

# The Representation of Cross-fostered Chimpanzees in K.J. Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* and W.N. and L.A. Kellogg's *The Ape and the Child*

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*This article explores the potential of fictional and scientifically written accounts of cross-fostered chimpanzees. The novel "We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves" (2014) by K. J. Fowler is compared to "The Ape and the Child" (1933) by psychologists L.A. and W.N. Kellogg. An analysis of the narrative situation and style reveals two results: First, both texts contribute to different discourses. While "The Ape and The Child" presents scientific results to the discourse of comparative psychology, "We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves" problematizes the ethical validity of such experiments and the literary representation of non-human animals. Secondly, the emotional first person narrator in "We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves" contrasts the claimed objective writing style in "The Ape and the Child" and consequently draws attention to the constructedness of both texts.*

*Keywords: genre, cross-fostered chimpanzees, Animal Studies, Science Studies, fiction*

## 1 A Strange Fascination

According to Pollard (2009), humankind has a genetic overlap with chimpanzees of up to 99% (p. 44). Chimpanzees are mankind's closest living relatives as a species and there is a strange fascination about this thought. The question how close these relatives actually are to humankind has inspired research and creative work alike.

Pinker (1994) describes a trend in behavioural psychology that started in the 1930s and 1940s that tried to separate the genetic basis from the socialised traits: non-human Great Apes were put in a human environment to find out if they could acquire human behaviour (p. 344). From the 1960s onwards, there have been different approaches that mainly specialise on the acquisition of language (Pinker, 1994, p. 344). They considered the finding that the non-human Great Apes are physically not able to perform speech: Washoe and Koko (*gorilla gorilla*) were taught sign language and Kanzi (*pan paniscus*) used a board with symbols to click on (Pinker, 1994, p. 344).

Eventually, there was a loss of interest in these experiments, due to controversial and mostly disappointing results (Calarco, 2015, p. 619). However, chimpanzees are still used in experiments for the medical industry today (Wadman, 2011, p. 268). It poses the ethical question if it is acceptable to use animals for human needs. In some considerations the non-human Great Apes are especially important in this discussion, because they are genetically the closest to mankind. In 1993, the two animal rights activists Singer and Cavalieri published a book called "The Great Ape Project" in which several well known authors



support the claim for the other Great Apes to be granted Human Rights (Singer & Cavalieri, 1993).

In 2014, Karen Joy Fowler published her novel “We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves” (hereafter: WAACBO), that was inspired by the Kelloggs who cross-fostered a chimpanzee in the 1930s. They published a book about the experiment called “The Ape and The Child” (hereafter: TAATC) in 1933. The following article explores how the texts from different genres represent the chimpanzees and which potential both portrayals have.

In order to do this, there will be a closer look on excerpts from both books on the topic of laughter in chimpanzees. As both texts belong to different genres, there will first be a closer look at the genres’ characteristics. Both excerpts will be summed up and contextualised. Thirdly, there will be an analysis of the portrayal of chimpanzees in both excerpts. The last part will be a discussion on the potential of each of the texts.

## 2 Science and Fiction

It is important to note that the texts belong to different genres. WAACBO is a novel. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a novel is a „fictitious prose narrative of book length, typically representing character and action with some degree of realism“ (“Novel”, n.d.). Seager (2012, p. 1), a literary scholar, calls attention to the fact that such definitions are often criticised, because they cannot incorporate the full history and complexity of the concept they are trying to delineate. The above-mentioned definition should thus only give a broad idea of what to expect. As a novel, WAACBO subsequently belongs into the fiction genre. Fiction texts are often understood as texts with made-up content. However, one can easily imagine a fiction text based on a true event. Barnet, Berman, Burto & Cain (1997, p. 11) argue that the decisive feature of fiction is not based on the amount of made-up content, but rather on the attitude of the reader: One has different expectations of a novel than of a newspaper article, even if they might report on the same topic. The general idea of fiction goes back to oral traditions and is consequently older than writing (Gwynn, 2009, p. 2).

TAATC is a piece of scientific writing. As a genre, scientific writing arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when “previously interrelated discourses, such as philosophy and the natural sciences separated” (Sielke, 2015, p. 9). Its most outstanding trait is its claimed objectivity that aims at portraying the truth. Objective writing is almost synonymous with scientific writing today (Daston, 1992, p. 597). It is most prominently created by the use of a passive voice and dummy subjects (e.g. “There is a bird in the tree.” The bird is the real subject, but the sentence structure hides it) (Gross, Harmon & Reidy, 2002, p. 163). Form is important to the genre: A study demonstrated that for physicists who read the same information in a piece of popular science writing and in an article, the last option was easier (Russell, 2010, p. 24). Experts apply reading strategies and tend to read the introduction and the conclusion first and rarely read the whole article in order to extract information (Russell, 2010, p. 24).



### 3 The Sources

#### 3.1 We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves

WAACBO (2014) is a novel by K.J. Fowler that was inspired by the Kellogg experiment. As a child, Rosemary was twinned with a chimpanzee named Fern in a behavioural study by her parents. Fern was taken away when her parents considered her to be too dangerous. The narration takes place when Rosemary is in college. It shows how the family deals with the loss of Fern. The novel has a non-linear storyline. It mixes childhood memories of Rosemary and her present time in college.

In the extract scrutinized for this paper, Rosemary remembers when she and Fern were given tasks as part of the experiment. Despite performing better at the tasks, Rosemary observes that the grad students pay more attention to Fern. She is jealous and when Fern quits her task out of despair, Rosemary rejects her and injures herself while trying to get attention. Fern laughs at Rosemary which causes excitement by the scientists, because it is untypical for chimps to do so without a physical trigger, such as tickling.

#### 3.2 The Ape and The Child

As an experiment in comparative psychology, W. N. and L. A. Kellogg raised a young chimpanzee named Gua for 9 months twinned with their son Donald. In TAATC (1933) the Kelloggs document the results. Both observations from their everyday life and from set up experiments contribute to the overall picture.

The extract used in this comparison is from the chapter “Emotional Behavior”. There is an introductory part to the chapter, followed by a disclaimer with the promise not to humanize Gua more than necessary. The main part delineates three interactions upon which Gua would react with laughter, that are considered relatively untypical for a chimpanzee, because they do not require physical contact. In the end, possible explanations for the phenomenon are given. In the preface of the book it is stated that in order to address a broader audience, the writing of the book is simplified.

### 4 Analysis

McHughes (2009, p. 489), a literary scholar, contends that it is difficult to write from the perspective of another species, because of the threat of anthropomorphism. It is not known whether animals think and if so, what they think. Besides, language as a medium is also particularly human. This is why the narrative situation of the texts is analysed first with regard to how the chimpanzee’s external and internal reactions are represented.

Secondly, there will be a closer look at what Gross, Harmon and Reidy (2003, p. 9) consider as “Style” in their analysis of scientific texts: The choice of words and the description of the chimpanzees will be analysed.

The idea of the experiment is to integrate the chimpanzee into a human environment and raise him/her like the child he/she is twinned with (Kellogg & Kellogg, 1933, p. 14). Hence the last criterion will be the position of the chimpanzee within the family.



## 4.1 We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves

Rosemary is the extra-homodiegetic narrator in the novel. This is emphasised by the constant use of the pronoun “I”. Her younger self is the focalising agent. This means the reader experiences the situation through the eyes of young Rosemary, told by her older self. Rosemary describes Fern in two different ways. There are factual observations such as “It’s not clear [Fern] understood the game yet” (Fowler, 2014, p. 80). And there are interpretations of Fern’s emotional status, such as “Fern is getting frustrated” (Fowler, 2014, p. 81) and “I can smell that she’s unhappy [...]” (Fowler, 2014, p. 91).

The ability to smell unhappiness appears animalistic. The choice of words suggests that not only Fern is influenced by the human environment, but Rosemary is also influenced by Fern. Their relationship is the product of an exchange. There is a strong bond between the two: Fern instantly goes to Rosemary when she quits her task. However, Rosemary rejects Fern (Fowler, 2014, p. 81). She is jealous of Fern, because Fern gets more attention from the adults. Rosemary asks the rhetorical question “Fern couldn’t ride a horse, could she?” to defame Fern (Fowler, 2014, p. 81). For Rosemary, Fern is her more popular sister. This is reinforced when Rosemary hurts herself and the group of scientists, including the father, focuses on Fern’s laughter rather than on Rosemary’s injured arm that later turns out to be broken.

Moreover, Rosemary sees herself as inferior:

“The things I can do that Fern can’t are a molehill compared to the mountain of things she can do that I can’t. I’m considerably bigger, which should count for something, but she’s considerably stronger. The only thing I do better is talk, and it’s not clear to me that this is a good trade-off, that I wouldn’t swap it instantly for being able to swamper up the banister or stretch like a panther along the top edge of the pantry door.” (Fowler, 2014, p. 82)

Rosemary challenges the view of human superiority by stating that she would rather have Fern’s skills than her own. She agrees with the common notion that language is the most striking trait that sets mankind apart from other species (Calarco, 2015, p. 618). However, she does not consider it an advantage.

## 4.2 The Ape and The Child

TAATC is written from the perspective of W. N. Kellogg and L. A. Kellogg. This is emphasised by the use of the pronouns “we” and “us” (Kellogg & Kellogg, 1933, p. 168-169). The identification of authors as the narrators is frowned upon in other genres, but it is necessary in scientific writing to establish responsibility for the data. The pronouns are limited to the introduction and the disclaimer, except for one later use. This means that after the disclaimer, the pretension of an omniscient, i.e. an extra-heterodiegetic, narrator is attempted. W. N. and L. A. Kellogg are also the focalizing agents. In accordance with the narrator, signs of the focalising agents are later on avoided. While the pronouns in the beginning suggest the observing parents as the focalising agents, the reader’s attention is drawn away from this suggestion later on, when the text approaches a zero focalisation after the disclaimer.

In order to avoid anthropomorphism, Gua’s laughter is described as “rhythmic exhalations corresponding to human laughter” (Kellogg & Kellogg, 1933, p. 169). In contrast to that, Gua’s rare laughter while playing is suggested to be caused by her having “good fun” (Kellogg & Kellogg, 1933, p. 170). The phrasing does not fit the register; hence it is put in quo-



tation marks. Early on, Gua is referred to as a “subhuman organism” (Kellogg & Kellogg, 1933, p. 168). It differentiates Gua from the family and addresses her as less than a human. However, Gua and Donald are both referred to as “subjects” (Kellogg & Kellogg, 1933, p. 170). Here, Donald is put in the same position as Gua. The term “subject” renounces the emotional connection between the observers and their subjects.

Consequently, the text shows no personal connection to Gua. A possible relationship to Donald is suggested, because they play together, but it is not further explored (Kellogg & Kellogg, 1933, p. 170). As a result of the distance, Gua does not have a voice. In fact, she is barely described as an individual. Only the last part of the extract refers to the fact that she is the only chimp so far who laughed without being tickled (Kellogg & Kellogg, 1933, p. 171). It sets Gua apart, but it is suggested that this is not because of her, but because of her situation and that she cannot be compared to caged chimpanzees (Kellogg & Kellogg, 1933, p. 171).

### 4.3 Results

The narrative situation in WAACBO creates an empathic closeness to Fern. Rosemary views Fern as part of her family. She is jealous when Fern gets more attention by the scientists who conduct the tests. The actions between them appear like banter between siblings. Rosemary rejects Fern and Fern laughs when Rosemary falls from a table. Despite this fight, their bond is strong enough for Rosemary to interpret Fern’s behaviour without language. However, Rosemary also admits that Fern’s behaviour is not always clear (Fowler, 2014, p. 80). Despite the fact that Fern knows bits of sign language, she cannot express herself well towards humans, which makes Rosemary her only chance for communication in the human environment.

Despite the fact that the narrators are also part of the family, the portrayal of Gua in TAATC is the opposite of Fern’s. The narrators describe Gua’s behaviour as seemingly objective as possible, which creates a distance to her. It also contributes to the avoidance of anthropomorphisms. Gua’s foster parents become her observers. The family relationship, which is the idea of the experiment, is not documented. This scenario leaves no space for Gua’s voice. Gua is reduced to an object of investigation. The same goes for Donald, her human brother. However, they are differentiated by the choice of words as Gua is considered “subhuman” (Kellogg & Kellogg, 1933, p. 168). Similar to the scenario in WAACBO, the chimpanzee is the preferred subject of the study, while Donald is not mentioned as often.

## 5 Discussion

In the following part the potential of both portrayals of the cross-reared chimpanzee will be discussed.

WAACBO problematizes Fern as an agent. Rosemary is her interpreter, albeit not a reliable one. Fern needs a voice to fit into her environment, but there is no ideal solution for her communication with humans. Anthropomorphism becomes an inevitable part of it. The novel is not a contribution to science, but it creates room to discuss the topics that cannot be talked about in scientific writing. For example, Rosemary prefers Fern’s traits over her own. The novel questions why language, for example, would be a desirable trait



for chimpanzees and unveils the anthropocentric intention behind the experiment (Calarco, 2015, p. 618). It tests whether chimpanzees can live up to human standards while Rosemary's view suggests that humans and chimpanzees may simply have different qualities. Consequently, WAACBO contributes to the discussion of literary representations of non-human animals and to the philosophical discourse on relationships between humans and other animals.

TAATC pursues the objective style that has become synonymous with scientific writing. According to the preface, the book is kept in a simpler style to make it readable for a broader audience (Kellogg & Kellogg, 1933, p. XI). However, it still mainly addresses the scientific community and fulfils its standards of form and language. By sticking to the scientific standards, TAATC can easily be consumed by its scientific readership. As mentioned before, it is easier for scientists to read the common format than more liberal versions (Russell, 2010, p. 24).

In addition, WAACBO draws attention to the constructed character of its narrative situation. The first person narrator and the focalising agent are both noticeable to the reader. It is clear that Rosemary reports on the experiment from a biased perspective. In TAATC, the visibility of the narrator is avoided. If both texts are read next to each other, WAACBO draws attention to the fact that like Rosemary, the Kelloggs also portray their experiences from a certain perspective. After all, both texts are to some degree a representation of the same experiment, presented from different points of view. As a result, WAACBO unveils the constructed character of both texts.

Consequently, WAACBO can be read as revisionist critique on TAATC. On the one hand, it questions the ethical background of ape experiments and it thematises the portrayal of non-human animals with the medium of human language. On the other hand, it is a meta-comment on the claim of scientific objectivity, because it exposes the problem that any event can only be described from a limited point of view, even if there seems to be an omniscient narrator.

## 6 Conclusion

The comparison of the two texts illustrates differences in the representation of cross-fostered chimpanzees in scientific writing and fiction. It also illuminates the genres' potential for different discourses: TAATC aims at distributing scientific data. It follows the scientific standards and is easier to understand for the scientific community. As a negative side effect, the chimpanzee is objectified and has no voice. WAACBO on the other hand consciously breaks with the scientific objectivity, which leads to three changes: Firstly, the first person narrator tries to give Fern a voice, but cannot do this without anthropomorphisms. By doing so, WAACBO illuminates the problems of representing non-human animals in literature. Secondly, the complex relationship between Rosemary and Fern contributes to the philosophical discourse on human-animal relationships by questioning the idea of human superiority. And thirdly, WAACBO can be read as a revisionary critique on the scientific writing style. While the narrators' perspective is mostly hidden in TAATC and thus appears to tell the truth, the narrator in WAACBO is clearly visible. Since both texts report on the same experiment, WAACBO shows that scientific writing is biased as well, despite hiding it.



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