

**Beastly Flesh:
Review of Carol Birch's *Jamrach's Menagerie***

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Carol Birch, *Jamrach's Menagerie*
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Few books can be more appropriate for review in a special issue on *Spectacles and Things* than Carol Birch's Booker short-listed *Jamrach's Menagerie* (2011), which focuses on that most material of all things – flesh, both animal and human. The novel opens with the scene that first impresses upon the Victorian narrator Jaffy Brown the lesson of the wondrous fragility of living flesh and its ready transformation from the presumed embodiment of the immortal soul into an object of consumption. At the age of eight, sent on a simple errand down Ratcliffe Highway, he is mauled and nearly devoured by a tiger escaped from the menagerie of the titular Charles Jamrach, advertising himself as “*Naturalist and Importer*” of exotic species (p. 15, original italics), though less interested in advancing scientific knowledge than in procuring exotica for sale and profit. Jaffy's initial encounter with the beast, however, is figured not as a confrontation with Mammon but as a quasi mystical, Blakean vision of the “Tyger, burning bright” (Blake 1988: 24, l. 1) – a revelation of Otherness incarnate: “the impossible in all its beauty came walking towards me [...] The Sun himself came down and walked on earth” (p. 9). This is in line with what might be described as the novel's almost pantheistic subtext, in spite of the crisis of faith, leading to irresolvable doubt and agnosticism, occasioned by the protagonist's later trials. Saved from the tiger's maw by Jamrach, Jaffy is precipitated into a realm of extraordinary experience, a whole new world of

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visual and material marvels, first in his saviour's business establishment and eventually on a maritime journey to the far-flung reaches of the Empire.

The son of a sailor long since dead, Jaffy is a traveller of the imagination even before he begins his literal travels away from London, an appropriate guide for the time-travelling neo-Victorian reader. His earliest memories of growing up in Bermondsey with his mother recall mariners' "voices wild and dark" carried across the Thames, "lilts from everywhere, strange tongues that lisped and shouted, melodies running up and down like many small flights of stairs, making [him] feel as if [he] was far away in those strange hot-sun places" (p. 4), to which he eventually journeys in the flesh. Birch plunges her readers into a glorious Technicolor world of Victorian sights, sounds, tastes and smells, facilitating a vicarious sensory immersion in a bygone age, as when Jaffy wanders across a fair at the Thames Tunnel, responding viscerally to the spectacle: "The barrows of the clothes sellers were decked out with brightly coloured ladies' dresses, high above us like lines of airborne dancing girls. I smelled lavender, sugar, sarsaparilla" (p. 50). Just as Jaffy earlier revels in the dream-like joyful "wildness" of the tiger's touch that effects an acute self-loss – "I never had a lostness like that before" (p. 10) – the reader is invited to lose her/himself in the exotic otherness of the Victorian world of wonders portrayed.

Jamrach's menagerie functions as a nineteenth-century cabinet of curiosities, in which Jaffy himself will become an eventual exhibit as a living cannibal, following an expedition to capture a half-mythical beast or 'dragon' (apparently a Komodo monitor lizard) for a wealthy collector, Mr Fledge, an enterprise that goes disastrously wrong, ending in shipwreck. This maritime adventure takes up the bulk of the narrative, but the glorious framing sections, set in London before and after, perhaps linger most in the reader's mind; it is in the transformation of the everyday into something 'rich and strange' that Birch's writing comes fully into its own. In our supermarket age with its ever-ready supply of goods catering to all desires, the inconceivable novelty and singularity of Jaffy's first ever taste of a "raspberry puff" is exquisitely imagined for us:

The first bite was so bitterly sweet the corners of my mouth ached. So beautiful, a film of tears stung my eyes. Then the pain dispersed and there was only delight. I had never tasted

raspberry. Never tasted cream. The second bite was greedy and gorging, stopping my mouth up. (pp. 19-20)

The raspberry puff is purchased for the protagonist at Jamrach's behest by his employee Tim Linver, the boy who will become Jaffy's closest friend; it functions as a promise of new opportunities and undreamt of experiences to come, as Jaffy enters Jamrach's employ. Yet also, of course, it serves as a portent of the darkest moments of the narrative, of the way in which the shipwrecked mariners, cast adrift upon the open sea, will be reduced to gorging greedily and gratefully on each other's flesh.

Jamrach's business of procuring exotic beasts for ordinary customers as well as wealthy collectors reduces living creatures to sign value; any labour capacity the animals may possess is disregarded in favour of their sheer decorative potential, setting exotic accents in their owners' homes, providing talking points and entertaining spectacles. Marvels of nature are turned into objects of consumption; "bluebirds, breasts the colour of rose sherbet" are to be had for "[s]ix shillings a pair" (p. 22). For all his instinctive sensitivity to the creatures' plight, the lesson that everything has its price is quickly grasped by Jaffy: "'How much for my tiger?' I asked" (p. 23). Appropriately, in addition to beasts and birds, Jamrach's shop sells all manner of curiosities from the four corners of the world, a veritable treasure trove of exotica evoking the densely cluttered interiors of Victorian homes, one time even including, so Tim claims, "Shrunken Heads! Human! Looked like monkeys" (p. 34). Another oblique foreshadowing of the later decapitation of human bodies prepared for consumption, this titillating but ghastly piece of information also suggests that, for all its wonders, the menagerie is simultaneously a Gothic site, a prison-house in which animals are crammed together cruelly and indiscriminately, a counting house run for profit rather than any concern for ecology or animal welfare. In our twenty-first century of pet lovers, animal charities and welfare legislation (at least in most Western countries), where the emphasis is on species conservation, environmental sustainability, and the preservation of natural habitats, where increasingly stringent regulations make it more and more difficult – and less acceptable – for circuses to use performing animals, Birch's novel stages a trenchant critique of exploitative human-animal relations. So too of humankind's depredation of the natural world more generally which, if it reached its initial zenith in the newly industrialised and progressively

globalised nineteenth century, has continued more or less unabated ever since. In this sense, the failure of the expedition, the *Lysander's* sinking, and the reduction of her crew to feeding off one another constitute a narrative 'judgement' on excessive materialism *per se*. Unrestrained capitalism is implicated as an immoral cannibalistic enterprise that violates our natural bonds to fellow human beings, other species and the world we jointly inhabit, denying the essential interrelatedness of all things.

There is something simultaneously beautiful and corrupting about Jamrach's menagerie and the encounter with otherness, mediated by the gaze, it provides for Jaffy: "That was all I ever wanted. To stay among the animals for ever and ever and look into their eyes whenever I felt like it" (p. 24). Some readers might be reminded of Jack Walser's encounter with the circus apes in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), his "exchange with the speaking eyes of the dumb [...] meeting across the gulf of strangeness" (Carter 1994: 108). In both cases, of course, the fascination with otherness relies on the others' forcible reification and containment for the pleasure of the gazing subject. Nonetheless, the reader senses a (still) subconscious recognition by Jaffy of a kind of Levinasian obligation imposed by the other on the self, based on reciprocity rather than expediency. Mr Fledge, the mysterious client on whose account Tim, Jaffy and Dan Rhymer, Jamrach's seafaring hunter and adventurer friend, set out on their travels, however, feels no such obligation, merely self-serving acquisitiveness; he "always wanted what no one else had, what no one else had ever had, [...] determined to be the first person in the civilised world ever to own a dragon" (p. 66). Drawing on the typically Victorian trope of vision, Birch's novel invites a re-adjustment of perspective towards the competitive striving for possessions that underlies Western materialistic culture, re-focusing the reader on the intimate reality of individual things and beings as opposed to their scientific or economic objectification and commoditisation. The ethical necessity of this re-adjustment is fittingly mediated through the adult narrator's musing on a once treasured, now lost possession, Dan Rymer's telescope: "It was a lovely thing – the patterns in the high-polished mahogany, the lacquering on the brass. On the sunshade, silver engraved with a feather pattern" (pp. 61-62). In contrast to the distancing effect produced by gazing too long at faraway stars, which begin to "flutter" and blur indistinctly before the telescopic lens, Jaffy notes that focusing "here below on a bird's eye, you can see the shine in it, the life.

And sometimes, a thing comes so close it makes you jump” (p. 62). Implicitly, the care lavished on an inanimate object (the telescope) throws into stark relief humankind’s carelessness towards its fellow living creatures.

To some extent, Birch’s novel seems intended to make us “jump”, to jar us out of complacent twentieth-first-century viewpoints and value judgements, even as it seems to presume a superior environmental sensitivity on the part of its readers. Thus the depiction of acts of cannibalism, bar the inevitable blood, evince a lack of expected Gothic overtones, being treated almost mournfully, elegiacally, as Birch transforms the breaching of one of Western society’s most primal taboos into the inevitable tragic outcome of the sailors’ over-reaching and earlier transgressions against ‘Nature’. In this sense, *Jamrach’s Menagerie* may be read as an updated neo-Victorian version of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ (1798).¹ The whale hunt, with its bloody aftermath and grisly harvest, serves as a gory intimation of the later winnowing (or rendering) of human flesh.² However, readers of Anca Vlasopolos’ earlier neo-Victorian non-fiction (or biofiction) *The New Bedford Samurai* (2007) will already be familiar with similar depictions, whereby the brutal whaling industry becomes a powerful trope through which to explore nineteenth-century and present-day environmental destruction and ecological disaster, as well as, in the case of Vlasopolos’ novel, their irreversible long-term legacies for future generations.

As if to underline the conflict between the affirming and abjecting gaze, Jaffy experiences an almost anthropomorphic encounter with the harpooned female sperm whale, noting that “[t]o me it seemed she was looking at me all the time” (p. 112). Once hauled in, “[h]er eye was still bright” and “blinked slowly, once”, as though again regarding him directly, before “the stabbing began” and the crew are engulfed in her “dark spume” of blood (p. 113). Jaffy implicitly admits his own and the whale’s equal status as living, suffering beings, when he recalls: “It was then I truly realised the whale is no more a fish than I am” (p. 113). The whale’s death throes are described in excruciating detail, seeming to take forever, to the point of Jaffy soundlessly “begg[ing] her to die” (p. 113) – as later he will wish for his shipmates to die quickly and quietly. The whale’s passing is followed by her gruesome dissection, the gleaning of oil, blubber, and ambergris,³ leaving “great heaps of hacked flesh that bled and gave off a

sweet stink that made my guts clench with a kind of perverted hunger” (p. 115). Here Jaffy’s sense of ‘perversion’ suggests something misguided and unnatural about the whole procedure, while once again foreshadowing the crisis to come.

The second transgression involves the ‘ora’ or dragon, a “magnificent” beast, “a thing of wild splendour” (pp. 153, 168), eventually taken captive though never intended by nature for confinement, hence desperately “beating itself senseless against the sides of its cage” (p. 165). The human offence is emphasised by Birch’s carefully chosen image of absolute vulnerability, radically at odds with the creature’s size and predatory strength: “Twenty cruel talons flexed and clenched with a rapid unconscious innocence, like the hands of a baby screaming with colic” (p. 165). The dragon’s viciousness, as when it runs amok aboard ship and mauls the second mate Comeragh’s leg, is unmediated, containing “no mercy, no malice” (p. 190), but human beings, the novel implies, should know – and act – better. For Jaffy, the dragon functions both as an alluring ‘Heart of Darkness’ and a source of ethical obligation, which he fails to meet: “The awe, as if I’d come to the edge of a big hole in the earth and peered in and seen something wild and unspeakable looking back” (p. 168). Though Jaffy finally succeeds in making the miserable starving dragon eat again, his achievement is overshadowed by his renewed objectification of the beast, his acquiescence to Dan’s statement “I believe we’ve made our fortunes”, and his envisioned conversion of the dragon into gifts he will purchase for family and friends back home with his material gain from the beast’s suffering: “Buy Ma a new dress. A Bonnet. And Ishbel [Tim’s sister], what would she want? [...] Fans and beads and feathers” (p. 173). In Jaffy’s imagination, the dragon is transmuted directly into commodities. Instead, it is left to the ship’s ‘madman’ Skip to sum up the violation of the beast, claiming the dragon would be “better off dead. Kinder. Crueller than what we do to the whales, this is” (p. 184).

As in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, the ship gets becalmed, the men lose all track of time, and suspect the dragon of having laid a curse upon them. After Skip loosens the creature, the terrified crew drive it into the sea. The anticipated fortune vanishes before materialising, and shortly thereafter the *Lysander* is caught in violent waterspouts, curiously reminiscent of the dying whale’s spume of blood. The following day, watching the stricken ship sink fully from one of the two whaleboats, Jaffy

fittingly notes that “[t]he last of the ship was like the dying of a whale. She bled thick yellow blood from her every seam, from her dead eyes, from her heart. All the oil we’d taken since we left the Greenland Dock” (pp. 209-210) – poetic justice for the crew’s crimes against their fellow creatures. Yet the sailors’ trials are only beginning. Ironically, adrift in one-time whaling waters, it seems that no ship comes to their rescue because the whales have been hunted to near extinction and an alternative source of oil, namely oil from below ground, has “done for” the whaling industry (p. 116).⁴ Though they manage to salvage two hogs, these are quickly consumed; the animals’ butchery and draining of blood into buckets is identical to the later efficient disposal of the human dead or murdered, once food and water have run out.

In spite of the inherent drama of the situation, the second half of the book, particularly once the men are cast adrift, repeatedly flags. While perhaps realistic in terms of mimicking the tortuous slowness with which time passes for the doomed mariners, it does not always make for thrilling or even persuasive reading. Put bluntly, even before this, the *Lysander* crew is simply too *nice* and self-disciplined to be wholly believable, for instance in their long-suffering tolerance of the pontificating, insubordinate, half-mad Skip, who endangers his shipmates, or some survivors’ almost saintly resignation towards death when drawing the metaphorical short straw for the ‘cooking pot’. (Towards the end, having run out of wood and other burnable matter, the human meat is eaten raw.) It seems somewhat unlikely that, in extremity, those stronger would have surrendered so placidly to the weaker, instead of resorting to the law of survival of the fittest and fighting it out amongst themselves. Other texts dealing with similar incidents, including cannibalism, such as the ‘Shipwreck’ section in Julian Barnes’s *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989), based on Théodore Géricault’s painting *The Raft of the Medusa* painting (1818-19), have offered a much darker view of men’s preparedness to survive at all costs, in comparison to which Birch’s account comes across as far too idealistic.

Similarly, the motif of cannibalism is not really made to work as hard as it might have done. On the one hand, it is used to signal morally compromised humanity in extremity and, on the other, as previously suggested, it serves as a metaphor for capitalist depredation and excess materialism. In a more general sense, of course, within the nineteenth-century, “[c]annibalism functioned as the ultimate signifier of otherness” (Wesseling 2010: 318), notions of which Birch’s novel is clearly intent on

problematizing. Yet the act hardly seems to precipitate a genuine moral or spiritual crisis for Jaffy or any of his comrades, bar passing guilt for wishing their next crew mate would hurry up dying so they might feed again (p. 258); regret for not giving the dead a proper send-off (p. 267); the momentary horror of witnessing a dying man's awareness of his body's imminent fate to become another's meat (p. 268); or a belated crisis of conscience for having killed a friend – but not for having eaten him (p. 291). The closest the novel comes to a more complex treatment of the cannibal trope is a remark by Dan, preparing to drink from a cup of his shipmate's blood – “‘Drink of this,’ said Dan when it was his turn, raising the cup as if it was a chalice, ‘for this is my blood, shed for thee...’” (p. 270, original ellipses). However, this is rather too heavy-handed and parodic an evocation of the host and the Christian ritual of communion, for the men's dying most certainly does not involve a willing, self-chosen sacrifice. That only comes later, once Tim suggests drawing lots and shooting the loser rather than waiting for one of the four remaining survivors to die. Certainly there is nothing comparable to the deeply conflicted experience of Nicholas Frere, the protagonist of Robert Edric's *The Book of the Heathen* (2000), convicted of having gone native and allowing his anthropological fascination with cannibalism to pitch over into first-hand participation in the rites, as he becomes another ambivalent Kurtz figure.⁵ None of Birch's mariners attain comparable tragic stature.

A similar problem of verisimilitude relates to the attractive golden boy Tim, whom Jaffy at one point describes as “[b]eautiful [...] like a dirty sweaty Apollo” (p. 144). Reduced to drinking urine when the water runs out, Jaffy reflects that even “Tim's piss was golden, of course [...]. Honey sweet, no doubt” (p. 234). In spite of Dan's protectiveness towards the boys and the *Lysander* stopping off at a port with readily available women early on in the voyage, it seems naïve to suppose that the adolescent bumbling “greenies” (p. 78), especially the evidently desirable Tim, would not have attracted unwanted sexual attention from some of the older hardened members of the crew. By comparison, the brutal gang rape of the beautiful sailor Rafael and his subsequent suicide aboard a ship off the Chatham Islands, featured in the neo-Victorian frame of David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), seems a much grittier, more realistic representation of nineteenth-century seafaring life than the mostly genial camaraderie portrayed by Birch. While I am not, of course, proposing that all neo-Victorian fiction

must include homosexuality, the relationship between Jaffy and Tim, veering as it does between extremes of admiration, jealousy, love and sometimes hatred and, as indicated above, glossed with occasional hints of same-sex attraction, could have been rendered far more interesting by an exploration of these possibilities; so too Jaffy's friendship with the experienced, "sage old simian" (p. 144) and substitute father-figure Dan. I wondered whether Jaffy's apparent sexual innocence in this regards was not intended to underwrite his essential moral innocence for his transgressions, his basic characterisation as victim of circumstance rather than perpetrator.

Close to death, Jaffy and Dan are rescued by a passenger steamer off the Chilean coast and return to London, financially compensated, like the Linver family also, by Fledge for their suffering. Though neither prosecuted nor blamed by the people back home, Jaffy realises that he has been forever othered from his fellow men and women: "It would be in their eyes when they looked at me, their knowledge of what had passed" (p. 302). Rendered unknowable even to himself, like the alien soul of the tiger or dragon, he feels himself to have become "the cannibal boy" (p. 327), an exotic marvel or horror, and after a prolonged period of depression, he escapes back to sea, carrying with him Dan's gift of a copy of John James Audobon's *The Birds of America* (1827-38). This instils an obsessive desire in Jaffy for further naturalist knowledge, especially with regards to birds, and he becomes a consummate artist, not only drawing birds in captivity but dreaming up spacious decorative cages that allow them at least some semblance of movement and the dream of freedom. In part, then, his fascination with winged creatures seems linked to a desire for escape from materiality and embodiment *per se*. Eventually, he leaves the sea to set up a shop, selling songbirds and more exotic species and his more humane miniature aviaries, as well as creating a contained "wilderness", a huge enclosed "bird garden" (pp. 336, 343), which attempts to replicate the birds' natural habitats in a seeming act of atonement for their captive condition. Here Ishbel and Mrs Linver come to live with him. While never able to make meaning of his experience of the *Lysander's* doomed journey and remaining implicated in the commoditisation of humankind's others, Jaffy seeks to minister to the needs of his fellow creatures and render their man-made prisons as comfortable, tranquil, and beautiful as can be. Yet for all its connotations of a return to a state of original innocence, his paradisiacal haven mirrors his inability to escape the mental prison of his own otherness – a neo-Victorian

gloss on the postmodern condition, simultaneously alienated from and intimately implicated in our diminishing natural world. In the end, the simulated bird garden as a more humane version of Jamrach's menagerie also serves as a *mise en abyme* for Birch's novel as a whole, refiguring the text as neo-Victorian cabinet of curiosities into which we peer enquiringly to catch reflections of our Victorian others/ourselves.

Notes

1. For a brief encounter between one of Jaffy's shipmates and "a huge white bird" that may well be an albatross, see p. 122. Later, Skip blames himself for the deaths of his shipmates, interpreting these as punishment for his 'killing' of the dragon. After the sinking of the ship, once the whaleboats and survivors have become separated but manage to find one another again, Jaffy momentarily imagines meeting the other boat only to "see it was full of dead men still going about their business" (p. 228).
2. In addition to an overt allusion to the Biblical story of Jonah, Birch's novel also includes what appears to be an oblique homage to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), published six years before her own novel's setting, when Jaffy remarks "I wanted to look a whale in the eye" (p. 77).
3. Jaffy specifically comments that "ladies wear [ambergris] upon their wrists and in the valley between their breasts" for self-adornment, again linking capitalism, as exemplified by luxury goods, to a quasi murderous lust for consumption.
4. The whaling industry becomes an emblem of the futile wastage of capitalism; as Jaffy's crewmate Gabriel remarks, "They'll always need the bone for the ladies' stays, but they won't be wanting all this oil no more" (p. 116).
5. For a comprehensive discussion of Edric's novel, see Wesseling 2010: 311-338.

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