

More than a children's book: A surface reading of Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*

LUCINDA JANSON

Abstract

This article employs Margaret Cohen's notion of the 'generic horizon' to explore the production and reception of Anna Sewell's 1877 novel *Black Beauty*. It uses a 'surface reading' methodology, focusing on the novel's contemporary generic context and on how the book was received and marketed. This allows the article to interrogate critical commonplaces about the novel's genre. While *Black Beauty* is typically considered a children's book, the novel in fact had a considerable adult audience, especially among working-class men. This article sheds new light on *Black Beauty*'s genre through its contextual reading of moralistic, animal-centric children's literature, and didactic tracts on horse management. It contends that the novel is a sophisticated exploration of the suffering and indignities faced by both horses and their working-class handlers in Victorian England. Reading the novel alongside contemporary horse care manuals brings into focus Sewell's serious didactic purpose, in both teaching the correct means of tending horses and in presenting them as feeling, sympathetic beings in their own right. This article argues that Sewell's novel deserves to be read as a significant contribution to nineteenth-century debates about animal welfare.

* * *

Anna Sewell's 1877 novel *Black Beauty* is a classic tale of equine welfare. It is written in the first-person from the perspective of a horse, Black Beauty, who relates his life as a carriage horse in Victorian England. Born in an idyllic countryside setting, Black Beauty is broken in and trained humanely for life as a working carriage horse. Although his first masters are kindly, he is soon sold into a series of progressively harsher situations. He eventually comes to work as a cab horse, pulling a hansom cab through the perilous London streets. Throughout his tale, Black Beauty encounters other horses who recount their plight; most notably, the mare Ginger narrates the mistreatment she has received from a young age, which has rendered her antagonistic towards humans. By contrast, Black Beauty's fortunate early upbringing enables him better to endure his subsequent trials. His forbearance in the face of pain and hardship is rewarded at the close of the novel, when he is retired to the country and reunited with a kindly coachman. Black Beauty's experiences span class and geographical distinctions and offer a nuanced portrait of equine life and welfare in late Victorian England.

Sewell was an invalid for much of her life, and relied considerably on horses for transportation, forging close bonds with them.¹ This is reflected in her sympathetic portrayals of her equine characters. She wrote the novel near the end of her life, in a plain style influenced by her Quaker mother's didactic, evangelical tracts.² *Black Beauty* is now generally regarded as a children's book, due to its unassuming style. It is considered the precursor of many children's stories featuring anthropomorphised animals, and is today most commonly marketed towards children.³ However, as this article will demonstrate, the

¹ Adrienne E. Gavin, 'Introduction', in *Black Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), xi.

² *Ibid.*, x-xi.

³ See, for instance, the Viking Children's Classics edition—Anna Sewell, *Black Beauty* (New York: Viking, 2000)—and the Puffin Classics edition—Anna Sewell, *Black Beauty* (London: Puffin Books, 2010). Among other scholars who treat *Black Beauty* as a children's book are John Rowe Townsend, *Written for Children: An Outline of English-Language Children's Literature* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1996), and James Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast: Animals, Pain, and Humanity in the Victorian Mind* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

novel was originally aimed at working-class men, and enjoyed a considerable adult audience in the nineteenth century.

This article uses Margaret Cohen's article 'Narratology in the Archive of Literature' as a starting point for a discussion of *Black Beauty*'s production and reception. A focus on the novel's generic context, and on the ways in which it was received and marketed, raises questions concerning critical commonplaces about its genre. A reading of *Black Beauty* in the context of the period's moralistic, animal-centric children's literature, and contemporaneous didactic tracts on horse management, sheds new light on the novel's genre and aims. I argue that *Black Beauty* has much in common with books designed to inculcate good principles of equine care in grooms and stablemen, and that this is reflected in Sewell's depiction of her working-class characters.

In 'Narratology in the Archive of Literature', Cohen argues that critics should take seriously popular fiction, which has been largely ignored, often due to its female authorship or working-class readership. She hence advocates that scholars apply 'narratology to the archive of neglected aesthetics'.⁴ Cohen describes her project of exploring various understudied genres as a 'thick history of the novel's diverse aesthetics'; that is, she seeks to complicate the traditional narrative of the 'rise of the novel'. This critical commonplace bypasses popular genres by concentrating almost exclusively on the nineteenth-century realist novel such as Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine* and Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and the twentieth-century modernist novel, for instance Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Instead of this narrow focus, Cohen attempts to recover a 'historical account of poetic taste' and to take seriously genres that have been denied sustained critical attention.

To achieve this, Cohen rejects Fredric Jameson's notion of 'symptomatic reading', which seeks to recover the repressed 'textual unconscious' and which argues that what a text does not say is more important than what it says.⁵ Cohen argues that this form of reading is inadequate to deal with non-canonical, popular genres, which often lack the complexity to sustain a traditional close reading. Cohen hence advocates for a new kind of 'surface reading' which explores a large number of texts superficially, looking for tropes and patterns between texts, rather than undertaking a close reading of a small number of novels. This enables Cohen to uncover what she calls the 'generic horizon' of texts with which contemporary audiences would have been familiar, but which have been largely overlooked by conventional literary history.⁶ Cohen argues that critics often assume they are familiar with a text's genre, without situating it within its historical context. She describes this phenomenon as the fallacy of the 'horizon of generic expectation'.⁷ Cohen advocates that scholars address this critical blind spot by 'situat[ing] individual works in relation to their generic horizon'.⁸

Cohen's notion of 'surface reading' does not invalidate close reading, but rather provides a new contextual angle which can be applied to canonical and popular texts. Her method involves both close reading of a small number of 'literary' texts and a more distant reading of their generic contexts, which largely involves popular and non-literary types of writing. Although in practice this can reinforce the divide between so-called 'literary' and 'popular' texts, Cohen's methodology is a useful strategy for grappling with a wide range of material, and for placing texts which are often read ahistorically back into their specific contexts. Cohen applies this method of close attention to the 'generic horizon' in her book *The Novel and the Sea*, in which she explores the genre of maritime adventure fiction from *Robinson Crusoe* to Joseph Conrad.⁹ Cohen creates a contextual 'thick history' through an exploration of non-fictional captains' logs and popular sea fiction. This enables her, for example, to place Conrad's modernist, seafaring novels within the context of similar books in more popular genres.

Cohen's focus on the contemporary reception of novels and their genres—and her insistence on placing texts within 'a wider archive', including popular and non-canonical texts—is especially relevant for a

⁴ Margaret Cohen, 'Narratology in the Archive of Literature', *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 55, doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.51.

⁵ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), 106.

⁶ Cohen, 'Narratology in the Archive of Literature', 57.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹ Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

reading of *Black Beauty*. While the novel is now largely categorised as children's literature, an exploration of the contemporary context of its production and dissemination can provide new and more productive approaches to examining the text.

Although today children comprise the book's primary audience, this was not true for its original public.¹⁰ The book had a substantial working-class readership, and was marketed directly to men who worked with horses, to encourage them to treat their horses well and care for them effectively.¹¹ The book was promoted by the London City Mission to Cabmen, and some cabmen reportedly declared it 'the best book in the world'.¹² *Black Beauty* was also modestly priced to attract a working-class audience. While a luxury edition was sold for five shillings, the book was also issued at lower prices, including a 'popular paper' which cost one shilling.¹³ By 1879 the book was in its sixth British edition, and the novel had sold over 100,000 copies by 1890.¹⁴ Moreover, an 1878 review declared that while the story 'may be read with pleasure and profit by educated people', it should primarily be 'put into the hands of stable boys, or any who have [anything] to do with horses'.¹⁵ The literacy levels of the working classes increased considerably and rapidly in the second half of the nineteenth century, and by 1900 virtually all young married couples were capable of signing their names.¹⁶

The cab trade was a major employer of working-class men in Victorian London. In 1851, there were 6,039 licensed cab drivers in the capital, while by 1891 there were 15,219. It was estimated that, in 1864, 50,000 people depended on cabs for their livelihood.¹⁷ However, a cab driver's income fluctuated depending on the season and on the chance of getting enough customers. Moreover, the trade was particularly precarious for cab drivers who rented their horse and carriage from often unscrupulous cab proprietors. For instance, a cab driver reported in 1877 that his income had fallen from £2 to only 30 shillings per week due to increases in the rates charged by cab owners.¹⁸ Parliamentary papers record poor conditions for cab drivers around the time Sewell was writing her novel. The London Commissioner of Police reported that trade was slack in 1875, forcing many proprietors of small cab companies out of business. In the same year, the police received reports of 527 horses 'unfit for use'.¹⁹ Sewell's advocacy for the humane treatment of horses was hence particularly suited to a readership of working-class cab men. The increase in literacy levels during the nineteenth century meant that Sewell's book was able to reach a large working-class audience.²⁰

Despite this evidence of a considerable adult audience, much analysis of *Black Beauty* has placed the novel in a tradition of children's literature featuring animals. Scholars such as Peter Hunt have treated the novel as an early example of the craze for talking or anthropomorphised animals in children's literature, from *The Jungle Book*, published in 1894, to twentieth-century examples such as Beatrix

¹⁰ Thus, for example, Clay McShane and Joel A. Tarr, *The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 179 take for granted that *Black Beauty* is a 'juvenile book', claiming that it remains on many reading lists for students at American junior high schools.

¹¹ Adrienne E. Gavin, *Dark Horse: A Life of Anna Sewell* (Stroud: Sutton, 2004), 185.

¹² Mrs [Mary] Bayly, *The Life and Letters of Mrs Sewell* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1889), 273.

¹³ Susan Chitty, *The Woman Who Wrote Black Beauty: A Life of Anna Sewell* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971), 223; Anna Sewell, *Black Beauty: The Autobiography of a Horse* (London: Jarrold & Sons, 1895), end matter.

¹⁴ Gavin, *Dark Horse*, 187; see also 'Black Beauty', *Arthur Stebbings' Model Railway Time Table, and Travellers' Guide*, no. 6 (1879): 27, link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/PRPFXM101455670/GDCS?u=nla&sid=GDCS&xid=6b54544b

¹⁵ 'LITERATURE', *Essex Standard, West Suffolk Gazette, and Eastern Counties' Advertiser* (24 August 1878): 6, find.galegroup.com/np.nla.gov.au/dvnw/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=DVNW&userGroupName=nla&tabID=T003&docPage=article&docId=R3208617146&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0. It is interesting to note that advertisements placed in a *Travellers' Guide* described the novel as 'one of the most interesting books ever written', clearly appealing to its general interest, rather than specifically to children's interest. See 'Black Beauty', *Arthur Stebbings' Model Railway*, 27.

¹⁶ Jonathan Rose, 'Education, Literacy, and the Victorian Reader', in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 33, doi.org/10.1002/9780470996324.ch3.

¹⁷ Trevor May, *Gondolas and Growlers: The History of the London Horse Cab* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1995), vi.

¹⁸ Adolphe Smith and John Thomson, *Street Life in London* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1877), 5.

¹⁹ 'Reports of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis for 1875', 1876, Command Papers, Nineteenth Century House of Commons Sessional Papers, vol. 34, 5, parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.1876-052134?accountid=12694.

²⁰ Rose, 'Education, Literacy, and the Victorian Reader', 33.

Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, Jack London's *White Fang*, and Michael Bond's *Paddington*.²¹ Lori Jo Oswald, moreover, treats *Black Beauty* as an example of the stereotypical noble horse in children's animal fiction.²² Other critics have drawn attention more productively to *Black Beauty*'s place within a tradition of moralistic first-person animal autobiography, written for children and designed to inculcate moral values.²³

While *Black Beauty* shares certain traits with this children's literature, the novel is more generically complex than such an identification would suggest. *Black Beauty* is fundamentally a didactic tale, and while it is not aimed primarily or solely at children, it contains elements of the moral tale. Yet *Black Beauty* is not a mere moralistic fable, but rather intervenes in some of the most important nineteenth-century debates surrounding the treatment and welfare of horses. Moreover, its wealth of practical detail made it a useful handbook for working-class men who looked after horses. Thus, *Black Beauty* contains considerably more than the 'slightly sentimental social criticism' of Peter Hunt's formulation.²⁴

A comparison of *Black Beauty* with other first-person animal autobiographies of the period demonstrates that Sewell's novel eschews many of the conventions of the animal moral fable, in favour of a more commonsense, factual narrative. The moralistic first-person animal autobiographies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries largely concerned domestic and household animals such as cats, donkeys, or mice, and were written primarily for children. While scholars such as Margaret Blount and Tess Cosslett have stressed *Black Beauty*'s similarities to this moralistic genre, it is in fact the novel's exceptionality which is more notable.²⁵ A good point of comparison with *Black Beauty* is the 1863 book *Rambles of a Rat*, one of the closest in time of publication to *Black Beauty*. Brought out pseudonymously by 'a lady of England', the tale was in fact written by prolific children's author Charlotte Maria Tucker. The story follows the adventures of a rat, unimaginatively named Ratto, whose 'rambles' didactically encourage good, moral behaviour in children. Ratto discovers the evils of opium, meets a rat who compares human hotels to rat traps, and ultimately learns the importance of charity and kindness to all.

By contrast with Sewell's realistic narrative, Tucker cultivates sympathy for the rats by anthropomorphising them. She gives her rats human attributes and emotions, with little regard for scientific accuracy, and adopts a sentimentalising and condescending tone. Ratto claims that he leads a 'merry life' with his seven brothers in a warehouse near the Thames. Instead of dwelling on the dirtiness and dinginess of such an existence, Ratto claims that he lives in a 'palace of rubbish' or 'a mansion of odds and ends'.²⁶ Even the death of his six brothers in a trap is not treated as a traumatic experience; rather, Ratto elides this embarrassing episode. He declares that since 'this is a very melancholy part of my story', he will 'hasten over it as fast as I can'. He is unable to state plainly that they have been killed, instead observing euphemistically that the rats were 'carried off in a bag to be worried by dogs in the morning!'²⁷ This inability to speak plainly about death contrasts with *Black Beauty*'s realistic and detailed description of the suffering and death of Ginger. Her dead body is described in graphic detail, with its 'lifeless tongue ... slowly dropping with blood' and its 'sunken eyes'.²⁸ While *Black Beauty* certainly uses elements of the moralising animal tale, Sewell's novel is set apart by its focus on the physical welfare and suffering of horses.

Sewell's first-person ventriloquised narration is considerably more sophisticated than Tucker's, as Sewell highlights the equine experience in her novel. Sewell portrays horses as sentient creatures,

²¹ Peter Hunt, *Children's Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 147–49. Note that *White Fang* was also written from the perspective of an animal—a wild wolfdog—albeit in the third person.

²² Lori Jo Oswald, 'Heroes and Victims: The Stereotyping of Animal Characters in Children's Realistic Animal Fiction', *Children's Literature in Education* 26, no. 2 (June 1995): 139–40, doi.org/10.1007/BF02535736.

²³ Margaret Blount, *Animal Land: The Creatures of Children's Fiction* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1975), 249–50; Tess Cosslett, *Talking Animals in British Children's Fiction, 1786–1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 69–90.

²⁴ Hunt, *Children's Literature*, 147–48.

²⁵ Blount, *Animal Land*, 249–50; Cosslett, *Talking Animals*, 69–90.

²⁶ A.L.O.E., *The Rambles of a Rat* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1863), 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁸ Anna Sewell, *Black Beauty*, Viking ed., 168.

countering the common view of horses as commodities to be bought and used. She exposes the indignities of horse markets and denounces drivers who employ horses as though they were machines. The pony Merrylegs complains that boys treat him ‘like a steam engine or a thrashing machine’ which can ‘go on as long and as fast as they please’.²⁹ Sewell, moreover, concentrates on the physical discomfort of working horses in Victorian England. The scenes of breaking in *Black Beauty* and *Ginger* emphasise the physical pain of the process. *Black Beauty* describes the bit as a ‘nasty thing’, describing the ‘feel’ of ‘a great piece of cold hard steel ... pushed into one’s mouth’.³⁰ Later, he complains about ‘straps here and straps there, a bit in [his] mouth and blinkers over [his] eyes’.³¹ Thus, Sewell attempts to demonstrate the tangible reality of being a horse, describing sensations and emotions as a horse would have felt them, rather than imposing human attributes onto the animal. Robert Dingley argues that *Black Beauty* fails to adequately condemn systemic injustices towards horses, and describes the novel as merely a ‘horse of instruction’.³² Yet Sewell’s informative approach is in its own way radical, especially when placed within the context of contemporary didactic literature on horses.

It is useful to read the novel alongside two works of the same period: Samuel Sidney’s large and handsome manual on equine care for the middle class, *The Book of the Horse*, and the working man’s handbook, *The Horse Book*, produced by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). Moreover, it is useful to compare *The Book of the Horse* and *The Horse Book*, since there has been some scholarly confusion between the two. In early British editions of *Black Beauty*, an afterword recommends to the reader an ‘admirable little book, price fourpence’ which sets out the ‘right treatment of horses’ and whose ‘directions’ are ‘short, clear, and full of common sense’.³³ The most recent scholarly publication of the novel, Kristen Guest’s 2016 edition for Broadview, claims that this ‘little book’ is an abridged version of *The Book of the Horse*, a large manual about horse purchase and care for the aspirational middle class.³⁴ My research, however, has led me to the same conclusion as Sewell’s biographer, Adrienne Gavin, who identifies *The Horse Book* as a short didactic tract published by the RSPCA.³⁵ I argue that Sewell did not mistake *The Horse Book* for *The Book of the Horse*, as Guest assumes, but rather that the two are separate works, designed for very different audiences, as will be illustrated below.

The Book of the Horse, written by Samuel Sidney—and revised in later editions by George Fleming—is an imposing tome designed for a newly wealthy middle class who had little experience with the horses that now symbolised their rising wealth and status. The full edition of more than 600 pages contains numerous wood engravings and 25 full-page coloured plates, and is bound in gilt-trimmed leather with marbled edges. Even a reduced version of the book would have cost considerably more than the fourpenny book Sewell recommends.³⁶ A far more likely candidate for the book Sewell mentions is *The Horse Book*, a slim 70-page tract produced by the RSPCA. This confusion between a middle-class status symbol and a practical handbook for working people is emblematic of much of the criticism of *Black Beauty*, whose lack of historical contextualisation has caused widespread misreading of the novel’s generic horizon.

Sidney’s *The Book of the Horse* differs considerably from *Black Beauty*. It privileges the human experience over the animal, and addresses an aspirational middle-class audience. By contrast, Sewell is considerably more interested in the equine and working-class experience. While *The Book of the Horse* provides advice which Sewell would have approved of—for example, how to train a horse not to be scared of the railway—its concerns are fundamentally different from those of Sewell’s novel. The tone, readership and perspective of both books differ dramatically. Sidney explicitly states that he writes for

²⁹ Ibid, 40.

³⁰ Ibid, 15.

³¹ Ibid, 27.

³² Robert Dingley, ‘A Horse of a Different Colour: *Black Beauty* and the Pressures of Indebtedness’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 25, no. 2 (September 1997): 241–51, doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300004769.

³³ Anna Sewell, *Black Beauty*, Jarrold ed., end matter.

³⁴ Anna Sewell, *Black Beauty*, ed. Kristen Guest (Ontario: Broadview, 2016), 193, 231.

³⁵ Gavin, *Dark Horse*, 198–99.

³⁶ I have, moreover, been unable to find proof that such an abridged version ever existed.

a 'class' of people 'to whom town pursuits have brought fortune' and who want to experience 'the pleasures, the exercise, the healthy excitement which horses and carriages, riding, driving, and hunting, so eminently afford'.³⁷ Sidney devotes a considerable portion of his book to horse pedigree and breeding, topics on which *Black Beauty* has very little to say.

Moreover, *The Book of the Horse* contains an enthusiastic and detailed description of the joys and technicalities of hare, fox, and deer hunting. Sidney quotes approvingly Washington Irving's remark that hunting has a 'great and salutary effect upon the national character'.³⁸ Sewell denounces this practice for its cruelty, and for its danger to both humans and horses. *Black Beauty* witnesses the fall and subsequent death of his brother Rob Roy, whose neck is broken while hunting, and also the death of the young squire who was riding him. *Black Beauty*'s mother denounces the sport, claiming that it 'often spoil[s] good horses' and 'tear[s] up the fields'.³⁹ Samuel Sidney, by contrast, is very cavalier about the possible dangers of hunting, showing complete disregard for the potential injuries to horses. Indeed, Sidney's priority throughout his book is the human, not the horse. He urges owners to sell a dangerous horse, without considering the fate of an unrideable horse who, like *Black Beauty*, would be sold for hard, menial work. Coachmen, for Sidney, are as expendable as the horses they care for. Sidney advises that if a coachman 'continually has a horse lame, sick or off his feed', then the 'proper plan' is simply to 'get rid of the coachman'.⁴⁰

While Sewell's novel is similarly didactic, she addresses a very different audience from Sidney. *Black Beauty* hence has considerably more in common with the RSPCA-produced pamphlet *The Horse Book* than with Sidney's tome. Many thousands of copies of *The Horse Book* were issued, and by 1881 the book had reached its tenth edition, with 50,000 copies printed that year alone.⁴¹ The preface states that it 'has been written as simply as possible', and indeed the book arranges its subject matter into brief chapters, and then into simple points of a few sentences each.⁴² There is considerable overlap between its concerns and those of Sewell in *Black Beauty*. For example, it deals with the best kind of stable for horses, how to feed and groom them correctly, and how to prevent accidents. These practical hints are, in great part, replicated in *Black Beauty*, which equally recommends the light, airy, and well-drained stables, large stalls and 'kindness and gentle treatment' advocated by *The Horse Book*.⁴³ The two books are also alike in the plainness of their style. *Black Beauty*'s simplicity of style is perhaps not so much a marker of its status as a children's book, as it is an attempt to speak directly to the working class.

Moreover, it is significant that Sewell's novel shares similarities with this RSPCA-produced book, since the Society credited Sewell with assisting in their campaign against the trade in horse flesh for human consumption, by demonstrating the cruelty of sending horses to the knackers to be slaughtered after a lifetime of faithful service.⁴⁴ Early editions of the novel contained a recommendation by the RSPCA before the title page.⁴⁵ Yet Sewell herself implicitly criticises the RSPCA's refusal to address upper-class cruelty towards animals. The Society was often censured for its hypocrisy in castigating the working classes for their cruelty towards animals while ignoring carriage horses wearing a painfully tight bearing rein, or the cruelties of hare and fox hunting.⁴⁶ George Fleming's letter on the bearing rein—in which he blames coachmen, rather than their masters, for its use—represents a typical RSPCA

³⁷ S. Sidney, *The Book of the Horse: (Thorough-Bred, Half-Bred, Cart-Bred,) Saddle and Harness, British and Foreign, with Hints on Horsemanship; The Management of the Stable; Breeding, Breaking, and Training for the Road, the Park, and the Field*, 2nd ed. (London: Cassell, Petters, Galpin & Co., 1879), 5, doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.27093.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 395, 401.

³⁹ Sewell, *Black Beauty*, Viking ed., 12–13.

⁴⁰ Sidney, *The Book of the Horse*, 518.

⁴¹ Arthur W. Moss, *Valiant Crusade: The History of the R.S.P.C.A.* (London: Cassell, 1961), 92.

⁴² RSPCA, *The Horse Book: Being Simple Rules for Managing and Keeping a Horse Humanely and Advantageously in the Stable and on the Road, to Which Are Added a Few Words on the Horse's Eye, Foot and Stomach, and Hints on Draught* (London: The RSPCA, 1865), 3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7–9.

⁴⁴ Moss, *Valiant Crusade*, 96–97.

⁴⁵ Sewell, *Black Beauty*, Jarrold ed., front matter.

⁴⁶ Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 137–49.

opinion.⁴⁷ Anna Sewell, by contrast, demonstrates that it is wealthy owners who use the bearing rein most egregiously. Thus, despite the misgivings of a groom, one of *Black Beauty*'s rich mistresses forces him to wear a tight rein, which causes him to 'foam at the mouth', and 'made [his] breathing very uncomfortable'.⁴⁸

The novel's conclusion is largely utopian, providing the outcome that *Black Beauty* deserves, but not the one he would have likely received in the real world. Yet Sewell undercuts the ending's apparent sentimentalism, in a reminder that *Black Beauty* is far more than a children's fable. *Black Beauty* is not a middle-class children's book, but a novel whose generic context reveals Sewell's profound sympathy for horses and their working-class handlers. This generic realignment of the novel necessitates a reconsideration of the novel's apparently idyllic ending. In the context of Sewell's portrayal of working-class life, the ending—in which both *Black Beauty* and the cab driver Jerry retire to rural bliss—is perhaps more utopian than realistic. While the novel requires this ending to conform to its sentimental, didactic mode of virtue triumphantly rewarded, there are enough cracks in this perfect façade to point the reader to a more dismally realistic conclusion.⁴⁹ While *Black Beauty* and the kindly cabman Jerry receive their happy endings, the miserable fates of other characters suggest that such an optimistic ending is simply aleatory. The good fortune which awaits *Black Beauty* is not shared by other horses in the novel. Ginger dies from overwork and is sent to the knackers, while Sewell implies that even the peaceable Merrylegs might suffer a similarly dismal lot. While in London, *Black Beauty* notices 'a little grey pony with a thick mane and a pretty head' who looks 'so much like Merrylegs'. This pony is being cruelly treated, pulling a 'heavy cart' while a boy '[cut] him under the belly with his whip' and 'chuck[ed] cruelly at his little mouth'.⁵⁰ Indeed, the final line of the novel belies the apparent utopianism of the ending, as in his happy retirement *Black Beauty* 'fanc[ies]' that he is 'still in the orchard at Birtwick' with his 'old friends'.⁵¹ This reference to his 'old friends' reminds the reader of the miserable fates of Ginger and Merrylegs, who *Black Beauty* knew in his youth, and draws attention to the extraordinary chance by which Beauty was saved from a similar fate.

A reading of *Black Beauty* through Margaret Cohen's notion of the 'generic horizon' generates a productive interpretation of the novel's genre. This article demonstrates the potential for the application of Cohen's notion of 'surface reading' beyond her own research into nineteenth-century seafaring narratives. Such close attention to the historical and literary context of Sewell's *Black Beauty* enables an understanding of the novel's genre. Instead of viewing it as a simple, moral tale aimed at children, it is instead possible to view the novel as a complex and multifaceted exploration of the suffering and indignities faced by both horses and their working-class handlers in Victorian England. Reading the novel alongside contemporary horse care manuals brings into focus Sewell's serious didactic purpose, in both teaching the correct means of tending horses, and in presenting them as feeling, sympathetic beings in their own right. Sewell's novel hence deserves to be read as a significant contribution to debates about animal welfare both in the nineteenth century and today.

Bibliography

Primary sources

A.L.O.E. *The Rambles of a Rat*. London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1863.

Bayly, Mrs [Mary]. *The Life and Letters of Mrs Sewell*. London: James Nisbet and Co., 1889.

⁴⁷ George Fleming, 'Cruelty to Horses', *Times*, August 13, 1874, 6, link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CS102544141/GDCS?u=nla&sid=GDCS&xid=06109ed9.

⁴⁸ Sewell, *Black Beauty*, Viking ed., 95.

⁴⁹ Moira Ferguson, *Animal Advocacy and Englishwomen, 1780–1900: Patriots, Nation, and Empire* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 103, doi.org/10.3998/mpub.15747.

⁵⁰ Sewell, *Black Beauty*, Viking ed., 169.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 206.

'Reports of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis for 1875'. 1876. Command Papers. Nineteenth Century House of Commons Sessional Papers, vol. 34, parlipapers.proquest.com/parlipapers/docview/t70.d75.1876-052134?accountid=12694.

RSPCA. *The Horse Book: Being Simple Rules for Managing and Keeping a Horse Humanely and Advantageously in the Stable and on the Road, to Which Are Added a Few Words on the Horse's Eye, Foot and Stomach, and Hints on Draught*. London: The RSPCA, 1865.

Sewell, Anna. *Black Beauty: The Autobiography of a Horse*. London: Jarrold & Sons, 1895.

———. *Black Beauty*. New York: Viking, 2000.

———. *Black Beauty*. London: Puffin Books, 2010.

———. *Black Beauty*. Edited by Kristen Guest. Ontario: Broadview, 2016.

Sidney, S. *The Book of the Horse: (Thorough-Bred, Half-Bred, Cart-Bred,) Saddle and Harness, British and Foreign, with Hints on Horsemanship; The Management of the Stable; Breeding, Breaking, and Training for the Road, the Park, and the Field*. 2nd ed. London: Cassell, Petters, Galpin & Co., 1879. doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.27093.

Smith, Adolphe, and John Thomson. *Street Life in London*. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1877.

Secondary sources

'Black Beauty'. *Arthur Stebbings' Model Railway Time Table, and Travellers' Guide*, no. 6 (1879): 27. link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/PRPFXM101455670/GDCS?u=nla&sid=GDCS&xid=6b54544b

Blount, Margaret. *Animal Land: The Creatures of Children's Fiction*. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1975.

Chitty, Susan. *The Woman Who Wrote Black Beauty: A Life of Anna Sewell*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971.

Cohen, Margaret. 'Narratology in the Archive of Literature'. *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 51–75. doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.51.

———. *The Novel and the Sea*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Cosslett, Tess. *Talking Animals in British Children's Fiction, 1786–1914*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.

Dingley, Robert. 'A Horse of a Different Colour: *Black Beauty* and the Pressures of Indebtedness'. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 25, no. 2 (September 1997): 241–51. doi.org/10.1017/S1060150300004769.

Ferguson, Moira. *Animal Advocacy and Englishwomen, 1780–1900: Patriots, Nation, and Empire*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998. doi.org/10.3998/mpub.15747.

Gavin, Adrienne E. *Dark Horse: A Life of Anna Sewell*. Stroud, Glos.: Sutton, 2004.

———. 'Introduction'. In *Black Beauty*, ix–xxxii. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Hunt, Peter. *Children's Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.

Jameson, Frederic. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London: Methuen, 1981.

'LITERATURE'. *Essex Standard, West Suffolk Gazette, and Eastern Counties' Advertiser*, August 24, 1878, 6. find.galegroup.com/rp.nla.gov.au/dvnw/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=DVNW&userGroupName=nla&tabID=T003&docPage=article&docId=R3208617146&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0

May, Trevor. *Gondolas and Growlers: The History of the London Horse Cab*. Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1995.

McShane, Clay, and Joel A. Tarr. *The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.

Moss, Arthur W. *Valiant Crusade: The History of the R.S.P.C.A.* London: Cassell, 1961.

Oswald, Lori Jo. 'Heroes and Victims: The Stereotyping of Animal Characters in Children's Realistic Animal Fiction'. *Children's Literature in Education* 26, no. 2 (June 1995): 135–49. doi.org/10.1007/BF02535736.

Ritvo, Harriet. *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.

Rose, Jonathan. 'Education, Literacy, and the Victorian Reader'. In *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, edited by Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing, 31–47. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. doi.org/10.1002/9780470996324.ch3.

Townsend, John Rowe. *Written for Children: An Outline of English-Language Children's Literature*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1996.

Turner, James. *Reckoning with the Beast: Animals, Pain, and Humanity in the Victorian Mind*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.