

Snakes on a Page: Re-reading Monstrosity and Vulnerability in Selected Contemporary Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a radical departure in the reading of monstrosity and vulnerability in selected contemporary fiction. By focusing on the representation of particularly vilified members of the natural world, namely snakes, I expose how the authors destabilize the boundaries between human vulnerability and animal monstrosity. These representational strategies facilitate readers' engagement with the complicity of human characters in the violence that permeates the narrative arcs. More expansive and, I argue, more accurate readings of monstrosity enable us to move towards reckoning with the power of human characters to exert their will in destructive and cruel ways. This is a reckoning that is long overdue, and it is a crucial step towards more respectful engagement with the natural world. The texts that will form the foundation of the rest of the analysis are *Stay and Fight* (2019) by Madeline Ffitch, *Reptile Memoirs* (2022) by Silje Ulstein, and *Blue Skies* (2023) by T. C. Boyle, and I deploy strategically selected strands of Literary Animal Studies, Critical Animal Studies, Vegan Studies, and Monster Studies as the theoretical lens through which to read the novels. (JM)

KEYWORDS: vulnerability; monstrosity; snakes; children; contemporary fiction



As a rapidly changing climate and unpredicted, extreme weather events increasingly shape daily lives across the globe, contemporary societies can no longer ignore the impact of anthropogenic activities on the natural world. Literary fiction offers rich imaginary spaces within which authors can interrogate the ways in which humans both navigate their changing worlds and, through their actions or lack thereof, contribute to these changes. Key relationships that characterize our modes of engagement with our worlds are the ones we have with other animals. It is in these relationships that attitudes about ownership, control, and selfish exploitation crystallize clearly, albeit in ways that tend to remain unexamined. Animals feature in

our lives as so-called pets, parts of our diets, “items” on supermarket shelves, entertainment, unpaid emotional support, and other labor types. They are also put to work in our imaginary and representational repertoires, again in ways that often escape critical scrutiny.

This article utilizes an amalgamation of Literary Animal Studies, Critical Animal Studies, Vegan Studies, and Monster Studies as a theoretical framework to read three recently published novels—*Stay and Fight* (2019) by Madeline Ffitch, *Reptile Memoirs* (2022) by Silje Ulstein, and *Blue Skies* (2023) by T. C. Boyle—to expose and interrogate how deeply embedded anthropocentric ontological assumptions continue to distort understandings of our place within larger ecologies of practice. These distortions result in misunderstandings, resentment, and ultimately in violence. Close, critical scrutiny exposes how humans’ unwillingness to look beyond our presumed centrality sets the stage for scenarios in which these characters reframe narratives to claim roles of vulnerable victims when their own choices directly, and predictably, result in violence. The human characters’ avoidance of responsibility for their own actions is highlighted through the presence of snakes, who are perceived as monstrous animal others. In representational maneuvers that exacerbate the monstrosity of an animal that is already vulnerable to misunderstanding, the authors place snakes in direct conflict with young children. The violent confrontations between the snakes and the children serve as plot devices that challenge readers’ expectations. This analysis will focus on interrogating the literary constructions of monstrosity and vulnerability in the selected texts. By re-reading the novels from a more-than-human scholarly perspective, new understandings of monstrosity, vulnerability, and power are allowed to emerge. More expansive and, I argue, more accurate readings of monstrosity enable us to move towards reckoning with the power of humans to exert their will in destructive and cruel ways. This long-overdue reckoning is a crucial step towards a more respectful engagement with the natural world, where the distinctions between who is vulnerable and who is dangerous are no longer taken for granted.

Literary Animal Studies (LAS) serves as a richly generative theoretical lens that facilitates a re-reading of cultural texts and invites the deconstruction of animal signs. It also opens up new ways of thinking about embedded anthropocentric ideologies by engaging substantively with a more-than-human perspective. Roland Borgards explains that LAS “explores literary animals in a way that highlights how deeply aesthetic and literary questions are interwoven with both political and material spheres”

(156). As this analysis will demonstrate, the literary snakes are located within particular contexts, and their representations can most meaningfully be understood when we consider the political and material dynamics that come into play when they appear on the pages of the texts. In his work on literary animals, Robert McKay calls for critical scholarship that “would systematically and conscientiously attend to the representational complexity of cultural imaginings of animals’ lives and deaths, and of the manifold encounters with humans that often mark the passage from one to the other” (637). This article contributes to the growing bodies of research that heed McKay’s invitation. Like McHugh, I believe that the stakes of such an intellectual exercise are high, as “the textual politics of literary animals . . . suggests a thoroughgoing critique attuned to the traces of species, to markings of potentials for different orders of agency beyond the human subject” (487). Anthropocentric epistemological assumptions about literary animals both reflect and perpetuate discursive constructions that render animals beyond the text vulnerable to violence. Critical Animal Studies (CAS) as a theoretical framework with an activist orientated agenda has obvious potential to add value to an interrogation of the representations of snakes in these novels. However, the addition of key elements from Vegan Studies (VS) and, to a lesser extent, Monster Studies (MS) enriches the analytical lens through which this reading takes place and allows fresh insights to emerge. The overlaps and points of alignment between CAS and MS facilitate a reading that does the unthinkable. It compels a shift from assigning primary vulnerability to children who are hurt to the snakes who hurt them. In addition, it moves the needle in the construction of monstrosity from the snakes to the human characters who wield their anthropocentric power in such cavalierly careless ways that the violence permeates the pages long before the children are attacked. Simon Mittman articulates the role of the monster as follows:

Monsters do a great deal of cultural work, but they do not do it *nice*ly. They not only challenge and question; they trouble, they worry, they haunt. They break and tear and rend cultures, all the while constructing them and propping them up. They swallow up our cultural mores and expectations, and then, becoming what they eat, they reflect back to us our own faces, made disgusting or, perhaps, revealed to always have been so. (1)

When the snakes ingest the children, the reflection reveals the human face as the most destructive stakeholder in all the narrative scenarios, yet this

monstrosity can easily be overlooked when the tragedy involves a child being hurt. It is, however, when we engage with this monstrous human reflection that we are most eager to consider the ruptures in our ontological and symbolic frameworks. The unsettling, disruptive potential of the monster is a theoretically rich tool for, as Ingvil Hellstrand et al. note, “[W]hat or who is considered monster/monstrous is not based on ontologically fixed categorisations but rather something that shifts between objects and bodies, between imaginaries and politics, as part of cultural circulation, and is therefore also open to change” (2). The representations of the humans and the snakes in the selected novels encourage readers to grapple with the instabilities of these constructions. Monstrosity as a discursive construct is an imaginary that can be deployed in complex, multifaceted ways, and it can manifest physically, socially, culturally, sexually, as mental other, or as villain. While all these deployments emerge in the selected texts, this article will focus primarily on identifying and challenging how monstrosity is represented around snakes.

Engaging with the vulnerability of snakes is already a fraught task, even when they are not being represented as a threat to children. Sue Hall Pyke traces the Western cultural tendency towards “snake vilification” (475) to biblical constructions of snakes as “harbingers of evil” (476). In a comprehensive overview of how snakes tend to be “mischaracterized and vilified” (7), Animesh Manna explores Judeo Christian associations between snakes and humanity’s downfall in the Garden of Eden, while also recognizing cultural differences in understandings of snakes. While a more thorough engagement with the rich symbolism around snakes is beyond the scope of this article, I agree with Manna’s explanation that “Eastern traditions often embrace snakes as embodiments of wisdom, renewal, and protection, while Western traditions frequently portray them as harbingers of evil and temptation” (4). Notwithstanding this symbolic complexity, the prevalence of “fear-based narratives” (1) related to snakes continue to saturate the Western imagination, and the representational dynamics of this reality are what I seek to interrogate in my analysis. The appearance of snakes also means that they are not likely to elicit a “cute response” which, as Kate Marx explains, involves certain types of features that elicit in human observers an “innate response that made them want to nurture and protect the bearer of those features” (92). While the cute response is far from benign in relation to how people treat animals because it objectifies them (see Harris), the popular perception of snakes as slithery and scary does exacerbate their vulnerability to violence. The global snakeskin trade is just

one example of how snakes are subjected to “spectacular cruelty” (Barkham). Both vulnerability and monstrosity demand new, more nuanced readings, which my selected theoretical frameworks facilitate as I engage with the primary texts in the rest of this article.

CAS demands a radical shift away from some of our most deeply embedded epistemological and ontological assumptions about the centrality of the human animal. Nik Taylor and Richard Twine make terminological choices that resonate with the Mittman quotation above when they note that CAS “attempts to rupture normative understandings” (4) of everything from scholarly and disciplinary conventions to conceptual and theoretical frameworks as they advance an academic activist agenda that seriously engages with the quality of animals’ lives and deaths. The critical dimension of CAS is crucial for the purposes of this article, as it allows us to interrogate the representations of snakes as political, discursive maneuvers that reflect problematically anthropocentric sociocultural assumptions even as they reinforce and perpetuate these assumptions. As Steven Best explains, CAS critiques

the entire social system and complex of oppression and domination, such as has developed throughout the human-established “civilization” of the last ten thousand years, and it seeks a radical political analysis and tactic in response to systemic social and environmental problems. (23)

Best’s articulation resonates with my argument as his formulation also invites us to question how we conceptualize “civilization” in contexts of violence against nonhuman animals. This is similar to my argument that we need to rethink how we understand monstrosity.

The images of monsters swallowing up and eating invite a consideration of how Vegan Studies can contribute to the theoretical framework I am proposing for this analysis. Twine makes a case for a “pro-vegan CAS” and he couples this with a reiteration of “the often made point that veganism is more than ‘just a diet’ and is better seen and practised as a systemic and intersectional mode of critical analysis and a useful lived philosophy counter to anthropocentrism, hierarchy and violence” (19). Systemic critiques and reflecting on how violence emanates from anthropocentrism will prove to be particularly generative in reading against the grain of popular constructions of monstrosity and vulnerability. Vegan Studies also focuses on the disruptive and troubling potential of conventional modes of being, and specifically of eating, in the world. As

Twine argues, vegans “introduce a sense of embodied questioning, a discomfort to the habitual normativity of meat culture” (631). The consumption of animals depends on keeping the referent absent (see Adams) and processes of marginalization, both in terms of where slaughterhouses are located and the type of workers who are typically employed in these spaces, function to perpetuate this invisibility. Twine explains the role of the vegan in challenging these processes as follows: “In a sense the violence that meat culture more or less successfully sequesters to the spatial and class margins of society is brought back into uncomfortable proximity by the presence of the vegan” (631–32). The marginalized status of the human characters in the selected texts do not make them vegan, but it does locate them in positions where they share a vested interest in challenging the status quo. Vegan Studies exposes the flawed assumptions and the strategic power of anthropocentrism that facilitate the continuous human complicity in literally eating violence and the suffering of sentient beings. The representation of snakes using their bodies to consume the bodies of children “reflect back to us our own faces” (Mittman 1), our own complicity, and our own monstrosity. All three of the selected theoretical frameworks contain core tenets that compel us to think differently about how we are in the world, about what props up some of our most naturalized understandings of our place in our worlds, and about what gets exposed when ruptures and rends become impossible to ignore. The fictional confrontations between snakes and children enable us to think through these dynamics in service of considering new imaginaries. New imaginaries are needed to reflect new ontologies as it is impossible to continue pretending that existing frameworks serve the natural world we share with other animals.

The three texts offer layered plot lines with snakes, and specifically the violent confrontation between snakes and young children, serving to move the narratives towards their climactic dénouements. As the plots develop, snakes slither along the margins of the human character arcs, but their mere presence foreshadows the monstrous violence to come. While my analytical focus will be on the authorial choices around the snakes’ representations, I will provide a brief overview of each text for contextual purposes. Significantly, the plot outlines will signal the outsider status of the human protagonists, and their own social marginalization will be tied into the discussion of the snakes. In *Stay and Fight*, Helen, Karen, and Lily’s paths converge when they move in together in rural Appalachia, after Helen’s boyfriend leaves. Karen and Lily are a couple with a young son,

Perley. Much of the novel revolves around the challenges the three women face as they try to carve out a home and a life for themselves off the grid and at the edges of a society that fails to respect their choices and their constructions of a family. Perley is seven years old when the snake attacks him. One of his mothers, Karen, is a trained nurse and she treats his wounds at home but, when the school sees his injuries, child protection services are called in and Perley is removed from the women's care.

I will engage most succinctly with *Stay and Fight* because, while the novel provides an easy access point into the discussion, it represents slightly more innocently anthropocentric human characters who do not cause the confrontation quite so directly as they do not go out and buy "pet" snakes to bring into their home. Throughout the article, I use quotation marks when I use the word "pet" to signal my recognition that this is a loaded and problematic term to use in relation to animals. The construction of vulnerability is also less stark as Perley is older than the babies who are represented in the other two novels and, unlike them, he survives the incident. Karen and Lily are building their home on the outskirts of a society that will "treat Karen like she's just some stranger" (18) rather than Perley's mother, and where they are both marginalized as "dykes" (15). This marginalized outsider status is cast as its own type of monstrosity, and it serves a boundary policing function in the community. In their analysis of constructions of monstrosity in narratives of sexual violence, Anja Emilie Kruse and May-Len Skilbrei explain that the "purging of unwanted or monstrous 'elements' may also be seen as effectuating and strengthening the social bonds of a normative community—those *inside*—at the expense of severing the bonds of the expelled—the *outsiders*" (841). Karen and Lily are very much outsiders here, but the extreme outsider status of the snakes facilitates at least some accommodation of them inside the community. The women are all sharing a bonding moment with their neighbors when the first snake enters the narrative. Karen describes the rare moment of getting along with their neighbors as follows: "It was when we pictured ourselves standing together against outside threats, instead of threatening one another" (59), and this is the point in the narrative when the "black rat snake" slithers onto the page. Significantly, this snake is introduced in the same paragraph where Karen reflects that they "preferred to imagine [them]selves on the right side of things, including history" (59). Her comment relates to a general sense of treating the land and people respectfully, and she is also the character who tries to understand the snake's perspective. My larger argument in this article asserts that our

interactions with other animals, as crystallized in conventional constructions of monstrosity and vulnerability, place us firmly and destructively on the wrong side of history.

Karen is, albeit in a compromised manner, attempting to consider and to teach Perley what it is like to be a snake. I am adapting this formulation from Thomas Nagel's influential essay on an inter-species encounter titled "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" (1974). The snake's presence in the text is immediately represented as a cause for alarm as another child points and, with a raised voice as indicated by the exclamation mark, alerts the group to the snake: "Then one of Frank's daughters pointed down behind the woodstove and said, 'Snake!'" (59). The skewed, anthropocentric power dynamics are signaled by the fact that the child is positioned above the snake and points down to where the snake is seeking concealment behind the stove.

While this article does not allow space to delve into the philosophical intricacies of Nagel's argument, the description of the scene urges the reader to imagine how the snake experiences this moment where a group of people are looking down on the exposed body while numerous children are pointing and shrieking. The reader learns that the "snake froze in place. It grew rigid and crimped up all along its length. It gave off a sulfur-and-onions smell..." (59). Karen tells the children to stop shrieking as they are scaring the snake and that the "kink" is "an anxiety reflex" while the smell is emitted "when they're afraid" (59). She tries to teach Perley to engage with the snake by telling him that the snake is their friend and that "[t]his snake lives here, too." While well-meaning, this is a gross oversimplification of the co-existence of a snake and humans in a shared space, and the result is predictably violent. This encounter starts an extended conflict between the women as Lily fears the consequences of the snake in such close proximity to Perley, and Karen insists that there is no cause for concern. The human characters use the snake as an example in what they consider to be a teachable moment (Karen's explanations of how the snake feels), as a way to exhibit their environmental sensitivity in what amounts to little more than ecological virtue signaling (Karen's references to their shared habitats, 69), a symbolic way of claiming the land on which they are making their home (Karen refers to the snake's presence as a sign that their new house had been chosen and Frank says the snake indicates luck, 59), interesting objects of amusement to spot (the shrieking girls), and as a toy to laugh and lunge at (Perley 60). What they fail to do in any meaningful way is to engage respectfully with the snakes who are trying to

maintain a place to hide and who are mostly represented as reacting to humans in fear and protective modes.

As Perley grows into a toddler, he asserts himself as a “Friend of Snake” (62) and is repeatedly represented as imposing this sense of friendship onto the snakes by grasping, hitting, and hissing at them playfully. The snakes become a pawn in the parenting battles the three women are engaging in, and Perley ends up learning nothing about how to be in the world with other animals. When he gives them “a thwack” (67) because he finds the smell they emit in fear amusing, Lily resists Helen’s attempt to course correct his behavior by insisting that “[h]itting is Perley’s form of love-petting” (67). The women discuss the intended meaning of his hitting by demonstrating how it feels on each other while completely disregarding that the profound power imbalances between humans and animals would make these experiences completely different for snakes. The snakes keep trying to convey their experiences to the human characters via their fear smell, but they never take this seriously. When the snakes start getting close to Perley’s body, the terminological choices signal how little headway these human characters had made in terms of challenging anthropocentric interactions with animals. Lily sees that Perley is “playing with something” (69) she could not see before realizing that he is touching a snake. This brief phrase signals the status of the snake as a thing rather than as someone, and as a toy. When Lily sees the “black snake coiled twice around his arm” (69), she “swiped that snake down Perley’s arm like taking off a bracelet” (69). As the simile suggests, these snakes are never more than accessories and, when a human character chooses to do so, they can be violently removed from any habitat that they supposedly “share”. While Lily and Karen focus on Perley’s safety, the snake who is swiped aside speaks in this short, stark sentence: “Sulfur engulfed us” (69). A close reading reveals fear, violence, power imbalance, and human self-centeredness rather than some idyllic embrace of nature.

When the attack happens, Karen realizes that her actions set the stage for it, but she remains unable to de-center herself from the narrative. Perley is hurt and the snakes end up hunted and killed, but Karen reflects on how she paid for her actions (117). While Perley suffers injuries from which he recovers and they temporarily lose custody of him, the snakes lose their habitat and their lives, so the reader is encouraged to wonder about who really paid for the mistakes: a CAS reading suggests that it was not the human characters, or that any price they paid pales in comparison to what the snakes lose. By the time the snake attacks Perley, the author has

problematized the human behavior to such an extent that it is impossible to read the snake as simply monstrous, even though the violence is represented graphically.

In an analysis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* through rubrics of Monster Theory and CAS, Morgan Armstrong notes that the categories of both monsters and humans are constructions. Armstrong explores how the "process of 'monster-making,' also renders the process of 'human-making' visible, and ironically, somewhat monstrous" (14). Similar dynamics are at play in the imaginary world of Perley and the adults that facilitate the violence. Ffitch's representation of the child being attacked refuses to resort to blaming the snake and, in doing so, she encourages readers to reconsider our own categorizations of monstrosity and to see the permeability of the boundaries between monsters, animals, and humans. Karen, who encouraged the presence of the snakes in the human home, is the one whose narrative point of view is used to describe the violent clash. She makes an ominous distinction between how this specific species of snake bites and eats:

A black snake's bite is like a slap, there and gone

But the way a black snake eats is different from the way a black snake bites.

When a black snake eats, its mouth is a conveyer belt. Its back-curved teeth haul the snake forward to engulf its prey. Once attached, it's difficult, as a practical matter, for that snake to let go.

Perley was prey too big to eat whole. He'd rolled onto the snake with the full weight of his sleeping body, trapping it. The snake struck his face, just below his left eye. It couldn't retreat, so it dug in. (Ffitch 117)

Throughout this encounter, the snake is represented as a "panicked creature" (118), and the dissolving boundaries between the panicking women and the snake are further suggested by the merging of their collective fear: "The odor that overtook the room belonged to us all" (118). When the women finally manage to detach the snake from Perley, "bits of its teeth remained" in the child's body with Perley's face "gaping and raw, his horrible open eye vacant above the wound" (118). Perley himself appears monstrously disfigured here, and this further facilitates a reading of the child rather than the snake as the monster, and the snake rather than the child becomes associated with vulnerability.

The snake has nowhere to retreat to, but the human characters do, yet they choose not to do so. Monstrosity shifts to Karen, as she seems to

morph into a mute, mindless being who relishes her violence. Helen describes how “Karen refused to speak to me or to anyone. She didn’t sleep. She took the .22 down from the rafters and paced the floor, stalking snakes. In the morning, I swept up exploded skins, scattered mouse meat, split snake hide. She’d grin darkly at the wall” (168). The capacities for speech and rational thinking are core components of propping up constructed divisions between animals and humans, and between humans and monsters. Karen’s silence and her irrational violence serve to challenge the readers’ assumptions about what is human. By destabilizing the category of the human, the author also prompts a rethinking of the nonhuman and the monstrous, since these categories all take shape in their oppositions to each other. As Armstrong explains via engagement with Foucault’s work, “the ‘human’ identity possesses a genealogical trajectory with ‘origins’ discursively embedded in what this identity claims *not* to be. In other words, its existence relies on its opposition to the ‘nonhuman’” (3). The anthropocentric power of the human to exert our will and our violence discursively and physically is exposed to such an extent that we are forced to ask ourselves who the real monsters are in this scenario.

Blue Skies depicts a recognizable American future where climate change’s consequences structure all aspects of the characters’ day-to-day lives. Ottilie and her husband Frank are an elderly couple, living in California. They have two adult children, Cooper, who is a biologist, and Catherine (Cat), who flits between jobs and moves to Florida with her partner, Todd. Cat spends much of her time day drinking while trying to establish herself on social media as an influencer and she buys a “pet” snake to give her brand an edge. Cat and Todd have twin girls called Tahoe and Sierra. The babies are two months old when Cat’s snake attacks Sierra. In this novel, the snake causes the baby’s death, and the family is left with accusations of “child endangerment” and the “real possibility of [social services] putting Tahoe in protective custody” (224). The introduction of the snake in *Blue Skies* is represented through a simile that mobilizes imagery of jewelry in a more extended manner than Lily’s cursory reference to the bracelet in *Ffitch’s* novel. Boyle uses repetition and he titles the first chapter, which is narrated from Cat’s narrative perspective, “They were like jewelry”. The first line of the chapter repeats the phrase, and then again, the word: “They were like jewelry, living jewelry, and she could see herself wearing one wrapped around her shoulders . . .” (3). In the rest of the opening paragraph, she thinks about how the wearing of the snake “would make a statement” and she spends some time considering what outfit would

show off this accessory most effectively. It is only on the next page that we learn that the “they” refers to snakes she sees in an exotic pet shop. She discusses her purchase with the owner, R. J., by referring to sizes and coloring, and comparing one’s skin to a “design like something you’d see in a print top at Anthropologie” (6), the upmarket clothing and accessory chain. She ends up buying a young Burmese python, a species of snake that R. J. tells her “make great pets, but they do tend to get big” (7). After haggling down the price, she takes the snake and heads to the nearest bar, and she describes the “thrill of carrying it with her like any new purchase” (10). She calls the snake Willie and, despite the act of naming him, she continues her objectification by noting that his body felt “no different from the snakeskin purse she had at home” (13). Cat is in general represented as a rather superficial and contradictory character who is struggling to find her place in the world, but the levels of cognitive dissonance she displays in her engagement with Willie are extreme. With a startling lack of self-reflexivity, she switches between equating Willie to consumer items and referring to a terrarium as “his new home,” which “was designed to give the snake a little privacy so that he could feel secure” (19). She goes so far as to wonder whether snakes “even dreamed” (20). These references to Willie’s feelings and imagined interiority ring hollow, and Willie is never more than a prop in Cat’s attempts to construct some identity that feels meaningful to herself.

Cat’s self-centered selfishness is represented in the context of a family whose attempts at ethical engagement with the natural world signal ever-expanding levels of self-delusion that allows the reader to reframe understandings of monstrosity before the snake kills a baby. The “They were like jewelry” chapter is followed by chapter two, titled “Entomophage,” which offers Otilie’s perspective as she shares how Cooper’s concerns have shaped their diets. Cooper encourages the family to consider the environment and he explicitly centers animals and food in these discussions when he says: “Cows. Pigs. Goats. Jesus, we’re chewing ourselves into oblivion” (26). Significantly, while Cooper is the character who is most committed to expanding the gaze to consider seriously the place of other animals, his articulation reveals what he continues to value most highly, namely how the treatment of animals impacts human life on a planet in peril. Our potential “oblivion” is the issue here, rather than the suffering of the cows, pigs, and goats on our plates. Cooper and Otilie are represented as more clear-headed and sensible than Cat, and they are well aware of the suffering that infuses the food chain. They just do not care enough for this awareness to result in any real change in their behavior.

Ottile refers to “sparing sentient creatures the horror of the slaughterhouse” as “another argument Cooper had used to soften her up” but, ultimately, the knowledge of these animals’ suffering is overridden by the fact that her husband “just isn’t into vegetarian” (26). She describes the violence of animals being turned into food in graphic detail but, rather than regarding this as any moral imperative to change, it simply becomes information that she can choose to disregard because of her husband’s dietary preferences. This knowing complicity in violent suffering means that the novel introduces various human iterations of monstrosity long before the snake kills the baby.

Dinesh Wadiwel mobilizes the monstrous to understand the animal-industrial complex, which constitutes “a monstrous deployment of technologies of violence and extermination” (283). In his interrogation of the “monstrous scale” on which humans cause the suffering of fish, Wadiwel teases out the epistemic dynamics that render us incapable of understanding “fishing as a system of concentrated violence against sea animals” (204). Significantly, Boyle represents characters who cannot claim ignorance yet persists in making choices that actively contribute to the violence against the animals they eat. Ottile admits that “yes, she’d seen the films of chickens dangling by their feet on a disassembly line, awaiting the whirring blade to decapitate them, and the steers taking the blow to the head while their knees buckled and the pitched forward in dark avalanches of flesh” (27). Boyle follows these stark images of brutality with Ottile’s admission that “she felt good about herself” for her performative acts of caring as she incorporates insect protein into the family’s diets. These descriptions encourage the reader to reframe Ottile from a sweet grandmother who loses a grandchild to a monster, to a powerful character whose careless complicity in violence makes her a monster, albeit one who takes on a more palatable form than a snake engorged with an infant.

The text never lets the reader forget Cat’s complicity in the violence either. When Cat awakes after an alcohol-infused sleep, she realizes that Sierra was silent because she “was wrapped up in some sort of bright shining blanket, which wasn’t a blanket at all” (222). The baby is wrapped up in Willie, whom Cat has been insisting she loves (113). She now removes any sentience from him when she notes that his “eyes were dead things” (222) as his “coils tightened” around the child. Cat now morphs into a mindless agent of violence as she finds herself “jerking at his head, pounding him with her fists, screaming herself” and she notes that “she was slashing, she was stabbing” (222). Meera Lee draws on Derrida and explains

that “the term *monstre* typically serves to mark the separation of human beings as a higher form of life from other animal species” (719), but the image of Cat attacking Willie signals the “overlapping boundary between the monster and the human” (720). Cat’s selfish, anthropocentric attempts to incorporate Willie into her human world and her own descent into animalistic violence result in a situation where it becomes impossible to maintain clear boundaries between human and monster. The dead baby is collateral damage to Cat’s decisions as much as to Willie’s attack. If Willie is a monster, at the very least, we need to admit that he is not the only one in this scenario. Cat’s lack of self-awareness and responsibility is striking as she swiftly moves to construct herself as the victim. When she is arrested for the “aggravated manslaughter of a child” (255), she notes that Willie was euthanized but that it did not matter to her “because he’d got what was coming to him, and if he’d only stayed where he belonged, which was perfectly adequate, better than adequate, none of this would have happened” (253). She constructs him as ungrateful and betrays no hint of irony when she describes her “pet” home as where he belonged.

In the final novel for this analysis, *Reptile Memoirs*, the narrative switches between chapters narrated by Liv and set in 2003, 2004, and 2005, chapters narrated by Mariam set in 2017, and ones narrated by police officers, Roe and Ronja, in 2017. It emerges that Liv and Mariam are the same person, and that Liv changed her name after surviving a series of tragedies. Liv is a second identity after she shed her previous one, when she was called Sara, after being raped as a child by her brother Patrick. The shedding of her identity is reminiscent of a snake shedding a skin. As an adult, Mariam marries Tor and they raise Mariam’s daughter, Iben, together. The central plotline involves the attempts to find Iben after the eleven-year-old disappears from a shopping center in 2017. The snake/child confrontation in this text, however, is from Liv’s life in 2004. During this time, Liv shares a flat with two young men, Ingvar and Egil, and she buys a “pet” snake whom she calls Nero. The plot is intricate, and a number of characters’ arcs overlap in unexpected ways. Anita, who turns out to be Roe’s daughter, and Liv start an affair. After leaving her abusive partner, Anita and her baby daughter, Aurora, move in with Liv. Baby Aurora is still breastfeeding when Nero kills her. Nero’s naming after the Roman Emperor signals the introduction of a character who is associated with violence and cruelty, as well as misunderstanding and mythologizing. Significant bodies of scholarship have been devoted to grappling with the complex nature of Emperor Nero, who has been described as a “monster

king” (Draper 1), while also being recognized as a historical figure who was much too complex to be reduced to simple monstrosity. While all three of these novels try to offer some insight into the snakes’ perspectives and they all avoid any simplistic representation of the snakes as monstrous others, *Reptile Memoirs* goes further and devotes chapters throughout the novel to Nero’s point of view, in much the same way as it switches between the narrative perspectives of the main human protagonists. Like *Blue Skies*, *Reptile Memoirs* opens with a description of a snake’s body, which the narrator, Liv, describes as “a paradox” (3) of hardness and softness, heaviness and light, coarseness, and smoothness. The description signals the threatening potential of the snake’s body as his “split tongue vibrated slightly in the air, and he moved slowly up along [her] chest, towards [her] throat” (3). Like Cat, she experiences complicated feelings for the snake, and she wonders whether those feelings could best be described as “love” or “maternal affection,” but she is convinced that there is “a connection that crossed the boundaries between species” (4). Both Cat and Liv obtain the snakes for whom they pretend to care via the exotic pet trade. This is a trade in which the “exotic pets experience cruelty at every stage of the journey to a lifetime of captivity” (World Animal Protection 2019). The paradox Liv ascribes to the snake’s body is all part of her own projections onto that body, and she extends her paradoxical readings of the snake as she describes his “stony dead eyes” (3) but, a mere page later, thinks that the snake looks at her “with trust, even understanding” (4). Liv names him Nero and she insists that she “[w]anted to open [her] mind and understand his language” (26). She also performs her supposed commitment to his wellbeing by wondering whether they could feed him “live mice” because that “must be better for them—more natural” (26). There is, of course, nothing good or natural for either the mice or the snake in a setting where they have become props in Liv’s attempt to find connection and meaning in her life. She wonders about the best ways to use these creatures without ever considering that not using them at all would be the best for all concerned.

Her cruelty and violence in service of what is “best” for Nero continue to increase as she fools a woman into letting her take a kitten that she could no longer take care of herself. While the woman thinks she is adopting the kitten, she is taking the animal to feed to Nero. The author emphasizes the vulnerability of the kitten, and the fear as “[i]t screamed” when it noticed Nero, not “a kitten’s mewl, but a terrified scream like that of a person, which was immediately silenced by Nero’s teeth as they sunk

into the kitten's delicate neck" (64). These descriptions are accompanied by Liv's rationalizations as she convinces herself that her actions are morally justified as the kitten would have been euthanized anyway. As Liv tries to justify the kitten's suffering, she tells herself that her actions and those of Nero are not as bad as those of humans, who "[c]alled [their] prey beef and pretended it had never been alive" (64). While cows are indeed subjected to immense suffering en route to humans' plates, this does not in any way diminish the fear of the kitten or Nero's suffering in his confined space in Liv's home. The abandonment of "pets", the decision to keep a snake as a "pet", the killing of the kitten (a feeding exercise Liv later repeats with a rabbit and a puppy), industrial animal agriculture and Liv are all operating within the same anthropocentric frame. By the time the novel gets to the snake killing the baby, the narrative has become littered with monstrous behavior that extends far beyond just the snake's actions.

In the sections narrated from Nero's perspective, which the author prioritizes by giving the same title as the novel, the snake clearly articulates the sense of confinement and, significantly for the purposes of this analysis, he invokes the image of a monster in how he perceives a human woman. He describes her as a "creature" who was "enormous" and emphasizes her relative power by noting how "[i]t was its height that was most impressive, how the being towered over me" (39). Here, as a human becomes a hulking, threatening thing, Nero also deploys the objectifying pronoun "it" in his references to her.

When Nero recounts killing Aurora, the description makes it clear that his actions are similar to what he did in response to the mice, kitten, and puppy Liv served up to him as food. He describes the encounter with the baby as follows: "Kept control of myself for a split second in order to truly savour the pleasure at having found such fantastic prey, before I darted forth. Sank my teeth into the little neck and felt the sweet, bloody juices run down my throat" (218). The snake has no way of making any moral distinction between the "delicate neck" of the kitten (64) and the baby's "little neck" and he is operating within a framework that is entirely Liv's creation. There is no logical way to ascribe monstrosity to Nero without fundamentally implicating Liv. She notes how she "pictured the scene again and again": "how I had entered the room and seen that it was already too late, that he had killed and suffocated tiny Aurora, and that it was all my fault" (222). Liv takes responsibility in a way that Cat and Karen never do, but that does nothing to diminish the monstrous consequences of her actions.

As the novel nears its end, Nero relates that he recognizes some of the words he hears humans use when they come to look at him. He begins with words that are associated with his objectification as a potential commodity object, such as “skin,” “lovely,” and “valuable” (332), and he moves on to “Monster” (332), which is what a man calls him after he bites him in response to being touched. Nero’s description of the man’s hand, which was “dirty and hairy” (332), signals the text’s continuous challenging of the boundaries between human and monstrous animal. Detective Roe also contributes to the destabilization of the human/monster binary when he thinks about “Aurora’s delicate ribs, broken as if she had been squeezed by something” (336). He decides that the baby’s father, “Birk didn’t have a motive to kill his own child. A snake, on the other hand, needed no motive. It needed only a devil of a person who brought the hunter to its prey” (336). Liv is the one who orchestrated the crossing of Nero and Aurora’s paths, however unwittingly, so the role of devil is one that Roe associates with her rather than with the snake.

This article has demonstrated how selected contemporary novels challenge conventional understandings of monstrosity and vulnerability. In her reading of monstrosity and humanity in South Korean film, Meera Lee explores how a text can “depart radically from the conventional allegorical meaning of the monster” by mobilizing “ambivalence, as marked by the uncanniness or indistinction between humanity and monstrosity” (742). By reading selected texts through the rubrics of specific strands of Literary Animal Studies, Critical Animal Studies, Vegan Studies, and Monster Studies, I also expose how the faces of the human characters that are reflected back from the snakes’ gazes are infused with their own monstrosity. These texts refuse any simplistic boundaries between humanity and monstrosity and, when we engage with these blurred boundaries, new constructions of vulnerability are allowed to emerge. Snakes are members of the natural world who are particularly vulnerable to vilification; these textual snakes are representationally poised to be read as the epitome of monstrosity when they harm human children. However, when we engage with the texts from a vantage point that respects the more-than-human gaze, we are able to read their vulnerability and the human characters are revealed as the most powerful and casually complicit agents. We cannot meet the demands of this historical moment without understanding how to care for and engage with the most vulnerable members of our worlds. In order to do so, we need more nuanced and sophisticated tools for reading vulnerability. Through a close, critical analysis of three novels, this article

offers ways to expand our reading repertoires in ways that allow us to see monstrosity and vulnerability more realistically.

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