concerned with moving beyond the abstract “question of the animal” to consider the *condition* of the animal.¹ Linett’s book can, in many ways, be read as a refusal to accept this severing of “the question” from the condition, with her monograph demonstrating how questioning (not just of the animal, but

1 See Nik Taylor and Richard Twine, “Introduction: Locating the ‘Critical’ in Critical Animal Studies,” in *The Rise of Critical Animal Studies: From the Margin to the Centre*, ed. Taylor and Twine (London: Routledge, 2014), 1–15, here: 1.

of the concept of “the human” more broadly) can contribute in valuable, if often intangible, ways to the eventual improvement of conditions for a range of socially and politically devalued lives.

Linett’s introduction defines bioethical questions as referring to “(1) questions about the value and conditions for flourishing of different kinds of human and nonhuman lives, and (2) questions about what those in power ought to be permitted to do with those lives as we gain unprecedented levels of technological prowess” (3). She establishes the value of literature in intervening in these debates, where our ability to read against the grain, to have alternative responses to characters than those invited by the narrative, is particularly instructive. The introduction then establishes the posthumanist theoretical underpinnings of the book’s methodology, drawing on Cary Wolfe’s sense of that which comes after humanism rather than the transhuman ambitions of technological innovation. While the main premise of the book seems to be to assert literature’s potential contribution to bioethical debates, the more interesting intervention is Linett’s investment in detailing the inextricability of animality and disability. She notes that all of the novels considered in the proceeding chapters fundamentally question the idea of what it means to be human, and, in the process, raise questions about why we value some lives, whether animal lives, old lives, or disabled lives, less than others. Linett extends the important work of Sunaura Taylor, whose 2017 *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* establishes the ways in which animal rights and disability rights can work in tandem rather than opposition. For Linett, “Animal studies and disability studies have a simple common tenet, one they share with other social justice-oriented fields of study: difference does not justify exploitation” (16). She details here the damaging legacy of Peter Singer in connecting animal rights with ableism, focusing on passages in his work where cognitively disabled humans are presented as worth less than some animals and other human lives. This critique of Singer is a thread that runs throughout the book, with each chapter working to demonstrate the need to continue to dismantle humanist thought patterns that reflect human exceptionalism in their use of rationality as a measure to decide which lives are

valued, and which are available for vivisection, euthanasia, selective abortion, and industrial slaughter, among other practices.

The introduction is followed by four chapters, each considering a single literary text. Chapter one, “Beast Lives”, turns to H.G. Wells’s 1896 *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, presented as a text that “enabl[es] us to consider what characterizes us as human beings, what rights we have over other animals, and what, if anything, makes human beings unique” (35). Linett focuses on the ambivalence found in the novel’s approach to vivisection, demonstrating the contradictions of Wells’s own views on the practice: supportive of the advancement of scientific knowledge while uncomfortable with the pain inflicted on animals. Most compelling in this chapter is her consideration of how the Beast People—the products of Moreau’s attempts to turn wild animals into human beings through painful vivisection—are not only animalized but described through the language of disability (described variously as “cripples”, “dwarfed”, “lunatics”, and “deformed”). Linett reflects on the novel’s relationship with contemporaneous ideas of disabled lives as evolutionary backward. While she sees aspects of potential for a radical destabilization of the humanist subject in Wells’s story, Linett ultimately regards the use of the language of disability as unable to escape the chokehold of a “curative imaginary” (35) and suggests that Wells, by the close of the text, is unable to extricate himself from the lure of human exceptionalism.

Chapter two, “Old Lives”, turns to Aldous Huxley’s 1932 *Brave New World*. Linett considers the novel’s presentation of old age and the seemingly spontaneous death of citizens of Huxley’s dystopian society once they have reached the age of 60. Comparing the work to present-day advocates for the eradication of elderly dependents, *Brave New World* is presented as a novel that allows us to explore the question of how we value old people in society. Reading the novel through the lens of age studies and disability studies, *Brave New World* is seen to have the potential to challenge our own views on aging and the idea of old people’s lives as expendable. For Linett, the novel presents aging as a meaningful and “necessary part of having a body that experiences the world” (87).

Chapter three, “Disabled Lives”, diverts from the canonical works of science fiction thus far to consider how Flannery O’Connor’s 1960 Southern Gothic novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, intervenes in ongoing debates about disability in relation to bioethical issues such as euthanasia and selective abortion. She explores the animalization of the character of Bishop Rayner, a young intellectually disabled boy, and finds that he is used as a mere crutch to consider the novel’s broader interests in human value and religion. Linett argues that through the superficial representation of Bishop the novel shows a lack of concern for disabled lives. Yet, despite the text offering us a dehumanized Bishop, Linett suggests ways in which we can read against the grain, in crip fashion, to find sympathy for him.

Finally, in chapter four, “Cloned Lives”, Linett returns to the genre of science fiction to consider Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*. Distinct from the discussion of the novel that dominated the legal medical ethics debates at the 2016 seminar I described above, Linett considers how the novel allows us to explore the ethics of so-called “humane” farming and whether it is morally distinct from the horrors of the factory farm. I am convinced by Linett’s reading, and the novel has always resonated with my own vegan commitments through its presentation of the cloned children of the uncanny boarding school Hailsham as animals awaiting slaughter. At the 2016 seminar, I directly asked the two speakers how the novel’s reflection on the ethics of animal farming came into their readings. Both expressed genuine surprise at such an interpretation and declared that they had not ever thought to read it in that way. The provocation therefore to incorporate animal lives into their thinking, and to use the novel as a way of doing so, is what Linett sees as the greatest value of literature in such debates: that the various readings allowed for by literary texts encourage us to rethink the ways in which we categorize some lives as killable and others not.

But it may be that only readers already invested in animal rights will read the novel in relation to farming practices, and it is on the basis of this recognition that I raise my principal critique of *Literary Bioethics*. Missing in Linett’s work is an acknowledgement of the

ways in which her readings risk demonstrating that one's pre-existing ethical commitments may dictate, in advance, one's reading, rather than be formed *through* or shifted by such reading. I found myself wanting Linett to probe further just how the texts might work to challenge or interrogate one's existing ethical commitments rather than simply mirroring the reader's pre-existing judgements. As Linett's analysis of *Never Let Me Go* itself betrays, "Confronting the horror of a system in which human beings are raised to have good lives and respectful but early deaths to benefit others may spur readers to consider why we think such a system for nonhuman animals is acceptable (assuming we agree that *factory* farming is shamefully unjust)" (118). Here, the reader must already agree that factory farming is unethical in order to read the book in relation to the ethics of humane meat. Linett's argument might then perhaps be better framed as a demonstration of the value of literary *criticism*, and literary *analysis*, as what truly allows literature to participate in meaningful ways in bioethical debates.

To give a further example of the objection I am making here, I want to problematize the claims she makes in chapter one regarding the ways in which the early draft version *The Island of Doctor Moreau* more explicitly encouraged readers to adopt an anti-vivisection stance than the eventual published novel. Linett notes that "in the first version, Prendick tells Moreau that 'the bare thought of vivisection turns me sick'" and claims that "[s]uch a bald statement by our protagonist would be likely to encourage readers' agreement" (41). For one, it isn't clear to me why this would be the "likely" conclusion. Such a claim also discounts the ways in which the text directs us to see Prendick as an eminently ineffectual and dithering protagonist. As I have suggested elsewhere, Prendick's teetotalism associates him with Victorian vegetarianism, a frequent target of derision in Wells's work. Prendick appears pathetically unable to support himself on Moreau's island, acknowledging that he "was too ignorant of botany to discover any resort of root or fruit that might lie about me; I had no means of trapping the few rabbits upon the island". He later asks of the Beast People, in a parodic vision of

British imperial impotence, “I say... where can I get something to eat?”² Prendick’s bald admission of queasiness at vivisection might therefore just as likely lead the reader to judge him as a figure of urban degeneration as to agree immediately with his visceral judgement. This would also be the case in Linett’s claim that Wells’s decision to remove the character of Moreau’s wife from the final version of the text results in us losing a key passage of “shared but not-to-be-spoken horror” at vivisection that would be similarly convincing to the reader (41). This is to forget the gendered implications of anti-vivisection at the time at which Wells was writing, often derided as a feminine and overly sentimental response that Linett herself details earlier in the chapter. In this it seems that Linett assumes her “likely” readers of Wells to be of an anti-vivisection mindset already and to be unsusceptible to the narrative’s attempts to discredit Prendick. This renders our engagement with the bioethical questions raised by the text entirely dependent on our already existing ethical commitments coming into the novel.

This is not to say that the readings Linett offers aren’t valuable demonstrations of how to crip canonical texts and she offers compelling explications of the intersection of disability and animality in each. Each chapter also offers insightful debates around key bioethical questions of how we assign value to sentient lives. My critique of the book is based primarily on the framing of its argument but also partly driven by my sense of confusion as to the intended audience. Linett’s book seems to be of more interest for the bioethicist than the literary scholar since the latter, one assumes, would not need to be convinced of the argument that literature is an important mode of thinking about ethical questions. If read as a work of bioethical pedagogy, the text makes more sense as an accessible invitation for the bioethicist to use Linett’s readings of these novels (rather than the books themselves, *per se*) to think in more complex ways about the lives of animals, the lives of the old, the lives of the disabled, and the lives of possible future genetically altered or cloned humans. The book perhaps also makes more sense in the

2 H.G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (London: Penguin, 2005), 53, 55.

context of the US academy and the liberal arts model of post-secondary education. Linett's book will function as a useful teaching aid for students taking literature courses whilst pursuing majors in science studies that will require various future bioethical considerations, or in law and analytic philosophy which might benefit from the additional nuance provided by literary texts. Linett's book encourages students who may not immediately see the value of literary study to think about how literature can be valuable to their own disciplines and provokes them to reconsider their initial modes of reading and interpreting fictional texts. It should also be read as a demonstration of the necessity of not simply reading, but of *debating* literary meaning to develop more complex, thoughtful, and expansive moral frameworks.

From a literary studies perspective, I would have wanted to see Linett more explicitly consider the literariness of these texts, and the role of genre and form in influencing their incitement to bioethical reflection. That three out of four of Linett's chosen texts are speculative or science fiction (SF), for instance, seems worth unpacking. Is there something about that genre that is best suited to considering bioethical claims — akin perhaps to Sherryl Vint's claim that SF has the power “more than any other literature” to “defy [the human–animal] separation because its generic premises enable us to imagine the animal quite literally looking at and addressing us from a non-anthropocentric perspective”?³ It would also have been interesting to see Linett address her sole focus on the novel form. Can poetry also provide thought experiments to consider bioethical questions? Linett might have drawn here on her background in modernist literature to consider how formally experimental texts might also be able to contribute to these debates whilst resistant to being mined for content. There is a risk in her present focus of seeming far more committed than she would like to admit to the basic tenets of the rationalist, non-literary thought experiments, requiring a clear overarching concept explored through a linear narrative trajectory. Overall, the focus solely on plot and insistence on

3 Sheryl Vint, *Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 6.

the utility of literary texts as more detailed and complex thought experiments remains too close for my comfort to the very instrumentalization she resists in her introduction.

In spite of the above critiques, *Literary Bioethics* represent an important and compelling reinforcement and extension of the pioneering work of Sunaura Taylor in charting the links between animal studies and disability studies. Of most value is Linett's demonstration of the ways that the language of disability interacts with ideas of animality and how such interactions continue to play a role in our ethical consideration of other lives today.