

The Animal Within:

Recognizing the Fullness of Adolescent Selves

“Trouble with us humans is we keep forgetting we’re animals.”

—Eva 114

My twelve-year-old son, Jack, has recently had yet another surge of growth. He is taller (5’4), and heavier (124 pounds). But the place he has grown the most has been in his feet. He now wears size 9 men’s shoes. Jack is mutating right before my eyes. Given the rapid degree of change in his physical appearance, it isn’t surprising that he is undergoing similar shifts internally. He, like other young adults, has learned to deal with radical change as a way of life. This transforming spirit of adolescence is at the heart of my focus, along with the books explored here, and will show the natural bewilderment (and delight) that accompanies new powers and abilities.

Young adult literature includes many outer transforming novels in which young adults routinely take on animal forms. These books document how the lure of the natural, animal world intermingles (and often conflicts) with the acculturation all adolescents go through. These animal/human books serve as a metaphor for the funny, absurd difficulties of straddling worlds. Radical young adult transformations are at the heart of Annette Curtis Klause’s

Blood and Chocolate, Donna Jo Napoli’s *Sirena*, Patrice Kindl’s *Owl in Love*, Melvin Burgess’ *Lady: My Life as a Bitch*, Linda Hogan’s *Power*, Philip Pullman’s *The Golden Compass*, and Peter Dickinson’s *Eva*. The transformations these protagonists undergo are not merely intellectual. All aspects of their physical, spiritual, and intellectual world are affected. These books suggest that life is less certain than we might allow, and profoundly mysterious in ways that are often shuttered out. They explore the complex (and sometimes opposed viewpoints) often co-existing in an adolescent, demonstrating that knowledge comes in many forms, and for many purposes.

Adolescents have long been stereotyped as split figures without stability, their warring selves struggling in vain to secure an identity. Whether these conflicting sides are child vs. adult, or instinctual vs. intellectual, the difficulties are real. The young protagonists in these seven novels—whether werewolf, mermaid, owl, dog, panther or chimpanzee—struggle mightily to keep their humanity alive as they walk in and out of worlds that do not smoothly mesh.

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These protagonists, like all adolescents, must try out roles and take on personas until the labels they apply to themselves fit. Like all young adults, they must also become adept at code-switching—learning how to communicate in radically different roles and contexts. In these books the stark differences between the animal world and the human world—and child consciousness and adult perspective—make decision-making for these protagonists especially difficult.

It is no accident that the protagonist in each of these novels is a young woman. Readers of children's

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and young adult literature are accustomed to seeing feisty, independent and intelligent young women. But these animal/human books add a new twist. Placing these young women in animal and human forms forces new contexts for evaluating ways young women can flourish. The animal/human link helps readers to see the rich abilities of these young women. We can't just say *she's a cheerleader; she's a shy girl; she's boy crazy*. We have to say she's a whiz at biology—and an owl. Or a beautiful young woman—and a

werewolf. Or an accomplished musician—and a mermaid. Combining animal and human forms also helps readers see sexuality and other dangerous topics with new eyes. Seeing the animal side so closely aligned with the human side highlights the extraordinary demands placed on these earthy young women. Free from "normal" social conventions and "typical" peer groups, these young women must learn to utilize their powers in a world that doesn't understand. But first, they must learn the rules of both the animal and the human worlds.

In *Lady: My Life as a Bitch* and *Eva*, two normal

teenage girls are transformed without warning into animals. Lady and Eva find themselves literally transformed from their human form and placed in an alien animal body. Like many other adolescents, these two young women are rudely thrown into a new culture, without rules or guidebooks, with no convenient adjustment period. They have little choice but to cope. They ultimately must also choose between their animal and human societies.

When Sandra Farmer, the seventeen-year-old protagonist in *Lady: My Life as a Bitch*, accidentally turns into a dog, her own family cannot recognize her essence. They see only a stray mongrel seeking their affection. Without a family or home or stable identity, she is turned loose in her community. Her plight resembles what many adolescents face: "I set off again, no idea in my head about who I was or what I was and where I belonged or where to go, except to run and run until my pads bled and my dry tongue beat the ground" (22). Sandra, as a young female, knows the social and moral constraints of her human world. As a dog, her new freedom is exhilarating. In her dog form, Sandra, like many young adults, doesn't know the rules of how to behave, how to master a new culture, meet new friends, and survive on her own wits.

Peter Dickinson's *Eva* portrays a world where no living creature (including humans) can confidently look to a stable future. Human dominance is killing the animals, the trees, the earth itself, as well as hope for a sustainable future. It is a world where "most people stayed in their rooms all day, just to get away from another" (14). Into this future world, Eva wakes after a horrible accident to find herself, a teenage girl, in a chimp's body. Eva realizes quickly she will need the strengths of both her human and her chimp sides. She can't be just human, or just chimp. She must blend both viewpoints—to create a new stronger species. Bringing together the human and animal worlds is not so easy. Eva is immediately conflicted—not over "what the human part of her felt about being chimp but what the chimp felt about being human" (978). Seeing the world from animal eyes forces her to see humankind with new perspective.

Eva recognizes signs in human society that others have learned to ignore—like the fact that young children have begun to routinely commit suicide. As an animal she recognizes immediately the bleakness

of a future cut off from the natural world. Eva sees for the first time that most people “were strange, listless, empty [as] if they didn’t have anything to live for”(78). Viewing humans from the “outside,” she is horrified by the cruelty and violence inflicted by humans. “This is what humans did to animals, one way or another. This was what they’d always done” (134). In her new form none of the old human rules for behavior quite apply.

Ultimately, Eva tears off her “human” clothes and joins the chimp world in the wild. She does so, knowing she is more than a chimp. She is human *and* chimp working to preserve the “wild”—for both chimps *and* humans. For the next three decades Eva will be the communicator—the connection between the animal and human worlds. She will be the mother of a new breed of chimps who will evolve into the new humans when the old human species annihilates itself.

In these seven animal/human books, it is difficult not to think of the adult (human) side of these characters as thoughtful, logical and calculating, and the child (animal) side as closely linked with the instinctual, natural world. These female protagonists, like all young adults, straddle the border between childhood and adulthood. As they rapidly approach adulthood, their new intellectual awareness often conflicts with their more primal (“animal”) and instinctual child side.

Sirena, by Donna Joe Napoli, is a mermaid who has trouble reconciling her half fish, half human nature. Her human lover describes her difficulties well: “We are all made of little pieces. We are all part this and part that. We are air and water and fire and dirt. But you, Sirena, you are more” (102). Sirena *has* to be more. Sirena and the other half-animal, half-human females in these books must master multiple worlds at once. They are both children trapped in nearly adult bodies, *and* human and animal at the same time.

As a child, Sirena must use her newfound abilities and discover how her actions affect those around her. She learns quickly that her good intentions do not necessarily produce good results. When she and her fellow gregarious siren sing in delight at seeing sailors, they inadvertently lure them to their death. Like most adolescents, Sirena has little experience and many fears. But she faces her fears head on. She says: “If I yield to fear, my life will become small and dry, until

no pleasures touch me at all. I must allow myself adventure” (45).

The young women in these novels typically *do* allow themselves adventure, and they are not paralyzed by their difficulties. Though much is imposed on them, their choices are what mark them as human (in animal form). Sirena ultimately chooses unselfishly to give up her lover, though she knows she has the power to make him stay. Once she realizes the cause/effect relationship between singing and sailors dying, she denies her greatest gift—her song—with the sailor she loves. Her ability to balance perspectives, see choices, and make unselfish decisions is one mark of her approaching adulthood.

As these seven young women explore new abilities and push themselves into new worlds, they expose more of themselves to others. For many adolescents new awareness of their inner and outer selves can be frightening. As they venture into worlds far removed from the safety of home and neighborhood, they learn that being noticed by others may be dangerous, especially when their differences are undeniable. In *Blood and Chocolate* and *Owl in Love*, the werewolf and owl sides can be hidden but not removed. In *Owl in Love* and *Blood and Chocolate*, characters have spent a lifetime possessing knowledge they must hide and learning how to balance conflicting roles. It’s not easy being a female werewolf teenager in New Jersey. Or an owl/human teenager attending a suburban high school. Vivian and Owl are radically different in ways that cannot easily be masked. They are different to the core of their being, and their only choice is to accept who and what they are. They are a new form of being facing a new future.

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Because they push themselves into worlds their parents largely shun, they are especially vulnerable and on their own. It would be understandable if they simply retreated from their challenges. But they don't. Like Serena, they push on—though they often don't have a guidebook for how to proceed.

Vivian, in *Blood and Chocolate*, is both human and werewolf. In both her human and werewolf forms, she wonders if she will always have to hide the essential truths of her nature. As a typical post-modern young adult, she belongs to a multitude of packs and sub-packs. Many of the groups she belongs to possess conflicting values. As she weaves amongst

these groups, Vivian craves relationships where she can be accepted and reveal all of herself. Yet, when she ventures into human culture in high school classes, she realizes (much like each of our other young women) that “she [doesn't] know their rules” (51).

These rules are often unstated. Vivian quickly discovers that with humans when attraction is

involved, the most essential truths are rarely discussed. In her relationship with a human teenage boy, she realizes she is involved in a “game of pretend we don't want sex so badly” (52). This open discussion of sexual desire might be shocking if human teenagers were the sole focus. But here, the wolf side, with its earthy, uncontrollable passion, is presented as natural. Her lust isn't tainted by human rules of morality. Still, Vivian isn't so unusual despite her wolf appearance. What young adult understands what happens when attraction takes over? How can they, when much of what they experience can't be openly discussed—even with their own kind?

Though Vivian pines for a complex, adult relationship (involving sexuality), her mother and the other pack members still treat her as a child. Vivian complains when they dismiss her feelings as merely a “stage” (69). She is trapped in between, frozen by the viewpoint of others. She is equally trapped between animal and human worlds. If the humans knew of her wolf-like nature, they would kill her immediately.

When her wolf peers learn of her desire to mingle with humans, they harass her unmercifully.

Vivian feels locked into roles by both peers and parents. Though she feels ready to explore new experiences, to do so she must fight both peers and parents. Thomas Hine in *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* notes that many teenagers “serve a sentence of presumed immaturity, regardless of their achievements and abilities” (16). Hine states that:

The mismatch between young peoples' imposing physical development and their presumed emotional, social, and intellectual immaturity is dramatic. Will these powerful young people, who are judged not yet ready to join the adult world, assert themselves and immediately careen out of control, endangering themselves and others? (16-17)

Vivian is not interested in careening out of control. What she wants is someone who is “open enough to accept the truth about her” (77). She wants all of herself to be acknowledged. Yet, the fear that she will be rejected paralyzes her: “[What] if they saw her in her wolf-shape? They'd be fleeing down the streets like those teenagers on the television” (133). Vivian is right to be afraid of allowing all her abilities to surface. When she finally reveals her wolf nature to her human boyfriend, he is repulsed and horrified. At a tender age, Vivian recognizes the narrow conformity often practiced by humans and werewolves. To her credit, she continues to listen to her instincts, refusing to deny her full nature.

Balancing instincts and intuitions with human demands for conformity is tough for each of these protagonists. It would be easier if their animal side disappeared when they chose to reveal their human attributes. But the animal within isn't just a momentary costume change. The animal side is part of who they are, as natural as their human side. In Patrice Kindl's *Owl in Love*, Owl deals with high school trivia, and cliques—while also learning to balance her bird-of-prey “instincts.” Owl attends classes during the day and eats mice and hangs out in trees at night. In school she does her best not to stand out as an oddity. She says adamantly: “I am no vampire in a fairy tale” (4). Characters as strange as Owl know that simply changing her wardrobe will not make her fit in:

My fellow students at Wildewood Senior High have always thought me strange, odd . . . I am very different from them. My blood, for instance, is black, while theirs is red. It is a pretty color, human blood, when it is fresh. (5).

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Owl is not surprised by the shifting transformations of adolescents she meets at school. This tolerance for change is bred into her genetic code. Weirdness is inherent in her family. “Others of my family shift to dog- or cat-kind, a few to hooved or finned beasts” 4). Because Owl has a crush on her science teacher, she often is found flying in his neighborhood, or perched in trees overlooking his house. There she meets a kindred soul, a strange dark boy who has suffered because of his “extra” abilities. The humans he has come in contact with “thought him demented when he tried to do what his instinct told him he must do” (188-189).

Both Owl and her new friend search for cues on how to be human while also following their ‘instinct.’ There is much to learn. Nature rules the owl world with its dirt, killing and eating, and physicality. Like the other young women we’ve met, Owl finds the balance between fitting in and following her inner voice doesn’t come without mistakes and pain. Anytime her owl life intersects with her human life, trouble ensues. She survives by being adaptable and borrowing from both of her complex worlds.

By following her instincts she learns of her own special talents. Almost accidentally she learns that she has the ability to create a special owl call. “There is no call so insistent, so impossible to ignore. It is a cry from the heart to the heart bypassing the mind.” (187)

Owl was born with her traits; she didn’t choose her abilities. So genetics can be blamed for her feathers and love for mouse delicacies. But in Linda Hogan’s *Power*, there is no easy explanation for her links to the animal world. Omishto, the sixteen-year-old Native American protagonist, lives in two worlds. One side of her life connects her to high school and her mother’s Middle American aspirations. Another world Omishto inhabits is the native tribe of her ancestors—who have long believed in kinship with the Florida panther. The panther, they believe, lives both inside and outside themselves. If the panther is threatened, the tribe is also. Omishto is torn between her mother’s materialism and her “aunt’s” life in the wilds of Florida swampland at one with the native panthers. When a huge storm washes all worlds together, Omishto joins her lost tribe, choosing their understanding over her mother’s consumer-driven culture. She comes to see how both her future and her tribe’s are intertwined with the panther’s destiny.

Omishto is linked to our other young women because she chooses her primal, natural, animal heritage over her modern “human” heritage. When she and our other young women are pushed to choose a side of themselves, they surprisingly align themselves with their animal nature. Vivian listens to her wild nature and becomes more wolf-like than human. Owl coaxes her new friend to embrace his owl nature as the site of his authenticity. Lady, after a time in the dog world, states flatly: “I don’t want to be a human being . . . I want to be a quick and fast and happy and then dead . . . I don’t want to go to work. I don’t want to be responsible. I want to be a dog” (235). Similarly, Eva, forced to choose between a chimp world or a human world, ultimately sees the chimp world as more humane, more natural, more freeing.

Philip Pullman’s *The Golden Compass*, provides special insight into the animal/human connection explored so far. In *The Golden Compass* all humans possess a daemon, an animal alter ego. In this story the worst fate, except for death, is for children to be separated from their daemons. The animal alter ego so cherished by children is inseparably connected with the core of a human personality. Messing with another’s daemon is an unpardonable crime. “It was the grossest breach of etiquette imaginable to touch another person’s daemon” (126). The daemons of children possess a life of their own; they transform often, sometimes many times within a single scene. Later, as children age, the daemons settle on one fixed form. Lyra, the protagonist, learns from an old sailor why this settling takes place. He tells her: “when your daemon settles, you’ll know the sort of person you are” (147).

Lyra and other children naturally test the connections with their daemons: “Everyone tested it when they were growing up: seeing how far they could pull apart, coming back with intense relief” (170-171). In *The Golden Compass* the link between the animal and human worlds reminds humans of a time when “they

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were at one with all of the creatures of the earth and the air, and there was no difference between them” (326). *The Golden Compass* reaffirms what the other books have illustrated: As humans have distanced themselves from the natural world, the balance shifts and the future is threatened. When the natural world is far from everyday human activity, essential truths are hidden.

There’s a message in these seven novels for those of us who work with adolescents. We, as teachers and parents and adults, must keep the sense of humanity alive within our adolescents. We must be gentle with our manipulations, our attempts to lead adolescents into adulthood. We must delight in exploratory transformation and recognize both the “animal” and “human” sides in the fullest sense possible.

These books show an animal side full of instinctual knowledge tied to the richness of the natural world. This animal world, which humans often fear, is more humane, more loving and sensitive than “civilized” culture (at least in these books). In contrast these books show the human side as too often fraught with cruelty, intolerance and horror. In these books the human side is “thin,” missing essential information about the larger world.

Thomas Hine states in *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*: “A person standing at [the threshold of adulthood] must be invited to come through the door. But those with power to extend the invitation are often ambivalent about surrendering their authority” (46). The young adults portrayed in these books have an urgency to learn. And we, as teachers and parents, have a duty to welcome them through doors, offering experience and opportunities. They have much to experience, and in many situations they don’t know the rules. At the same time, they have knowledge that adults have forgotten, or have never experienced. The best of us as teachers learn from young adults as we teach them.

When young adults grow and take on new roles, they don’t necessarily forget old roles. In fact, like the characters in these novels, they often fully retain old roles and attitudes. Thus, adolescents are never EITHER children or adults. In almost all situations adolescents are both children and adults at the same time. At twelve my son is a shifting mix of both. When he plays his trumpet or teaches me how to make a power point presentation, he seems pretty adult to me.

When he is tired and begs me to read to him before going to bed, he is the beautiful child I’ve known forever. These novels remind us that the movement toward adulthood doesn’t come in neat, well-labeled adjustments. Being in the middle (as Nancie Atwell has suggested) is the normal state of affairs for adolescents.

We as adults must see the mysterious and sometimes brutal truths which adolescents face daily. I don’t think we should be frightened when we look at the truth of adolescent lives. These seven novels help to remind us that there’s more hope and freshness than horror. Anyone who has spent any time working with adolescents would agree with Patricia Hersch’s summary in *A Tribe Apart: A Journey to the Heart of American Adolescence*. Hersch states passionately: “The kids, if we get to know them, will decimate every long held stereotype any adult has ever had about teens . . . They are not all doing bad things . . . they are simply more complex than we could ever imagine” (232).

They should be. They are the evolving model, the future in progress. We shouldn’t look for anything less than the total emerging animal. There’s something wonderful about powerful, independent, and intelligent young adults exploring their full nature.

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