Neill, Anna. *Human Evolution and Fantastic Victorian Fiction*. Routledge, 2021.

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Situating itself amidst a legacy of titles that have made significant contributions to the field of Darwinism in literature, spanning across classics like Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* (1983) as well as Stephen Jay Gould's *Ever Since Darwin* (1977) and *The Panda's Thumb* (1980), Anna Neill's latest publication explores the intersectionalities between nineteenth-century British sf and the racist temporalities of Victorian evolutionary anthropology. In her interpretations of "fantastic" Victorian and Edwardian fictions, Neill analyzes anthropological ideas about race, culture, and species difference through her reading of a variety of literary forms: utopia, dystopia, nonsense, Gothic horror, and the peculiar hybrid forms of the modern fairy tale or children's fable. Strange twists of plot in such tales determine evolutionary fortunes or imaginatively manipulate deep antiquity as well as the distant future.

Neill successfully charts the collision of temporalities through her analysis to establish an imaginative circuitry between geological antiquity and human-caused urban environmental and institutional degradation. She begins with three child fantasy fictions: Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863), Lewis Carroll's *Alice* stories (1865-1871), and Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories for Little Children* (1902). In each case, she notes, a young protagonist navigates a marvelous evolutionary landscape and in the process appears to undergo moral growth. The next two chapters shift the focus to evolutionary depictions of human and non-human relations. Chapter 5 looks at the island laboratory of H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) and Chapter 6 concentrates on the Machinate Literary Mammal of Samuel Butler's "strange stories." The final chapters explore depictions of imagined human futures, particularly as responses to evolutionist

social engineering. Chapter 6 reads Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland* (1884) and the book ends with a discussion of three socialist utopian stories: Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), and Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905).

The title's unique contribution to an established field of studies may be located in the author's handling of the concept of time in Victorian and Edwardian realist fiction. Neill in her complex and varied ways engages with the notion of human agency at a crossroads with evolutionary gradualism as well as a profoundly non-human temporality. She not only dexterously merges the deep past and the lived present in her interpretation of the Victorian realism, but she also contemporizes human exceptionalism and evolutionary progress by foregrounding her research on an understanding of forms of temporal representation that the modern realist novel banishes, thereby severing ties with the possibilities to narrate the Anthropocene. Neill also recalls contemporary cognoscentes such as Amitav Ghosh in criticizing the temporal havoc these narratives create in challenging ideas about gradual and progressive human social development that justified colonial violence from the past. Neill has a clear vision in spotting the trend that wherever humanity enjoys an evolutionarily exceptional status in fantastic fiction, the long climb from primitive to complex organism, like the rise of "savage" to "civilized" nation, appears as simultaneously gradual and progressive. However, Neill uses the term "fantastic fiction" rather than "scientific romance" to describe these texts because in each case they narrate the heroic adventure ironically. Neill elucidates the ways their protagonists are often involuntary adventurers who frequently struggle to navigate the fantastic worlds they have stumbled into. As fantastic narratives, all the stories in one way or another disorder the version of deep time within which evolutionary anthropology measures human achievement. Consequently, a number of them sever

the analogy between individual development and the supposed ascent from animal or savage to civilized human, or, as Neill suggests, between evolutionary biology and social theory.

In Chapter 2, "Phylogeny Recapitulates Ontogeny," Neill interestingly weaves in issues of race and class in her textual exposition of Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*. She radically exposes the evolutionary logic behind the disturbing depictions of race and class difference in this novel. Neill painstakingly illustrates the novelist's disturbing juxtaposition of protagonist Tom's moral growth with depictions of the degenerate condition of "less-than-fully human racial others," which includes enslaved Africans, the starving native Irish, and the ignorant English underclasses—all categories of what Kingsley elsewhere disturbingly denotes as "human chimpanzees." At this point, the child's reform is no longer imagined as the effect of transformative immersion in an interspecies world, but instead as an allegory of evolutionary progress where the highest pinnacle of human success is the self-made Victorian gentlemen. Interestingly, the most noteworthy formulation on the idea of such "degeneration" had not been constructed until 1857 when Benedict Augustin Morel, a French psychiatrist born in Vienna, published his *Treatise on Degeneration of the Human Species* wherein he views degeneration as an irreversible physical and mental deterioration from a higher to a lower form. During the second half of the nineteenth century, such theories of degeneracy were to be worked into ideas about ethnology, race, and gender. From fictional representations of degeneracy explored in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and Robert Louis Stevenson's, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), the notion of abhuman, i.e. something that is only vestigially human, found itself implemented in the critical discourses of the modern genres of sf and fantasy with no delay at all.

To sum up, Neill has been successful in achieving her goal of laying bare the gradualist conception of development from child-animal-primitive to fully human adult which obscures expressions of human and non-human interaction and agency in shaping cognitive descent within much smaller units of time. She excels further in identifying the possibility of liberation in forms of storytelling that resist such gradualist chronology. However, it would perhaps be nice to have an extended conclusion as a befitting culmination of her argument. Though her detailed methodology leaves hardly any stone unturned in tracking the circuitous path that texts offer in illustrating modes of engagement with the human past and future, the relevance of the fantastic and the unknowable may have been further accomplished but for the dearth of a befitting finale! However, the lucidity of language and the clarity of vision that Neill brings to the table makes the book a pleasurable read.

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