

“One Day You and I Will Let Them All OUT”: Empathy and Humane Behavior in Hilary McKay’s Fiction

Abstract: This paper will explore how several characters in three fiction series by Hilary McKay enact empathy for and humane behavior towards animals. These characterizations include: Lulu, who encounters a new animal to protect and care for in each book of the early-chapter book series; Binny who loses (and finds) her beloved dog, Max, as well as a lynx, over her eponymous middle grades trilogy; Binny’s younger brother, James, who goes from snail and insect farmer to chicken farmer; Caddy, animal-loving zoologist and oldest sibling from McKay’s Casson Family books; and Molly, the David Attenborough-obsessed friend of Caddy’s sister, Rose. Taken as a body of work, the function of nonhuman animals by McKay (university educated in Zoology and Botany) encompasses petkeeping, farming, and conservation, while frequently being used to define and describe human characters. Exploring the ways human and nonhuman animals interact across the books, this paper will attempt a critical, animal-based, interpretative theory to determine if nonhuman animals are being used symbolically or as autonomous actors. Further, I will analyze characters such as Lulu and Caddy as “supernurturers,” individuals who demonstrate unusually strong affinities for animals.

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