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## CHAPTER 5

‘Whenever they catch  
you, they will kill you’:

### Human–animal conflict in 1970s British children’s cinema

*Noel Brown*

Beaten to death with a shovel; bludgeoned by poachers; torn to pieces by a hound; devastated by mechanical diggers. These are the fates that befall the animal protagonists of several of the most iconic British children’s films of the 1960s and 1970s. The four films discussed in this chapter, *Ring of Bright Water* (Couffer, 1969), *The Belstone Fox* (Hill, 1973), *Watership Down* (Rosen, 1978) and *Tarka the Otter* (Cobham, 1979), foreground bleak, often realist evocations of human–animal conflict that contrast sharply with the sentimentalism of mainstream Hollywood animal films, particularly those produced by Disney. Today, however, most of these films have slipped out of the popular consciousness. If they are remembered at all, it tends to be with a vague combination of nostalgia and something approaching dread, as relics of a less consumerist era of British children’s media culture and as loci of childhood trauma.

In this chapter, I would like to situate *Watership Down* in the context of the broader preoccupation with animals and nature in British children’s cinema of the period. This chapter builds on work previously published by the author in *British Children’s Cinema: From The Thief of Bagdad to Wallace and Gromit* (London: I.

B. Tauris, 2016). Between the late 1960s and late 1970s, the animal film was the most important British children's film cycle. The four films discussed in this chapter are linked by recurrent features: an emphasis on an ultimately ungovernable, untameable nature; humankind figured as an intrusive and destructive force, diametrically opposed to the 'natural' order; a tendency both to embrace and to repudiate anthropomorphism and sentimentality; punctuating moments of brutal realism; and implicit or explicit criticisms of modernity.

## The animal film and 1970s British cinema

While it may be tempting to regard children's movies containing animals as a distinct, formally coherent subgenre, these four films have very little in common with the most common form of Hollywood animal film as encapsulated by classical-era family films such as *National Velvet* (Brown, 1944) and *Old Yeller* (Stevenson, 1957): a sentimental maturation narrative that develops a simpatico relationship between a child and a beloved animal, and which reaffirms deep, almost spiritual interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. In this tradition, the union between humankind and the natural world is unalterable, and rarely tainted by ambiguity, much less by the possibility of mutual destruction.

The very different attitude to nature – and to humanity's relation to it – in the four films discussed here is neatly encapsulated by a passage of dialogue in the late-1960s British animal film *Run Wild, Run Free* (Sarafian, 1969), in which John Mills's character, the Moorman, explains to Mark Lester's child protagonist the wondrous yet unfathomable and potentially lethal qualities of the natural environment:

That's the wonderful thing about the moors. The whole thing heaving and bursting with new life in the spring, yet it's almost invisible. Now, look around. What can you see? You can't see anything, can you? But it's there, just the same. . . . The moor's alive, Philip. Sleeps and breathes and eats and drinks. Sometimes it's serene and peaceful. Feels kindly towards us. Other times it's angry and dangerous. It can even kill us sometimes, if it takes a notion to it. And right now, in the centre of the moor, deep down in the black peat, there's a heart beating. You can feel it, sometimes.

These films tend to view the relationship between modern humans and nature as antithetical. Indeed, their inter-species interactions present a clear metonymy for the current trajectory of Western society. Arguably, they show the children's film at its most progressive, presenting barbed criticism of

modernity and its structures of advanced capitalism and industrialization and gesturing to the increasing dangers of ecological collapse.

Children are conspicuously absent from all four films. In *Ring of Bright Water* and, to a lesser degree, *Watership Down*, animals are cast in the role of symbolic child; their basic drives and emotions are roughly analogous to the needs and reactions of young children. In *The Belstone Fox* and *Tarka the Otter*, though, the animals belong to a harsh, untamed natural world that, in its brutal excesses, is anathema to normative social constructions of childhood as a realm of innocence and unfettered play. Similarly, the children's film is traditionally associated with a rather different set of tendencies: brightness and colour, lightness of tone, the foregrounding of children and their experiences, an emphasis on family and friendship and community and happy endings.

Instead, a pervasive air of miserabilism permeates these films. The same can be said for a good deal of British children's and youth visual culture of the late 1960s and 1970s, including the Ken Loach films, *Kes* (1969) and *Black Jack* (1979), the post-apocalyptic drama *Survivors* (1975–7), and even a notorious series of public information films produced by the Central Office of Information (COI) that warned children, in the starkest terms, of the lethal dangers of fireworks, electricity pylons, ponds and agricultural machinery. All share a similarly bleak tone, murky visual aesthetic and (mostly) dysphoric endings. Given their clear incongruity within the larger patterns of children's film (in Britain and elsewhere), it is important to explore the factors that allowed such films to be produced and to be received with such enthusiasm.

In many regards, these four films are products of their time. If the brightness and extravagance of late-1960s mainstream British children's musicals like *Yellow Submarine* (Dunning, 1968), *Oliver!* (Reed, 1968) and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (Hughes, 1968) resemble a narcotic high, with money flowing in from Hollywood, the 1970s certainly looks – and, more importantly, *feels* – like a comedown. Investment in British family-oriented extravaganzas ground to a halt after Hollywood's financial crisis of 1969, beginning a downward spiral that was cemented by the government's withdrawal of financial support to the National Film Finance Corporation – established in 1948 to stimulate production of British features – in 1971, and the financial difficulties of several major studios. In 1974, the *Observer* grimly noted that 'for years, the [British] film industry has been playing out a death scene besides which the most lachrymose Hollywood weepies would seem indecently cock-a-hoop'. Brian Bell, 'Can the Film-Makers Carry On', *The Observer*, 11 August 1974: 11. British children's films thus reverted from a populist transatlanticism to a more characteristically 'British' style: low-budget, unformulaic, naturalistic; and now entering new territory, sometimes quixotic, obscure and confoundingly downbeat, yet buoyed by greater levels of creative freedom.

These changing institutional contexts coincided with burgeoning political activist movements, including ecological conservationism and animal rights. Both were causes célèbres of British liberal-socialism that had begun to move beyond fringe activism into the left-wing mainstream of political discourse. Certainly, Richard Adams's novel, *Watership Down* (1972), was widely viewed on publication as a political allegory, even if the author disavowed this interpretation. It is also worth noting that, in 1978, otter numbers had declined to such an extent that they were added to the list of UK-protected species, bringing the centuries-old practice of otter hunting to an end. While this had nothing to do with the film adaptation of *Tarka the Otter* (which was not released until late 1979), Henry Williamson's 1927 novel had played a major role in bringing the practice of otter hunting to national scrutiny. The point is not that these films are underpinned by an explicit polemical agenda, but rather that they reflect ideologies and cultural trends that were very much 'in the air' in 1970s Britain.

British children's cinema of the 1970s operated as something of a cottage industry. The Children's Film Foundation (CFF), which had produced children's shorts and features since the 1950s and was funded indirectly by the state through a mandatory levy on all cinema admissions in Britain, produced some of its most creative work during the 1970s, but its films reached ever fewer children. Commercial children's film was at an even lower ebb, but it did support the endeavours of a handful of entrepreneurial producers and directors. Noel Brown, 'The Railway Children and Other Stories: Lionel Jeffries and British Family Films in the 1970s', in *Family Films in Global Cinema: The World Beyond Disney*, ed. Noel Brown and Bruce Babington (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 120–36. One of these was James Hill, a documentary producer who became a key player in British animal films during the 1960s and 1970s. Having directed the transatlantic hit *Born Free* (1966), the production that reinvigorated the long-moribund animal film, Hill went on to direct notable later releases such as *An Elephant Called Slowly* (1967), *Black Beauty* (1971) and *The Belstone Fox*. Although *Born Free* and *Black Beauty* tend more to anthropomorphic cutesiness, all of Hill's films share a simple, naturalistic style that conveys both the splendour and the desolation of Britain's landscapes. This simple visual aesthetic, married to an apparent conviction to represent nature as it really is, strongly characterizes *Ring of Bright Water*, *The Belstone Fox* and *Tarka the Otter*.

## **Humans and animals in conflict: *Ring of Bright Water*, *The Belstone Fox* and *Tarka the Otter***

*Ring of Bright Water* can, in retrospect, be seen as a midpoint between the optimism of the 1960s counterculture movement and the increasing

disillusionment of the 1970s. One of the film's main selling points was its reuniting Bill Travers and Virginia McKenna, the stars of *Born Free*, in the lead roles. After their experiences making that film, the couple had become heavily involved in animal rights (they eventually established the Born Free Foundation in 1991) and closely associated with children's films focussing on animals. Travers, in particular, had prominent roles in *An Elephant Called Slowly* and *The Belstone Fox* and was producer-director of the documentary films *The Lions Are Free* (co-directed with Hill, 1969), *The Lion at World's End* (1971) and *Christian the Lion* (1976). While Hill was a jobbing director who happened to specialize both in children's films and documentaries, Travers and McKenna apparently viewed their crusading children's films and nature documentaries as two sides of the same coin forming part of a larger project that combined political pressure on governments to stamp down on the mistreatment of animals in captivity with the moral imperative of educating children to be enlightened, compassionate future citizens.

Based on Gavin Maxwell's bestselling autobiography of 1960, which centres on his domestication of an otter, *Ring of Bright Water* draws much of its pathos and authenticity from its rooting in real life. Its human protagonist, Graham Merrill (Travers), begins the film as a frustrated office-based administrator, appalled that he has become 'A code number that gets a pension, an expectancy of life calculated in years and days', and that 'we've been computerized – by our own computers'. Graham spots an otter through a pet shop window, and they exchange a lingering glance. His voice-over narration tells us that

From that first day, I imagined that the otter had somehow singled me out from all the thousands of people who passed the pet shop window every day. . . . Every time I passed he seemed to be watching me, and me alone. At first I thought it was only my imagination, but whatever I did he seemed to sense that I was there, and fixed me with his beady eyes. Clearly, I was the chosen one.

Graham's impulsive purchase of the otter, which he names Mij, expresses itself as tacit rebellion against the joyless regimentation of his city life. Mij's predictable ransacking of his London apartment cathartically releases Graham from the materialism and consumerism embodied by the post-industrial city. Unable to keep the otter in London anymore, Graham takes Mij to a zoo to try and find him a home but is dismayed by the sight of the caged animals and quickly turns on his heels, observing that 'I hadn't just bought myself an otter. I'd taken a step which was to change the whole course of my life. This otter had become a part of me.'

Later, Graham reads a classified ad that appeals to him: 'Escape the rat-race. Exclusive old-world cottage, west coast of Scotland.' On a

whim, he buys the house in Scotland, taking Mij with him, and decides to live as a beachcomber. As with many dissatisfied city slickers during the individualist movement of the late 1960s, Graham retreats to the wilderness in search of spiritual fulfilment. However, his need for an intimate relationship (previously frustrated by a recent divorce) is only partially fulfilled by his friendship with the kindly Mary MacKenzie (McKenna). Mij offers Graham the affiliation with nature (or the appearance of it) that he yearns for.

The otter is a peculiarly British animal to use as the centre of a family film. Savage, not adorable in the accepted sense, unsuitable for domestication, widely regarded as a pest and hunted mercilessly for sport, the otter bridges the divide between humanity and nature more than conventionally domesticated animals, displaying adaptability to land and water, possessing intelligence and playfulness, but remaining thrillingly untameable. However, audiences are denied an ingratiating happy ending. There is a disturbing portent of Mij's fate when Graham briefly returns to London and notices an otter-skin coat in the window of the same shop he had purchased Mij. In the following scene, unaware that Mij is a beloved pet and driven by received ideas that otters are vermin, an amiable roadside digger beats him to death with his spade. Reacting to Mary's horror, the man responds, bemusedly, that Mij was 'just an otter'.

Mij's death is presented in deliberately prosaic fashion, with none of the prolonged suspense of similar scenes in *The Belstone Fox*, *Tarka the Otter* and *Watership Down*. The fact that the killer blow is delivered by an apparently pleasant person in the course of their everyday work seems curiously appropriate, since what the film continually questions – and ultimately laments – is unempathetic thoughtlessness rather than active maliciousness. Despite such traumatic episodes, these films place greater emphasis on the cyclicity of nature – and the dialectic between its beauty and barbarism – than on the lives of individual animals. Mij, like the mother goose whose goslings Graham adopts after she is shot by poachers, successfully procreates, thus ensuring natural continuity. This fact is perhaps intended to make his violent death somewhat bearable. Mary's assertion in the film's final scene that 'wild otters' (i.e. Mij's cubs) swimming in the burn is 'the way it ought to be' perhaps serves as a reproof of Graham's removing the animal from its natural habitat for his own ends.

*The Belstone Fox*, described by the *Daily Mail*'s David Lewin as 'the most original film I have seen in years', is even less optimistic about the possibilities of inter-species accord. David Lewin, 'The Hound and his Best Friend . . . The Fox', *The Daily Mail*, 26 October 1973: 6–7. The film opens with a brutal scene in which two men in search of foxes dig into the ground, uncover a burrow in which a vixen is guarding her cubs and bludgeon the animals to death. The voice-over narration intones: 'And so begins the strange and terrifying story

of the Belstone fox.' No explicit reason is given for the killing of the animals beyond one character's matter-of-fact observation that 'some people don't like foxes'. This immediately places the species on the same level as the otters of *Ring of Bright Water* and *Tarka the Otter* and the rabbits of *Watership Down* as animals under constant threat from human incursions into their natural territory. A surviving cub is rescued by professional huntsman Asher (Eric Porter), who names it Tag. Asher's decision to spare the cub and wean it with a hound dog is viewed with scepticism by the squire, Kendrick (Jeremy Kemp), who permits it only on condition that he 'keep [the fact] quiet'. The film's opening sections develop a tripartite relationship between Asher, Tag and the hound Merlin, with whom Tag is happily paired as a cub. The film's major reversal is Asher's decision, under pressure from Kendrick, to make Tag the quarry in a fox hunt. By this stage, Tag has become famous in the local hunting fraternity for his boldness and cunning.

In the film's most gruesome sequence Asher, fervently leading the hunt against Tag, is thrown from his horse and badly wounded. Pursued by the pack of hounds, Tag leads them across a railway track. Tag and Merlin cross safely, but the rest of the pack is killed by an oncoming train. The camera quickly cuts between the carnage on the tracks (where limbs and bloodied bodies fly through the air) and Asher's face as he shields his eyes and cries out in anguish. Having been forced to shoot one of the crippled survivors, he then mutters to himself, 'damn him'. Subsequently, Asher hardens to the obsessive pursuit of vengeance; he rationalizes this to Kendrick by claiming that, if left alive, Tag will use the same strategy to escape the pack again. He refuses Kendrick's suggestion of hunting Tag with guns, insisting it 'wouldn't be right' and that they must kill him 'traditionally' through the hunt. Unusually, for this cycle of films, *The Belstone Fox* ends not with the animal's death but the human's. Increasingly ailing, Asher follows Merlin into the mountains, where he discovers Tag and Merlin peacefully side-by-side in a cave. Intending to kill Tag, he pulls out a knife but suffers a fatal heart attack. Asher's body is later discovered with Tag and Merlin loyally having remained by his side, keeping vigil. The final shot sees Tag alone, indefatigable, on top of the barren mountain.

Ironically, it is the decent but compromised Asher, a master of the hunt with forty years' experience, who imposes human qualities on the animal. His decision to spare the fox cub and wean it with a hound dog is viewed as quixotic by Kendrick. It is hinted that his kindness stems from a weakening of his faculties as a hunter – an individual supposedly divorced from sentimental attachment to (and anthropomorphism of) animals. Ageing, and increasingly indulgent, Asher acts against his hunter's instinct to kill the young animal and feels personally betrayed when Tag leads his pack across the rail track. But the real culprit is Asher himself, who insists on casting Tag as symbolic child and then hunting him, secretly hoping, as a point of personal pride, that the fox will escape. Ultimately, the human tendency to anthropomorphize is revealed as a dangerous misreading of nature's true



essence, which is characterized by amorality, spontaneity, hardness and endurance.

In contrast, the changeability of human civilization is highlighted. Asher's daughter, Jenny (Heather Wright), proclaims herself anti-hunting. One of the film's most potent images is of a young child, having been taken on her first fox hunt, being 'blooded' – that is, having the hunted animal's blood smeared on her face to initiate her to the practice. The camera slowly zooms on her blank face as the music becomes discordant, and she reaches her hand up to her bloodied cheek. The child's horrified incomprehension, coupled with the youthful and progressive Jenny's ethical objection to the hunt, and Asher's transformation from decent family man to bloodthirsty obsessive suggest that traditional pursuits such as fox hunting have become outmoded.

Tag's ability to survive and evade his pursuers rests on his own innate skills. Indeed, for Asher, it is important that the animal is afforded the opportunity and the means of survival, but not the certainty of it. The philosophy is similar to that of the sun god in *Watership Down*, who warns the rabbits that 'All the world will be your enemy. . . . And whenever they catch you, they will kill you. But first they must catch you.' The sentiment is echoed here when the hunter, Tod (Bill Travers), remarks of Tag: 'You can hunt him as much as you like, but you'll never catch him. . . . Never.' These films imbue their animal protagonists with natural defences (cunning, endurance) against a world of manifold dangers, where comfort, reassurance and safety are unknowable. Equally, their defences are often insufficient. Even the seemingly indefatigable Tag survives only because Asher keels over before he is able to deliver the death blow.

Both *The Belstone Fox* and *Tarka the Otter* are predicated on exposing the savagery and injustice of blood sports. *The Belstone Fox* takes deliberate aim at fox hunting (which was finally banned in Britain in 2005), and *Tarka the Otter* does the same for otter hunting. With a screenplay by naturalist and author Gerald Durrell, *Tarka the Otter* is a starkly brilliant riposte to the sentimental, sanitized Disney nature documentaries of the 1950s, and one of the bleakest and most brutal children's films ever made. The film follows the dog otter Tarka, interspersing documentary-style footage of wild animals and staged sequences shot on location with a sparse narration by Peter Ustinov. It presents various episodes in the otter's life, including his birth, the violent deaths of his mother (shot by a hunter) and father (savaged in a hunt), the honing of his predatory instincts, his finding a mate and his eventual apparent death at the hands of Deadlock, the leader of the pack of hounds who possesses 'an insatiable lust for otters'. Although unflinching in its distressing details, the film shows many scenes of animals engaged in pleasurable activities. In an early scene, Tarka's mother and father are seen mating underwater. Later, we see Tarka delightedly taking a shower in a stream, the narration reminding us that 'Like all otters, Tarka revelled in falling water, going wild with joy,

rolling in ecstasy as he tried to catch the twisting rope of water.' Tarka's predatory inclinations are never denied. There are various scenes of him catching and eating fish, and the voice-over explains: 'The more he killed the more he wanted to kill, and he feasted on them till his jaws were tired.' There is no implied tension in the film's alternate representations of its animal protagonist as symbolic child and vicious predator.

Again, humans are always malign: the salmon poachers, illegally stealing from the estate's streams under cover of night; the fishermen who trawl the sea and attempt to catch Tarka in their net, asserting that his skin will fetch 'a few bob'; the rabbit hunters who take a pot shot at Tarka; even the old woman who unwittingly throws a bucket of water over him from her window above. Anthropomorphism occasionally asserts itself. Towards the end of the film, Tarka sleeps with White-Tip and their cubs, dreaming, we are told, of travelling 'to a strange sea, where otters were never hungry and never hunted'. It is characteristic of the film's weighing the joys and beauty of nature against its viscerality that this yearning fantasy is juxtaposed by the return of the otter hunters. For the hunters, 'the first meet of the otter-hunting season was a grand social occasion.' They toast their anticipated success with glasses of sherry, interspersed with polite, genteel conversation. Then the hounds, who 'loved the huntsmen, who called each of them by name', arrive and the hunt finally commences. The cruelty of the hunt is in the protracted chase as much as the kill itself. The huntsmen allow Tarka a four-minute head start, 'a sporting chance' that serves only to instil fear in the quarry and build pleasurable anticipation in the hunters as, inexorably, the exhausted otter is brought down.

Neither the hunters nor the spectators, who observe with curiosity, are despicable people; the fault is with the arrogant assertion of 'natural dominion' over animal kind. Tantalisingly, during the climactic, fifteen-minute hunt, it seems at several points that Tarka may elude his pursuers, but once again there is no happy ending. In the final scene, Tarka is cornered by Deadlock, and they struggle underwater. Deadlock's dead body rises to the surface, but there is no sign of Tarka. Do the three bubbles that appear on the surface in the moments that follow suggest his escape upstream, or merely his final breaths? Perhaps they symbolize White-Tip's and the two cubs' escape? Is a hopeful interpretation of this scene permissible, given the film's harshly pragmatic interpretations of life in the wild, or merely a self-delusion that stems from its status as a 'children's film'?

## **‘They’ll never rest till they’ve spoiled the earth’: *Watership Down***

If *The Belstone Fox* and *Tarka the Otter* espouse a common philosophy, it is that human beings, despite technological advancements and the hubristic assumption of moral and spiritual sophistication, are still animals in all senses of the word. The rabbits in *Watership Down* reside in a society ridden by recognizable social structures, rituals, fears and conflicts. In so doing, the film approaches the same theme from the opposite angle: whereas the other films depict humans barely having progressed beyond animal savagery, *Watership Down* shows an animal civilization that in almost every regard mirrors the human world. It allegorically centres on rabbit civilization, delineating a society with its own laws, customs and language, though bound by earthly preoccupations and threats.

There is much that could be said about the film’s allegory of human civilization, but I am more concerned here with its occasional, fleeting, but always disruptive interactions between rabbits and humans. Whereas the narratives of the live-action films described earlier proceed via startling realistic images of animal slaughter and suffering, the animated *Watership Down* is much more expressionist in style – closer, at times, to ‘abstraction’ than ‘mimesis’. See Sam Summers’s chapter in this volume for a delineation of these concepts. In its own way, the results are equally unsettling. The humans’ impending arrival at the Sandleford Warren early in the film is described by Fiver as ‘something oppressive, like thunder’; human footmarks in the mud and a still-burning cigarette confirm that a ‘terrible thing is coming’, and Fiver then has a vision of blood gushing over a nearby cultivated field. A large wooden human sign overlooking the field that warns that the land is to be redeveloped for a housing estate offering ‘high class modern residences’ is introduced with an ominous low-angle shot as Fiver looks at the structure from ground height, making it look like gallows. Expressionist shots of this kind add considerably to the film’s portentous tone, but they serve another important function. By allowing us privileged access to the rabbits’ subjectivity, the film externalizes the actions of the humans (i.e. us) and presents humanity as Other, just as *The Belstone Fox*, *Tarka the Otter* and (to a lesser degree) *Ring of Bright Water* do. This is a far cry from the presentation of human–animal encounters in classical animal films, which invoke pastoral images of humans and nature in perfect synchronicity. The only such images here occur after the rabbits have found the Arcadian habitat of Watership Down, whose bucolic perfection is explicitly predicated on its isolation from the human world.

Elsewhere, audiences are repeatedly shown nightmarish visions of natural habitats compromised by human activity. In Cowslip’s Warren, where the few remaining rabbits are cowed into fearful submission and forced into

willing collaboration by the human farmer with the promise of abundant food, the atmosphere is described as heavy, 'like mist'. Holly's recollection of the destruction of Sandleford is particularly evocative, describing 'runs blocked with dead bodies' and 'warrens, earth, roots, grass all pushed into the air'. Holly concludes that 'They just destroyed the warrens because we were in their way', and Fiver responds, 'They'll never rest till they've spoiled the earth.' Holly's traumatized description is accompanied by a montage sequence that contains one of the film's most potent images: a mechanical digger raking a field, leaving blood-red claw marks scarred into the landscape. The shot is disturbingly (and intentionally) evocative of various sequences in which rabbits claw one another and, invariably, draw blood. In both cases, the effect is equally dissonant: the image is of nature brutalized and defiled. Moreover, the fact that no humans are seen during the destruction of Sandleford is an artistic choice that seems, deliberately, to evoke the mindlessness of the machine, the seemingly reflexive, amoral tyranny of late modernity.

The theme of nature and animals being 'in the way' of human progress is a recurrent one. The rabbits are forced to cross a busy country road (with a dead rodent flattened on to the surface of the tarmac), and later a speeding train mows down a group of rabbits escaping Efrafa, in a sequence that recalls the slaughter of the hounds in near-identical circumstances in *The Belstone Fox*. Human characters themselves are barely glimpsed. The pair of farmers who shoot Hazel are seen only in silhouette with their shotguns, and although we hear snippets of conversation, the point-of-audition remains with the rabbits, rendering it almost inaudible. The only exception to the film's overwhelmingly hostile depiction of humans is the young girl on the farm who reprimands the cat ('cruel thing!') for chasing after Hazel and Pipkin and later saves Hazel from being killed by it. We might interpret this character in a number of ways. Most basically, she reflects a broader convention in children's fiction for children to have greater affinity with animals and nature, and to be relatively innocent and untainted by the ethical compromises of adulthood. However, her presentation perhaps offers the possibility (but no more) of a more thoughtful, compassionate and enlightened future, much in the way that *The Belstone Fox* presents Asher's daughter, Jenny, as actively rejecting the methods and the prejudices of earlier generations. Adams's novel is more explicit in this regard: the child, Lucy, plays a much more actively sympathetic role, helping to nurse Hazel back to health after he is attacked by the cat and then releasing him close to the Watership Down Warren.

*Watership Down* also shares with the other three films discussed in this chapter a pervasive funereal tone. As with *Animal Farm* (Halas and Batchelor, 1954), Britain's first feature-length animation (and in obvious contrast with Disney), the muted, often drab colour palette is matched by the often doom-laden orchestral score. Comedy, a staple of children's animation, is mostly localized to the figure of Kehaar, a black-headed gull

portrayed by Broadway legend Zero Mostel. Kehaar remains anomalous for several reasons. First, he is voiced by an American among an otherwise uniformly British voice cast. Second, he remains a comical figure (even when flapping his wings in defence of the rabbits escaping Efrafa for Watership Down) with his outrageous European accent and his obsession with finding 'big water'. Third, he is freed (both by his wings and his demeanour) from the oppressive threat constantly hanging over almost every other character.

*Watership Down*, whose Royal World premiere was attended by Prince Charles, was a major commercial hit, becoming the sixth most popular film of 1979 in British theatres. Paul Donovan and Douglas Thompson, 'Booming Bunnies', *The Daily Mail*, 17 October 1978, 24; Justin Smith, 'Cinema Statistics, Box Office and Related Data', in *British Film Culture in the 1970s: The Boundaries of Pleasure*, ed. Sue Harper and Justin Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 273. But the film also attracted controversy. The debate began when the BBFC awarded *Watership Down* a U rating, reasoning that 'Animation removes the realistic gory horror in the occasional scenes of violence and bloodshed'. 'Watership Down', *British Board of Film Classification*, 15 February 1978. <https://darkroom.bbfc.co.uk/original/1b0cb7188e02ac62c6cdce5f2d1b928:2199e5760ab7c37b5b037fdee3a35735/watership-down-report.pdf> (accessed 25 October 2021). This decision is among the most complained about in the history of the BBFC and was immediately condemned by the film's director, Rosen, who personally requested that the BBFC assign it the 'A' rating. Glenys Roberts, 'The Rabbits of Warren Street', *The Times*, 19 October 1978: 11. Rosen believed that only in Britain was *Watership Down* considered a children's novel; in the United States, it was viewed as an adult allegory. Roberts, 'The Rabbits of Warren Street'. Contemporary British critics did not agree. *The Spectator's* Ted Whitehead saw it as 'a straightforward children's adventure story', and while *The Guardian's* Derek Malcolm asserted that it is 'as appealing to adults as children and, just possibly, to people who don't normally go to the cinema', and he insisted that 'It is not true . . . that the film is too violent and disturbing for children.' Ted Whitehead, 'Cinema', *The Spectator*, 20 October 1978: 30; Derek Malcolm, 'The Buck Stops Here', *The Guardian*, 19 October 1978: 12.

Today, by contrast, the film has passed into the collective folk memory as a nightmarish, almost inexplicable aberration within the history of children's film, a genre that (in Britain, at least) has since become far more innocuous. Hyperbolic it may be, but this view of *Watership Down* as 'unsuitable for children' requires some consideration. First, it bears pointing out that both *The Belstone Fox* and *Tarka the Otter* were classified as 'A' films on account of their punctuating moments of gruesome action and the bleakness of the milieu. Those ratings have escaped scrutiny, since neither film is especially well-remembered today, but standards of acceptability in the children's film (in Britain at least) have clearly changed since the 1970s. In some regards, attitudes have liberalized; mild swearing, sexual content and relatively strong violence are now considered 'suitable' for children's consumption. However,

it is hard to imagine the punctuating moments of gruesome action and the clearly polemical social discourse at work in all four films being viewed as palatable in contemporary British children's cinema (which is characterized, in part, by the strategic avoidance of any hint of political contentiousness).

Freed from the comparatively rigid institutional parameters of mainstream Hollywood and post-1990s British cinema, the producers of these films worked under fewer constraints than their latter-day counterparts. There are various reasons why this might be so, and a full answer would require more space than is possible here. However, it does seem clear that a confluence of social, political, stylistic and industrial factors were at play. The lingering controversy over *Watership Down's* status as a children's film is not purely a result of ongoing popularity, though, but also stems from its status as an animated film. Its sequences of rabbits being savaged to death are apparently more disturbing than instances of violent mayhem in, say, the *Indiana Jones* (1981–2008) or *Harry Potter* (2001–11) films. Presumably, this is largely because *Watership Down* presents psychologically disconcerting incongruities in the fictional realm of anthropomorphized animals, which runs contrary to the domineering, sentimentalized Disney image. Whereas real-life experiences of nature might prepare viewers (even children) for the dysphoric elements in the live-action films, representation of animals and the natural world in children's animation are enmeshed in the ideology of Western childhood. As Rosen explains, violent rabbits created problems 'because of the legacy of the Disney studio'. Roberts, 'The Rabbits of Warren Street'. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that all four films *perform* animality for ideological and aesthetic purposes. While the live-action films present the appearance of unmediated reality, their often unstinting representations of nature 'red in tooth and claw' (as Tennyson has it) no less reflect the cultural and political contexts of 1970s Britain than *Watership Down's* more abstract, but equally troubling, encounters between humans and animals. Of the four films discussed in this chapter, only *Watership Down* retains a prominent place in the popular cultural consciousness. To some degree, this reflects the enduring popularity of Adams's novel, which still sells hundreds of thousands of copies per year worldwide, as well as its striking, occasionally expressionist visual style and the seemingly indelible mark it made on contemporary audiences. Sandra Beckett, *Crossover Fiction: Global and Historical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2009), 107–8. In contrast, the neglect of its live-action counterparts (despite their clear virtues) adds weight to Terry Staples's claim to the ephemeral nature of British children's cinema. Terry Staples, *All Pals Together: The Story of Children's Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 195–6. These films are long overdue for rediscovery; their critiques of human aggression and self-absorption, and their implicit demand for a greener politics – one less marked by speciesism – remain pertinent today. All four films work to expose the brutality that lies behind the veneer of

human civilization, showing us that the savagery of the natural world was never truly left behind.