6 Wild Things Squeezed in the Closet

Monsters of Children's Literature as Nonhuman Others

Marleena Mustola and Sanna Karkulehto

It is no coincidence that monsters abound in children's literature. According to a simplistic explanation, the purpose of these raging, monstrous creatures is to help children cope with their fears and anxieties. It is worth noting, however, that the seemingly innocent children and the openly untamable, threatening monsters of children's fiction have something axiomatic in common: they are both creations of adults and, as such, different from and "other" to them. Childhood itself may be considered a social construction (e.g. Ariès 1996; Cook 2009), as adults need to see and construct children as pure, cute, and innocent (e.g. Jenkins 1998) and monsters as their polar opposites, in order to control their own ambivalent emotions toward their offspring. Likewise, the mechanism that aims to reject otherness by "taming the supposed out-of-control", which is an oft-used theme in children's literature, may justify both othering and separating the self from the difference, and abjection and abuse of these others (cf. Hellstrand et al. 2018). Children – the main target audience of child-friendly, adult-created cultural artifacts, such as toys and "children's" books – are always positioned as "others" in a world where the adult perspective is the perpetual default. This inevitably brings them closer to other "others", such as monsters (cf. Kincheloe 1998).

Even if adults have mostly been reluctant to address the undeniable monstrosity and vulgarity associated with and expressed by children, there is also some thematic affinity between monsters and children. Gary Cross (2004, 12–13) and Marina Warner (1994) note that "innocence" is not a self-evident characteristic of children but, rather, the romantic creation of adults, which entails a covert demand for children to live innocent lives on behalf of those who are no longer children themselves. Even though infants in our own era are virtual objects of worship because they represent some kind of primordial innocence, for most of Western history, babies have actually represented the fall from grace. Today's unwillingness to recognize children's unpleasant or repellent

qualities, which has been perceived to be manifested in, for example, an increasing eagerness to diagnose children's behavioral or emotional disorders and treat them with tranquilizers (e.g. Breggin 2014), leaves them adrift in adult fantasies, without a road map for maturing. This has led to the invention of the image of the "cool kid", the rebellious child who works against adult myths and fashions their own identity (Warner 1994; Cross 2004, 5–7, 124–125). Cool children and monsters, thus, share the position of independent but inescapably inferior beings that are alien to the dominant adult-centered culture.

The cultural category of monstrosity and the figure of the monster can be approached from various angles. They can be regarded, for example, as projections of the repressed facets of the self; as the unthinkable and the unnameable; as various representations and embodiments of difference; as political symbols of otherness; as metaphors of chaos and threat; and as manifestations of wildness or humans who have abdicated their humanity, such as aggressive criminals (Cohen 1996; Gilmore 2003; Asma 2009; Beville 2014). Maria Nikolajeva (2002, 38–39) sees monster characters in children's literature as alienating, because they enact the subversion of identity that is typical of postmodern aesthetics[1] (cf. Butler 1990). Maria Beville (2014, xii), for her part, describes nonhuman monsters in literature and film as unnameable and slippery, as impossible to fully explain, and thus as figures that offer humans valuable experiences of the unknown or unexpected, and difference and otherness (see also Hellstrand et al. 2018). Donna McCormack's (2018, 155) account goes on to make an important amendment to that of Beville: usually this otherness "comes to signify inferiority in opposition to the imagined superiority of the 'rational, autonomous, [human] subject'" (see also Shildrick 2002, 121). In the analysis that follows, we try to figure out the messy meaning-making processes that the representations of nonhuman monsters in children's literature offer. How do they, first, represent and embody contemporary (human) anxieties and deal with the unknown or unexpected that we humans face in our everyday lives? How may they even justify both othering, and abjection and abuse of others? Keeping all this in mind, we ask, second, if the monsters could also offer ways in which to explore and reconfigure the ethical relationships between humans and nonhumans.

To elaborate, this chapter examines how monsters have been used to represent inferior otherness in children's literature, and how they could be interpreted in the context of posthumanities. The otherness, wildness, and anthropomorphism of monsters allow readers to draw parallels between them and human children, which reveals the fact that both of these groups are subjected to adults' control and both are viewed as inferior to adult subjects, the self-declared representatives of human superiority, rationality, and agency. Not only will we consider how the narrative representations of the embodied similarity of monsters and

children signify inferiority, but we will also investigate how these inform us about the apparently unethical validation of othering. Narrative fictions can open such doors by their virtue of analyzing the many unknown and unpredictable variations of otherness, including the variations of monstrosity lurking in humans themselves. Children's literature does not shy away from asking how "the monstrous is already of the self, ontologically integral to the human" – a question that implicitly calls for an ethical reconfiguration, or perhaps even the creation of new forms of ethics (McCormack 2018, 155, 157, 162).

These complicated interrelations of nonhuman monstrosity, childhood, and adulthood are central to the three children's books discussed in this chapter: Maurice Sendak's picture book *Where the Wild Things Are* (2013/1963), which was also made into a film in 2009 (directed by Spike Jonze), Shaun Tan's short story "Stick Figures" (in *Tales of Outer Suburbia*, 2009), and Tuutikki Tolonen's novel *Monster Nanny* (2017). This inquiry does not cover all types of monsters or all types of children's literature containing monsters; however, the three analyzed works include monsters that both represent diverse aspects of human and nonhuman monstrosity and share crucial similarities with frequent portrayals of monstrosity in children's literature. These books are popular also outside their native countries and have aimed at global coverage: *Where the Wild Things Are* originates from the USA, "Stick Figures" is an Australian story, and *Monster Nanny* was first published in Finland.[2]

Where the Wild Things Are (2013/1963) by Maurice Sendak was first published in 1963 and has since established itself as a classic. The story, delivered in a traditional picture book format, is about a child called Max who, due to his aggressive behavior, is sent to bed without supper. Max then imagines an entire inner journey, during which he confronts and tames his inner monsters, that is, his feelings and emotions, until in his imagination, he returns to his room where his supper is now waiting for him. As the title suggests, Shaun Tan's "Stick Figures" (in *Tales of Outer Suburbia*, 2009)[3] is a short story about mysterious stick figure creatures who have always been a part of the suburban landscape depicted in the story. Children play with them, but also beat them, and nobody knows the reason for their existence. The origin of monsters remains a mystery also in Tuutikki Tolonen's *Monster Nanny* (2017), in which the children protagonists' parents are sent away for a holiday and replaced with a peculiar monster nanny. Siblings Halley, Koby, and Mimi start to investigate their hairy nanny Grah, who takes care of them and lives in the closet of their entrance hall. The mysteries of the monsters are not fully resolved in the novel, but the children are ultimately able to help them find their way back home and escape the evil witches exploiting monsters and using them as forced childcare labor.

Monsters as Others

When a big, hairy creature, smelling like a musty cellar, appears behind the front door of Halley, Koby, and Mimi's house at the beginning of *Monster Nanny*, the children are not sure what it is. Even after they get to know their monster nanny personally, they are generally unsure of how to make sense of it or how to interpret its communication correctly. As it grunts and murrs, the children ponder: "Was it happy murring or dangerous human-eating murring? How could one tell?" (Tolonen 2017, 51). The monster nanny is – like so many other monsters – unfamiliar, strange, and alien, which is why the children resort to a science book to acquire more information about monsters. A scientist Runar Kalli, who "found a monster in the forest behind his house, coaxed it into his home, and studied it for almost two years", wrote the book 80 years ago and the children borrow it from the library (Tolonen 2017, 33). Reading a book written in human language by a human scientist is probably the most anthropocentric way to approach a nonhuman creature, which makes the difference between humans and monsters particularly visible in the book.

In some ways, the monster nanny resembles humans and other mammals considerably, and, according to the science book, it is even classifiable as half-human: it has anthropomorphic nails, four fingers, and typical herbivore teeth. Furthermore, the children assume, for example, that mosquitos must also suck the blood of the monsters – or "whatever it is that flows in the monsters' veins" (Tolonen 2017, 153). Even though there is something recognizable about them, the monsters are obviously strangers, and some of their features seem to originate from a whole different reality. When Grah first arrives in the Hellman household, for instance, it sheds some weird substance that spreads into the whole apartment. It is described almost as some kind of "mist in the air" or "darkness stuck to the walls" (Tolonen 2017, 21), but it is clearly not any kind of a substance that the children would have come in contact with before.

Tan's monsters share the category confusion with Tolonen's. Tan's monstrous creatures are stick figures who have bodies and limbs made out of sticks, and heads that resemble grass tufts. They move around, "slowly as clouds" (Tan 2009, 65). It is a total mystery how anthropomorphic they really are or if they belong to flora or fauna. The embodied difference of these creatures thus likens them to such unworthy things as garbage or dead animals in the story: "If they are standing in the middle of the street, it's easy enough to drive around them, as you would a piece of cardboard or a dead cat" (Tan 2009, 65). Tan's depiction implies that no matter how confusing the monsters are, they are no different from dead animals left on the side of the road, or cardboard – other objects and beings that humans might not see, recognize, or even want to know

anything about. Since the stick figures represent yet another species that humans dissociate themselves from, Tan's short story quite indisputably designates the cultural and societal status of nonhuman otherness as something worthless (cf. Beville 2014, xi).

In contrast to Tan's story, Tolonen's monster nannies are treated differently: even if strange and mysterious, they still are half-humans, whereas Tan's stick figures are impossible even to categorize. Moreover, the human characters of *Monster Nanny* are sincere in their attempts to interpret and understand the monsters to the best of their abilities and to fabricate at least some kind of a meaning for their existence. The children discover that the monsters have been brought to the neighborhood homes as slave labor, apparently by three witchy-looking ladies. According to the ladies, they are merely executing a "secret special experiment in which [they] are researching new options for child care work" (Tolonen 2017, 6), but the children seem to know better: the monsters are kept in human habitations against their own will. In their role as researchers and experimenters, the witches are positioned as Frankensteinian characters – as unethical superiors exploiting a nonhuman species. It is not completely certain whether the witches belong to the category of human beings either, which associates the inhumane and exploitative treatment of otherness with other nonhuman characters. That being said, the same Frankensteinian interest has clearly motivated Runar Kalli, the scientist who has examined a monster in his house for two years, and it is worth asking if the end justifies the means or only questions human experiments with nonhumans, such as nonhuman animals, in the first place. The question is only highlighted, while Grah the monster obediently prepares breakfast and uses a washing machine, despite the science book's statement that "regular human work would be alien to [the monster's] free, wild nature" (Tolonen 2017, 207).

In Tan's "Stick Figures", the monsters are generally ignored by humans. The adults either do not notice them or try to keep them away from the yard by turning on the sprinklers and playing loud music. Children are more curious, however: they sometimes dress the stick figures in old clothes and hats, as if playing with dolls or decorating scarecrows. The adults reproach the children and prohibit such behavior but, crucially, give no reason for this rule: "'Just don't,' they say sternly" (Tan 2009, 65). The reader is positioned asymmetrically with respect to the fictional adults who leave both the fictional children and the actual readers to wonder at the reasons behind the compulsion. The adult authorities may guide the children because they want them to behave ethically – to give stick figures some personal space – but they may as well instruct them just to bypass and neglect the wooden creatures as well as the entire environment they evidently are all part of.

The otherness of the monsters also frightens some of the human characters, and sometimes this fear escalates into violence and aggression.

In Tolonen's book, Bathrobe, another nonhuman character who only comes alive in the company of select children, explains this by saying that humans are afraid of monsters, and, because of their fear, "people usually start to tease and bully anybody who is different" (Tolonen 2017, 201). Perhaps there is a reason for Tolonen's monster nanny to live in a closet and a *Bathrobe*, one of the most intimate pieces of human garment, to explain about the human fear of difference. Even if the idea of the monster, a justifiable allegory of difference and otherness, and "a figure who signifies selves and ways of living the world cannot 'bear to see'" (Holman Jones and Harris 2016; cf. Butler 2014, 41), thus hiding in the closet, may have but little to do with sexual difference – or queerness – in children's literature, the significance of closets in *Monster Nanny* is well worth a thought. Resonances between monstrosity, otherness, sexual difference, and queerness have been more or less axiomatic in the history of Western or Eurocentric culture (e.g. Halberstam 1995; Benshoff 1997; Holman Jones and Harris 2016; Precup 2017), and undoubtedly the restraints of heteronormativity are at play in children's lives in the contemporary culture as well. According to Henry Jenkins (1998), it is the very myth of childhood innocence that naturalizes heteronormativity, and according to a classic thought of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), heteronormativity relies on the "epistemology of the closet", meaning that gender and sexual difference are often suppressed by culturally dominant acts of control, denial, and concealment, all of which can be considered forms of symbolic, gendering violence in culture and society (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 170; Weininger 2005, 138; Butler 2015, 34, 59). This Sedgwickian context raises a question then of how we should read and interpret a monster character of a children's book who stays in a closet:

> The monster squeezed into the closet. The closet was quite narrow. To fit in it, the monster had to stand straight with its arms tightly at its sides, but it didn't seem bothered by the lack of room. The monster growled contentedly.
>
> (Tolonen 2017, 13)

We suggest that if the monster squeezed in the closet could be examined in the light of monster theory, it could also be scrutinized in the framework of queer theory. Both theories, or rather methodologies, engage critically with discourses on the strange, the weird, and the "other" and aim at

> thinking otherwise about the interconnections between the production of knowledge, the disciplining and creation of bodies and subjectivities, and the lives that are at stake whenever one attempts to draw a distinguishing line between the inside and the outside, self and other.
>
> (Hellstrand et al. 2018; Karkulehto 2010; 2012)

This interrelatedness reveals, first, that not only the disciplining of monstrosity or queerness – that is, everything that does not "stand straight" (Tolonen 2017, 13) – but also of all kinds of marks or signs of differences and otherness are, even if inherent in all humans, often disciplined or controlled, or even in a prohibited or closeted form. Second, the novel shows how the monster has to "stand straight" in order to fit into the closet, having no room around him/her for any natural movement. Yet Grah accepts this controlling cultural demand for confinement and "straightness" "contentedly". This image of a monster growling complacently in its tight closet space invokes the forced cultural assimilation that many minority groups – not only gender and sexual but also ethnic and religious minorities and, for example, indigenous people – have been subjected to, solely because of the differences they embody. Associations with the tragic, violent human history of colonialism and its severe consequences are difficult to avoid: imagining the monster purring in its little cell is eerily reminiscent of the imaginary figure of a "happy slave" and phenomena like the "Uncle Tom syndrome". However, no matter how tightly the monster is squeezed into the closet, there is still, undeniably, a monster in the closet; no matter how much symbolic denial and concealment we practice, the closets of human history are still packed with violence against otherness, all caused by the fear of difference.

An analogous fear of difference leads to physical violence in Tan's story. Boys beat the stick figures with "baseball bats, golf clubs, or whatever they have at hand, sometimes including the victim's own, snapped-off limb[s]" (Tan 2009, 66). Initially, the boys find this activity fun, and it goes on for hours, until it finally ceases to be entertaining: "It becomes boring, somehow enraging, the way they just stand there and take it. What are they? Why are they here? What do they want? Whack! Whack! Whack!" (Tan 2009, 67). This unprovoked violence toward the stick figures, who do not even defend themselves in any way but just take the beating, exemplifies the processes of the fear of difference, the dehumanization of otherness, and the consequent violence, which together expose the hidden monstrosity of humans themselves. As wooden creatures, the stick figures are also closely associated with nature, which reminds about the monstrous human abuse of nonhuman natural environments.

The constructed binaries that divide humans from the "other" position monsters at the margins reserved for the repressed, the abject, and the uncanny (Beville 2014, 1). The vulnerable position the monsters have is only partly shared by the children in these fictional works. The minors are, like monsters, dependent on the adult humans' authority and arbitrariness, and they are at risk of being bypassed or neglected by their parents. The Hellman kids are left alone for days in *Monster Nanny* because their mother simply decides to leave for a special holiday she has won and their father's return flight is late from a business trip. In *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max is instructed to stay in his room

without supper, and the kids in the suburban neighborhood are told to behave as the adults command. Nevertheless, the fictional children, at least in these books, evidently have a more secure position compared to that of monsters, since they can mainly rely on adults' care and assistance. However, even if they are not violently beaten, used as free labor, or stuck in the dusty closet like the monsters, the adults seem to have ambivalent feelings toward their children: they are tired and angry with them, and from time to time, they find them a burden rather than, for example, symbols of innocence. This pushes the children to act independently and develop emotionally and intellectually on their own (cf. Warner 1994; Cross 2004, 5–7, 124–125), which, in a way, tears them more apart from their parents and brings them closer to the monsters and the alien otherness they represent.

It has been argued that the acknowledged independence and otherness of children and childhood grants children at least some weight and visibility in various political and ethical spheres, and this acknowledgment helps us to consider otherness a meaningful ethical construction (Jones 2008, 197). According to Owain Jones (2008, 197), otherness is not only healthy for children and for child-adult relationships but essential to what children are. By the same token, this otherness is also essential to what adults are, and even essential to what humans are, in relation to the nonhuman others – and monsters or, what we regard as monstrous – in particular. In this way, the monster narratives in children's literature may persuade us to rethink or even reconfigure what it means to live with otherness, difference, and monstrosity (cf. McCormack 2018, 161), and how to perceive and manage the otherness, difference, and monstrosity in ourselves.

Wild, Animalized, Nonhuman Monsters

"Let the wild rumpus start", Max declares once he has learned how to control the monsters that represent his own unruly emotions in Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (2013, 22). Even though the monsters are essentially wild, he can confront them and even romp with them safely after he has tamed and understood them. The wildness of monsters connects them to wild nature and untamed nonhuman animals, while differentiating them from the "civilized" human culture. This dualistic divide between nature and culture, where the latter covers humans and human artifacts, and the former all the other external environments and beings (Haila 2000, 155; Åsberg and Braidotti 2018), is one of the most central conceptual human constructions that posthumanist thinking aims to challenge. In her seminal "Cyborg Manifesto" (2000),[4] Donna Haraway addresses this leaky distinction by imagining a cyborg: an ironic political myth, a feminist figure, and a critter that is not unequivocally a human, an animal, or a machine but a tangled combination of them all.

This binary nature-culture divide is visually played with in *Where the Wild Things Are*: the monsters look like hybrids; one has a head of an eagle, a body of a chicken, and legs of a bear; another has a head of a bull, a body of a wolf, and legs of a human. All of them have sharp teeth and claws. The hybridity of these figures indicates that the separation between different species, such as humans and other animals, should not be taken as fundamentally as it might appear in the humanist discourses of the book's time of publication. In Tolonen's *Monster Nanny* (2017, 47, 73, 76, 102–103, 132), the monsters are reported to look "like a pig", "like a moth, "like a hairy caterpillar", or "like a giant teddy bear", and they roar "like a lion", murr "like a large cat", or roll their eyes "like goldfish in a glass bowl". In the science book that the children study, a monster is characterized as a "peaceful humanoid animal, if not half-human" (Tolonen 2017, 102). Thus, even though the monsters are explicitly animalized and animal-like, they are also hybrid humans or even machine-like, which suggests that the nature-culture divide cannot be maintained or credibly justified.

In Tan's short story, the monsters incorporate features of humans, animals, and plants. Nonetheless, "they are not a problem, just another part of the suburban landscape" (Tan 2009, 65). The violence that the human characters direct against the stick figures brings forth the devastating actions humans direct against many kinds of others, including nonhuman animals and other aspects of the natural environment. This kind of violence that indiscriminately targets anything and everything nonhuman has a long history but has been forcefully articulated in literature since the notion of the turn to the era of the Anthropocene. As Adam Trexler (2015, 223) points out, before the turn of the millennium, climate change was considered mainly a sensational topic for science fiction, apocalyptic narratives, ecological thrillers, and dystopias. Only now that the scientific consensus concerning the destructive impact of human actions on the Earth system has grown stronger, other literary approaches have become possible as well (ibid.).

These new approaches include starkly realistic or dystopian portrayals of the destruction that humans cause to other entities and beings, and Tan's short story, with its quietly suffering stick figures, could be counted among them. Their lithe, vulnerable bodies remain "passively upright until smashed to splinters between heels and asphalt", and the only response to such human violence is "the sound of the dead branches falling from old trees on windless evenings, and random holes appearing in front lawns, dark sockets where clods of earth have been removed during the night" (Tan 2009, 66, 68). The narration in these passages is mysterious and oddly threatening, as if some bigger retaliation or retribution would wait just around the corner. Alternatively, perhaps the ominous tone is only meant to help the reader to grasp, in an affective way, the inequality caused by human behavior and their cruelty against

nonhuman otherness. At the same time, the violence and cruelty are directed to hybrid figures representing humans themselves, which portrays a disturbing image of humans' fundamental self-destruction.

Humans' wounding of nature and nonhuman animals is also criticized in Tolonen's *Monster Nanny*. The aforementioned science book that the children constantly rely on in their quest to know more about the monsters speculates:

> Would it be possible for us humans to live peaceful and mutually respectful lives alongside monsters? Or would we attempt to harness these gentle, strong beings as mere work animals to do our heaviest jobs? Regrettably often, human nature is far from humane.
>
> (Tolonen 2017, 106)

Later, Koby reads more about monsters' anthropomorphic habits and finds out that "[they] would hardly choose to coexist with humans. The disparity between the two species is too great. An equal environment would not be possible" (Tolonen 2017, 207). This extract epitomizes, and admits, the exploitative history of the human species: we have always exploited each other, tortured, killed, and eaten others, as well as destroyed and enslaved anything and everything. Why would it be any different with the monsters? Tolonen's novel thus emphasizes, in an honest but child-friendly way, that the idea of human supremacy is deeply problematic, as it creates a constraining distinction between humans and the others, while simultaneously justifying human cruelty against others by depicting humans as more "valuable" than others.

Since monstrosity is also closely intertwined with wildness, one may be tempted to ask whether monsters could or should be tamed somehow, and how ethical such an approach would be. Furthermore, in the context of children's literature, this evokes the parallel question, whether children could or should be tamed as well, seeing that childhood is also regarded as a "wild" and "natural" state. After all, it is only through prolonged socialization and education that children are assumedly cultivated into full members of the "civilized" human culture and adulthood (Jenkins 1998). *Where the Wild Things Are* thematizes this cultivation process through Max's relation to and eventual mastery of his inner monsters. At the beginning of the story, his mom calls him a "[w]ild thing" (Sendak 2013, 5), but Max evolves as the story progresses, and toward the end, he acts in a distinctly more civilized manner, being in control of his turbulent emotions. Moreover, this civilizational and educational "progress" is visually intertwined with nonhuman animality: on the first page, Max is wearing his wolf costume, and on the last pages, he removes it. He is no longer a wild animal with inner monsters but a well-behaved, "proper" human subject.

The beasts of *Monster Nanny* represent more complex cases, as when the story begins, the monster nannies have already been tamed, enslaved,

and assimilated into human habitats. Similarly, the children of Tolonen's book have already been tamed, as they are obviously well-educated and good-mannered little creatures. Halley, Koby, and Mimi seem to be very happy about their own status and position as (tamed) children, although this happiness suffers a crack when they learn – thanks to their ability to read, seek, and critically evaluate information – that monsters are miserable when being used as unpaid labor under human discipline and control. The children discover that the monsters' natural habitat is the forest, and that without their natural diet of rotten leaves, monsters' fur will grow thinner and their lives become joyless. This prompts the children to take their monster nanny Grah to the nearby forest, where it rolls and trashes around in rotten leaves, noticeably happily, and not only "contentedly". Afterward, the monster looks "magnificent and powerful", "as if it had grown in height and girth" (Tolonen 2017, 62). The monsters of *Monster Nanny* most likely need to be in touch with their animality, wildness, and natural habitat, or otherwise they will suffer.

This question about the taming of (inner) monsters seems to be interconnected with the question of whether or not humans themselves are happier when they tame and repress their own animality and wildness. Is the civilization that humans have created for themselves truly their natural habitat, and, if not, can any civilized human really claim to be more than merely contented? John Weaver (2015, 186–187) theorizes that civilization and culture are two different kinds of forces: civilization seeks morality and rationality, while culture is tasked with finding limits in order to create something novel and different. He also implodes the distinction between human culture and animality by stating that human animality *is* human culture. Human memory has simultaneously created civilization and forgotten about humans' creative animality, but "through human memory and animal forgetfulness, our cultivation begins" (Weaver 2015, 186). However, since the institutions that produce civilization, especially the educational system, aspire to create obedient citizens, they are in danger of the "fetishizing of 'becoming human'" (Pedersen 2015, 57).

While humans try to tame their offspring and other species in their surroundings, in order to cultivate them and to enhance life on planet Earth with diverse and often contradictory actions, the binary constructions – nonhuman and human, nature and culture, child and adult – act as justifying mindsets, for better or worse. Our everyday lives are crowded with children and other others, such as pets, who constantly fail to fulfill human adults' expectations to abandon their wildness and become tame. At the same time, children's literature is crowded with child protagonists who choose to rebel against these oppressive expectations: J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan, Rudyard Kipling's Mowgli, and Astrid Lindgren's Pippi Longstocking are all examples of fictional characters[5] who "reveal the depth of adult investment in a utopian childhood state" (Warner 1994). Real children, like fictional ones, have the power to subvert cultural norms,

especially those associated with the myth of innocent childhood (Jenkins 1998), simply by being normal children who cannot fulfill adults' unrealistic expectations. As Marina Warner (1994) puts it, "our children can't be better than we are".[6]

Inner Monsters

Despite their wild and animalized features, the monsters in the three books studied in this chapter, and beyond, are also anthropomorphic. Sometimes their monstrosity is clearly positioned as a part of humanity. *Where the Wild Things Are*, for instance, is built around an idea of children's inner monsters, which corresponds well to the traditional assumption that children's literature ought to offer resources for their readers' psychological development. According to Bruno Bettelheim (1979, 145, 191), fairy tales do not even attempt to describe the outer (physical) reality; instead, they aim to offer children a better understanding of their inner lives and help them resolve their psychological difficulties. This argument is made especially concrete by the otherness of the monster character called the Groke, who appears in Tove Jansson's famed Moomin stories. The Groke may exude a certain amount of existential horror, but her inclusion in the stories serves a psychological and an educational purpose, as her character presents the reader with poignant, relatable themes of loneliness and alienation (Ylönen 2014, 228, 233). Similarly, the monster nanny in Tolonen's *Monster Nanny* may be a horrific other, but its half-humanity can be read as a metaphor for humans' monstrous qualities and inner battles. As a result, the monster nanny also becomes a symbol for "the changing relationships between the human and nonhuman, culture and nature, technology and the body, and Other and Self" (Åsberg and Braidotti 2018, 11). In other words, it embodies the Harawayan "processes of becoming with all that is other-than-human" (Koistinen and Karkulehto 2018).

As humans empathize with monsters or identify with them, even in the context of fictional narratives, the boundaries between the two categories are momentarily shaken. In *Monster Nanny*, the youngest child, Mimi, is especially good at understanding their beastly, hairy caretaker. While her siblings are terrified of the huge "hairy cigar" that appears at their front door, Mimi simply observes: "It's not dangerous. […] Look at its eyes. It wants to stay here" (Tolonen 2017, 12–13). The six-year-old Mimi as the character that understands the monster the best is an easy choice, as smaller children typically have to rely more on nonverbal communication than spoken, "civilized" human language. When Mimi's father wants to know how Mimi is able to understand Grah, she gives him a surprised look and says: "Just normally. […] In the same way as one understands anybody. Just like I understand you" (Tolonen 2017, 256). The response suggests that the perpetual binaries and the

stark pragmatic and conceptual separation of different beings are actually learned, man-made constructions of adults. Children, by contrast, are represented as the ones who are more in touch with the natural, plain mutuality, and the feeling of togetherness that encompasses all creatures, which resonates well with the myth of innocent childhood.

In summary, the anthropomorphism of the storybook monsters as well as the monstrosity of the human characters in these narratives can lead the readers to question the deep-ingrained human/other distinction and encourage them to face their own inner monstrosity. In *Monster Nanny*, the human characters make a crucial discovery: "now that the monster was in sight again, it was much more difficult to forget it" (Tolonen 2017, 29). The increased visibility of humans' inner conflicts and an insistent feeling of otherness leave no other choice but to face them with courage or to repress them – to squeeze them in the closet. The narrative representations of monsters thus serve the same general function as the fictional monsters in Tolonen's novel do: they lure us into seeing them and facing them. In *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max boldly confronts his inner challenges, and his process of gaining control over his feelings is described in a way that really emphasizes the pluck it takes to examine oneself realistically and without fear:

> And when [Max] came to the place where the wild things are they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth / and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws / till Max said 'BE STILL!' and tamed them with the magic trick / of staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once and they were frightened and called him the most wild thing of all / and made him king of all wild things.
>
> (Sendak 2013, 17–21)

There is, however, a mystery at the heart of this citation that seems to also be at the heart of all humans' inner battles: the emotion-monsters may be successfully tamed, but only with the help of a "magic trick". This gives the readers little applicable advice on how to actually cope with difficult emotions.

Even as the nonhuman monsters are construed as others, they are also (inner) companions, and their human "hosts" may have grown quite attached to or even fond of them. For instance, once Max starts to miss his mom and feel homesick, he decides to leave the place where the wild things are but faces some unexpected resistance: "But the wild things cried, 'Oh please don't go – we'll eat you up – we love you so!" (Sendak 2013, 31). The monsters' reaction to the abandonment is quite forceful, and it reflects the paradoxicality of human emotions: the distinction between love and hate is vague and flickering. Moreover, the monsters' words echo Max's own words from the beginning of the book, where he

cites the same angry threat – "I'll eat you up" (Sendak 2013, 5) – to his mother, even though he clearly loves her. In Tolonen's novel, the children feel affection toward their familial monster, as evidenced by the sorrow they feel after they have managed to help Grah and the other monster nannies to finally get back home: "Halley felt tears rolling down her cheeks. She felt lost with the monsters gone. Like something essential had disappeared" (Tolonen 2017, 298). Others are not always others, after all; they may just as well be fundamental, although unrecognized, parts of our lives, or even parts of ourselves.

This internalization of the monstrous can make it especially frightening, although also especially powerful in other ways. Monsters do not simply signify oppositional others that are safely fenced off within their own boundaries. Instead, they act as the harbingers of the otherness of possible worlds or of possible, if as yet unrealized, versions of ourselves (Shildrick 2002, 129, 2018). As such, they force us to look at others and otherness from a different angle but also invite us to reconfigure ourselves – to tune into the alien and the strange within us. The stick figure monsters in Tan's short story, for example, prompt the people around them to guess at or create meanings for their existence, which eventually leads them to ask questions about themselves:

> if you stop and stare at them for a long time, you can imagine that they too might be searching for answers, for some kind of meaning. It's as if they take all our questions and offer them straight back: Who are you? Why are you here? What do you want?
>
> (Tan 2009, 69)

This existential questioning triggered by an encounter with nonhuman otherness can easily spread to the readers as well, guiding them to reconsider the essence and meaning of humans and nonhumans. These questions, in turn, evoke further questions about how we could reconfigure the current world, which has already entered the era of the Anthropocene, so that it reflects true humanity as well as includes nonhuman others in the sphere of ethical consideration and – cohabitation.

As Zoe Jaques (2015, 5) remarks, children's fiction can make sophisticated, albeit often overlooked, interventions into the ongoing debates on being human and nonhuman, and maybe even posthuman. Indeed, children's literature features interesting discussions about the ethical qualities and the cultural signification processes permeating humans' relationships with other creatures. All in all, this genre offers wads of intriguing, underutilized material for examining the construction of nonhuman otherness and its complex interconnectedness with the othered groups that have been established inside humanity itself, including children. Sendak's, Tan's, and Tolonen's works show how the distinctions between humans and nonhumans are, on the one hand, artificially

produced, and how they could thus, on the other hand, be purposefully reconfigured. In the end, monsters seem to exist anywhere: outside of us, inside of us, and everywhere in between.

Notes

1 In traditional fiction, child and adult readers are usually expected to identify and empathize with at least one character, while in postmodern aesthetics, the reader might be detached from characters by making them repulsive: physically unattractive, morally depraved, or alien (Nikolajeva 2002, 38–39).
2 Even though Sendak's and Tan's works rely heavily on pictures, we will focus mainly on their textual elements in our analysis.
3 Despite the fact that most of Tan's award-winning stories feature child or monster protagonists, some critics have debated whether his works should be categorized as children's literature at all (see Banerjee 2013), whereas others consider him to be one of the world's most important children's authors who has transformed the entire genre with his works (see Kite 2016).
4 "A Manifesto for cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s" was originally published in *Socialist Review* 80 (1985), 65–108.
5 Not all of these characters are rebels in the same way. For instance, Peter Pan rebels against growing up, while Pippi Longstocking rebels against the expectation of being a vulnerable, dependent girl. Peter and Mowgli act as affirmation of the utopian state of childhood, while Pippi fights against it.
6 Keeping this in mind, it should be mentioned, however, that the idea of the adults giving up in their aspirations and fetishizing wild, untamed children and animals also seems quite irresponsible and destructive.

References

Ariès, Philippe. 1996. *Centuries of Childhood*. Translated from French by Robert Baldick. First published in 1960. London: Pimlico.

Åsberg, Cecilia, and Rosi Braidotti. 2018. "Feminist Posthumanities: An Introduction." In *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*, edited by Cecilia Åsberg, and Rosi Braidotti, 1–22. Cham: Springer.

Asma, Stephen T. 2009. *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Banerjee, Bidisha. 2013. "Utopian Transformations in the Contact Zone: A Posthuman, Postcolonial Reading of Shaun Tan and John Marsden's *The Rabbits*." *Global Studies of Childhood* 3 (4): 418–426.

Benshoff, Harry M. 1997. *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*. Manchester University Press.

Bettelheim, Bruno. 1979. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Beville, Maria. 2014. *The Unnameable Monster in Literature and Film*. London and New York: Routledge.

Bourdieu, Pierre, and Loïc J. D. Wacquant. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press.

Breggin, Peter R. 2014. "The Rights of Children and Parents In Regard to Children Receiving Psychiatric Diagnoses and Drugs." *Children & Society* 28, 231–241. doi: 10.1111/chso.12049

Butler, Judith. 2014. "Afterword. Animating Autobiography: Barbara Johnson and Mary Shelley's Monster." In *A Life with Mary Shelley*, edited by B. Johnson, 37–50. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

———. 2015. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. 1996. "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)." In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 3–25. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Cook, Daniel Thomas. 2009. "When Child is not a Child, and Other Conceptual Hazards of Childhood Studies." Editorial. *Childhood* 16 (1): 5–10.

Cross, Gary. 2004. *The Cute and The Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gilmore, David D. 2003. *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manners of Imaginary Terrors.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Haila, Yrjö. 2000. "Beyond the Nature-Culture Dualism." *Biology and Philosophy* 15: 155–175.

Halberstam, Judith. 1995. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Haraway, Donna. 2000. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In *The Cyberculture Reader*, edited by David Bell, and Barbara M. Kennedy, 291–324. London and New York: Routledge.

Hellstrand, Ingvil, Line Henriksen, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, Donna McCormack, and Sara Orning. 2018. "Promises, Monsters and Methodologies: The Ethics, Politics and Poetics of the Monstrous." *Somatechnics* 8 (2): 143–162. www.euppublishing.com/doi/full/10.3366/soma.2018.0247.

Holman Jones, Stacy, and Anne Harris. 2016. "Monsters, Desire and the Creative Queer Body." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 30 (5): 518–530. doi: 10.1080/10304312.2016.1210748

Jaques, Zoe. 2015. *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg.* New York: Routledge.

Jenkins, Henry. 1998. "Introduction: Childhood Innocence and Other Modern Myths." In *The Children's Culture Reader*, edited by Henry Jenkins, 1–40. New York: New York University Press.

Jones, Owain. 2008. "'True Geography [] quickly forgotten, giving away to an adult-imagined universe': Approaching the Otherness of Childhood." *Children's Geographies* 6 (2): 195–212.

Karkulehto, Sanna. 2010. "The 'Greatest Finn' Meets the 'Gay Marshal': Foucault's Cycle, National Narratives and *The Butterfly of the Urals*." *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 1 (2): 177–197. doi: 10.1386/jsca.1.2.177_1

———. 2012. "Genres and Genders In-Between: Genre and Gender Hybridity, and Pirkko Saisio's Novel *Punainen erokirja*." *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 20 (3): 199–214. doi: 10.1080/08038740.2012.700948

Kincheloe, Joe L. 1998. "Home Alone As a Way of Life." In *The Children's Culture Reader*, edited by Henry Jenkins, 159–177. New York: New York University Press.

Kite, Lorien. 2016. "How Shaun Tan Transformed Children's Literature." *Financial Times* August 19, 2016. www.ft.com/content/b60e8c32-64cb-11e6-a08a-c7ac04ef00aa.

Koistinen, Aino-Kaisa, and Sanna Karkulehto. 2018. "Posthuman(ist) Feminism, Feminist Posthumanities." *Genealogy of the Posthuman*. http://criticalposthumanism.net/genealogy/feminism/.

McCormack, Donna. 2018. "Queer Disability, Postcolonial Feminism and the Monsters of Evolution." In *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*, edited by Cecilia Åsberg, and Rosi Braidotti, 153–164. Cham: Springer.

Nikolajeva, Maria. 2002. *The Rhetoric of Character in Children's Literature*. Lanham, MA and Oxford: The Scarecrow Press.

Pedersen, Helena. 2015. "Education Policy Making for Social Change: A Posthuman Intervention." In *Posthumanism and Educational Research*, edited by Nathan Snaza, and John A. Weaver, 56–75. New York: Routledge.

Precup, Mihaela. 2017. "To 'All the Monster Girls': Violence and Non-normativity in Noelle Stevenson's *Nimona*." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 8 (6): 550–559. doi: 10.1080/21504857.2017.1361457

Sedgwick, E. K. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sendak, Maurice. 2013/1963. *Where the Wild Things Are*. London: Red Fox.

Shildrick, Margrit. 2002. *Embodying the Monster. Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. London: Sage.

———. 2018. "Re/membering the Body." In *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*, edited by Cecilia Åsberg, and Rosi Braidotti, 165–174. Cham: Springer.

Tan, Shaun. 2009. *Tales from Outer Suburbia*. London: Templar publishing.

Tolonen, Tuutikki. 2017. *Monster Nanny*. Illustrated by Pasi Pitkänen. Translated by Annika Silver. Original Edition *Mörkövahti* Published in Finnish by Tammi Publishers in 2015. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Trexler, Adam. 2015. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.

Warner, Marina. 1994. "Lecture 3: Little Angels, Little Devils: Keeping Children Innocent." In *Reith Lectures 1994: Managing Monsters*. Transmission 9 February 1994 – BBC Radio 4.

Weaver, John A. 2015. "To What Future Do the Posthuman and Posthumanism (Re)Turn Us; Meanwhile How Do I Tame the Lingering Effects of Humanism?" In *Posthumanism and Educational Research*, edited by Nathan Snaza, and John A. Weaver, 182–194. London and New York: Routledge.

Ylönen, Susanne. 2014. "'Meidän maailmamme möröt ovat sisäpuolella': Muuminologian vaikutus lastenkirjallisuuden eksistentiaalisten kauhujen arvottamiseen." In *Lastenkirja.Nyt*, edited by Marleena Mustola, 217–240. Helsinki: SKS.