

Fear and Pity, Pity and Fear: Rereading Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* in the Age of #MeToo

Timothy C. Baker

Abstract

Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* (1970) is often approached simply as a narrative puzzle. Examining it in relation to #MeToo rhetoric and recent work by feminist scholars including Kate Manne and Linda Martín Alcoff, as well as examining its unacknowledged inspiration from *giallo* films, provides an opportunity to reconsider Spark's

complicated portrayal of agency and bodily experience, especially as it is perceived in the classroom. Spark's novel questions the possibility of writing female bodies in an age, and a form, that is dominated by misogynistic representations, and how the reception of such novels is often determined by cultural trends.

Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* (1970) is a staple of the Scottish literary curriculum. I have taught it virtually every year of my career, in courses on both ethics and space, and as an example of both Scottish and postmodern fiction. The novel, which seems to tell the story of a woman seeking her own murder, has frequently been approached as a literary puzzle and an opportunity to reflect on questions of fate and free will. Readers have long been divided about the novel's merits, either approaching the novel in terms of its events, in which case it is "a book of singular cruelty and shocking misanthropy" (Jordison, n.p.), or treating it as a philosophical exercise, where it can be seen, in the words of one recent critic, as an account of the "relationship of the self to the Other and to death within the universe as defined by existentialism" (Craig 118). In both cases, however, the novel's critics have often elided the body at the centre of the tale: in framing an account of murder and sexual assault either as exploitation, as Judy Sproxtton argues, or as a philosophical conundrum, as Malcolm Bradbury and subsequent critics have postulated, the novel's reception has overlooked its real-world resonances. The novel seeks an explanation for its peculiar tone, but has no relation to the experiential world.

Encountering the novel now, it is clear that readers may no longer have that option. I most recently taught the novel on 11 October 2018, six days after the United States Senate voted, by a margin of 51-49, to confirm Justice Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court, after a lengthy hearing concerning allegations of sexual assault. In this context, the novel was no longer viewed as an intellectual exercise: it was a story of a rape, and the ways in which women are not believed. Students were shaken by Spark's text in a manner I have never before encountered: a text that had previously seemed distant was suddenly their window into the world around them, and a character regarded as an intellectual cipher was given embodied being.

This transition in perception is not, of course, limited to Spark's novel. In May 2019 *The New York Times* published a short article by Parul Sehgal arguing that #MeToo, the movement created by civil rights activist Tarana Burke that grew prominent in 2017, was best understood through the medium of fiction. Sehgal considers a number of

recent texts, as well as some older ones, arguing that while in the public sphere women must “perform credibility,” the novel form permits writers to explore “inconsistencies and incoherence” and write “stories that thicken the mysteries of memory and volition” (Sehgal, n.p.). Spark’s novel certainly fits such a description: drawing on recent work by feminist scholars including Kate Manne, Linda Martín Alcoff, and Rebecca Kukla reveals the complexity of the novel’s portrayal of misogyny and female desire. Reconsidering the text in a contemporary social context shows the extent to which it can be seen as a critique of the narratives told about women’s bodies. At the same time, the novel’s own potential inspiration from *giallo* films, particularly the work of Mario Bava, has been completely ignored in all critical accounts. Combining these approaches provides an opportunity to reconsider Spark’s complicated portrayal of agency and bodily experience, and raises the central question of what possibility there is for writing female bodies in an age—whether 1970 or 2019—and in a form that is dominated by misogynistic representations, as well as the extent to which the reception of such novels is often determined by cultural trends.

The Driver’s Seat is a short, deceptively straightforward novel. The protagonist, Lise, journeys from an unnamed location in northern Europe to a southern city, presumably Rome, where she will die. The reader is told at the start of the second chapter that her image will soon be circulated in multiple newspapers, a combination of identikit reconstruction and “actual photography” (18). A few pages later the situation is clarified:

She will be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab-wounds, her wrists bound with a silk scarf and her ankles bound with a man’s necktie, in the grounds of an empty villa, in a park of the foreign city to which she is travelling on the flight now boarding at Gate 14. (25)

For the remainder of the novel, Lise appears to seek her ending. She is in search of a man who is her “type,” which the reader recognises as a potential murderer; she acquires the necessary scarf and tie, and the

weapon that will kill her. The reader begins to interpret every one of Lise's actions as directed towards this final moment. She is introduced, for instance, arguing with a salesperson who tries to sell her a dress that will not hold a stain, and she immediately leaves, insulted. On first reading the scene, the reader is mystified, but then realises that Lise must have already had violence in mind and wanted the stain to show. As Malcolm Bradbury writes in "Muriel Spark's Fingernails", the first major critique of the novel, and still one of the most influential, Lise's actions

are all part of a pursuit of the ending, in which she is an active participant. This means complicity with her murderer, and hence an issue about moral responsibility; it also means complicity with her own author, and hence an issue about form. (191)

In Bradbury's reading, Lise's choice to die means that she cannot be a victim; likewise, as a character searching for her own ending, she achieves a victory over the author. Lise, not her murderer or her author, is responsible: she is in the driver's seat.

Bradbury's emphasis on the relation between narrative form and psychological intent has remained the focus of many critics. Faith Pullin similarly argues, for instance, that Spark depicts a meaningless world "made meaningful by Lise's autonomous act of seeking her own death" (77), while Judith Roof states that Lise is not "driven by a desire to end, but by a desire to live the story properly" (62). Both critics accept Spark's marked lack of psychological insight, and in turn focus not on character but on story, while arguing that the particulars of the story are potentially arbitrary. For Judy Sproxton, meanwhile, "Lise's horrific plot for her own immolation is the most nauseating of Spark's narratives," although she notes that the reader's "sense of nausea is deliberately induced" (144). For all three critics, and many more, it is clear that Spark's novel is a comment on the nature of narration. The reader is not intended to empathise with Lise, but to use her story as a lens

through which to consider storytelling more generally. The novel, in this reading, is about the importance of narrative in shaping a life.

Spark's manipulation of chronology, frequently used to evoke a feeling of unease, is evident from the first page. The novel opens: "And the material doesn't stain,' the salesgirl says" (7). Just a page later the narrative returns to the same moment, and both tense and language have slightly shifted: "And it doesn't stain,' the salesgirl had said" (8). The effect is disorientating. One of these versions of events must be right, but neither can be wholly true; while the difference between the two sentences is small, the reader is aware that the apparently omniscient narrative voice is already inconsistent. Later in the novel Lise enters a department store with another tourist, a Jehovah's Witness named Mrs Fiedke: "Two television screens, one vast and one small, display the same image" (63). Here, as elsewhere in the novel, the reader or the characters are presented with an apparent choice, but ultimately realise choice is irrelevant: the outcome remains the same. The universe appears fixed, such that choice is an illusion. The frequent assertions of the novel's ending may bear this out: Lise's choices are a way for her to take control, but result in the same death.

As Bradbury and others acknowledge, however, Lise's control is not meaningless, for it allows her to assert herself over the narrative voice. The apparently omniscient third-person narrator is initially simply misleading. In the first chapter the reader is told that her "lips are usually pressed together" (9) yet they are described as slightly parted four times in that chapter alone. Likewise, she is said to be both "as young as twenty-nine or as old as thirty-six" (18) and also, more precisely, as thirty-four and a few months (9). If, as Jonathan Kemp argues, the focus on Lise's mouth "speak[s] the unspeakability, represent[s] the unrepresentability of what the novel is about" (546-7), the variations in narrative pronouncements indicate a central polyvocality. Lise is not being described by one omniscient narrator, but many potential observers, each with their own particular perspective. Taken at its most literal level, the novel might be a retrospective police account of Lise's murder, combining multiple witness statements. At the end, as Vassiliki Kolocotroni has recently written, the reader realises "that we will never know 'the whole

truth', never find out, other than what's pieced together in a misheard, misunderstood, badly translated, irrelevant, or indeed over-interpreted way, what really drove them to it" (1551). Lise, the narrator(s), and the reader are all forced to make choices, to interpret, and yet there is no final truth.

These hesitations and inconsistencies, at once playful and profound, account for the novel's continued popularity, especially in university classrooms. Students, primed to approach the classroom as a place of explication, are amused and frustrated by Spark's text, and the realisation that each of their classmates seems to have read a different book. Some years ago, a student, leaving the room, simply threw up his hands and exclaimed "What the *fuck* was that about?" But a much more significant problem remains, not only unanswered but unasked by virtually every critic: why, in endeavouring to present a parable of narrative indeterminacy, did Spark choose this particular story?

Spark's biographer, Martin Stannard, presents two possible inspirations. In 1969, while in Florence, Spark became obsessed with a news item describing a woman who,

[G]arishly dressed, had come to Rome and taken a stroll in the park. There she had been tied up, raped, and stabbed to death. To Muriel, the compelling feature of this butchery was that the 'victim' appeared to have provoked it. (364)

When Spark's novel was adapted into an Italian *giallo* film titled *Identikit*—directed by Giuseppe Patroni Griffi and starring Elizabeth Taylor and Ian Bannen, with a cameo by Andy Warhol—the European press focused on the real-life story, the murder of Marlene Puntschuh, from Stuttgart, by Guido B. Spimpolo, and Puntschuh's family's attempt to halt filming (Monterrey 92). Stannard also mentions the influence of Spark's friend Dario Ambrosiani, to whom *The Driver's Seat* is dedicated and who advocated a macrobiotic diet, like the character of Bill in the novel, as well as a particular sartorial refinement. To this extent, the novel may include both autobiographical and biographical impulses.

The ease, if not the complete success, with which Spark's novel was adapted into a *giallo* film also indicates the possible influence of contemporary film. The first example of *gialli* films, which predominantly combine elements of mystery, horror, and exploitation, is usually said to be Mario Bava's *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*, also called *The Evil Eye*, released in Italy in 1963. Bava's film introduces the most common narrative structure of the genre: an innocent character, usually a tourist, stumbles upon the work of what appears to be a serial killer, and, with or without the help of the police, attempts to solve the crime. The parallels between Bava's film and Spark's novel are much closer than simply the combination of a tourist and a crime within a Roman setting. Nora Davis, Bava's protagonist, is introduced on a plane, reading a murder mystery whose cover she displays clearly, just as Lise selects crime novels for public display. Nora, like Lise, dresses extravagantly, especially in a rather hideous snakeskin jacket early in the film. The voiceover narration is apparently omniscient, but displays remarkable excitement when Nora is in danger, and only comments when she is alone. There are other strange parallels with Spark's work: an early scene in an airport is virtually repeated in Griffi's film, while there is also the presence of a 'typing ghost,' surely not an intentional nod to that figure in Spark's first novel, *The Comforters*, but a curious overlap all the same. Most importantly, Nora and Lise both recognise fictional analogues to their situation. Nora draws attention to the similarity of her case with the work of Agatha Christie, particularly *The ABC Murders*; as Colette Balmain argues, "Nora exists only in the space and place of the narrative" and "wanders in and out of the textual spaces" (27). Likewise Lise, who selects a novel "with bright green lettering on a white background with the author's name printed to look like blue lightning streaks" (22) and "seems to display it deliberately" on the plane (39), gives it to a hotel porter at the novel's end, describing it as "a whydunnit in q-sharp major [that] has a message: never talk to the sort of girls that you wouldn't leave lying about in your drawing-room for the servants to pick up" (101). The quotation, with its nod to the *Lady Chatterley* obscenity trial and playful surrealism, is often taken to be a summary of Spark's

novel itself, where the “who” is rarely in question but the “why” is never resolved.

What particularly unites the text and film, however, is the extent to which women’s bodies are pronounced on, while the protagonists find themselves locked into a familiar story of murder and death. They not only look to crime fiction to explain their situation, but seem in some way aware that they are themselves locked into an artificial narrative, which in both cases is corroborated by the narrative voice. That voice, however, refuses to pronounce directly on the situation, and especially in Spark’s novel often expresses bafflement. If Bava’s film is a celebratory portrait of the recurrence of familiar narratives, designed to titillate its audience, Spark’s novel is a commentary on the persistence of such narratives, and the way they turn women into spectacle. Midway through the novel the narrator seems to give up, in a passage quoted by virtually every critic of the novel: Lise “picks up her paperback book and goes out, locking the door behind her. Who knows her thoughts? Who can tell?” (50). For Paddy Lyons, this narratorial ambivalence indicates that Lise is a “performance artist, caught only in action, not defined by thoughts or intentions, which are left for a reader to surmise” (93). Lise, in this reading, is defined solely by her arguably predetermined set of actions, and the narrator’s confusion mimics the reader’s own. Lise is only what she does: she is only how she appears to others.

Few critics, however, take note of the passage two paragraphs later:

The women stare at her clothes. They, too, are dressed brightly for a southern summer, but even here in this holiday environment Lise looks brighter. It is possibly the combination of colours—the red in her coat and the purple in her dress—rather than the colours themselves which drags attention to her, as she takes her passport in its plastic envelope from the clerk, he looking meanwhile as if he bears the whole of the eccentricities of humankind upon his slender shoulders. (50)

Lise is known for her visibility: her clothing “drags attention.” The clerk, however, is barely described, but is given a sense, in one clause, of an inner life that Lise is completely denied. Lise’s performance is explicitly a gendered one. As Iris Marion Young writes:

Misogynist mythology gloats in its portrayal of women as frivolous body decorators. Well-trained to meet the gaze that evaluates us for our finery, [...] we then are condemned as sentimental, superficial, duplicitous because we attend to and sometimes learn to love the glamorous arts. (68-69)

Lise’s clothing is always interpreted by the narrator as a quest for attention, as directed towards others. If, as Kate Manne has influentially argued, misogyny can be defined not in terms of individual intent but rather effect (20), Lise is a victim in two related ways: she is condemned for falling into a narrative where women are defined by appearance, and simultaneously condemned for exceeding the constrictions of that narrative. If male dominance, according to Manne, consists in part in “seizing control of the narrative” (11), Lise’s attempt to create her own personal narrative against and through the societal narrative by which she is constricted marks her as unfit for society. Spark’s focus on misogyny as social function rather than psychological intent aligns her closely with Manne’s more recent work, but is arguably out of step with her contemporaries. According to Manne, “[w]omen who resist or flout gendered norms and expectations may subsequently garner suspicion and consternation” (61). Lise is a paradigmatic example: she is punished, according to the narrative, for simultaneously failing to adhere to societal norms of relative invisibility and for adhering to gender stereotypes of clothing as performance. Her exaggerated performance of femininity, especially in terms of clothing, is seen as an affront.

This tension is especially visible in the sympathy accorded to her killer by many readers, which accords with what Manne calls “himpathy” or “the excessive sympathy sometimes shown toward male perpetrators of sexual violence” (197). Lise is killed by a man named Richard, a former sex offender whom she has previously met on the plane. He is

repeatedly described as fearful and trembling: his life as a “sex maniac” is, he protests, “all over and past” (103). Lise argues explicitly that women look to get killed, and Richard repeatedly claims his innocence: the man is never to blame. The novel ends with Richard’s protestation of victimhood, in a statement the narrator calls “unnerving”:

“She told me to kill her and I killed her. She spoke in many languages, but she was telling me to kill her all the time. She told me precisely what to do. I was hoping to start a new life.” He sees already the gleaming buttons of the policeman’s uniforms, hears the cold and the confiding, the hot and barking voices, sees already the holsters and epaulets and all those trappings devised to protect them from the indecent exposure of fear and pity, pity and fear. (107)

Richard not only has the final lines but, like the passport clerk, is given an inner life that Lise is denied. Students have, every year, pointed to Richard as a victim; the final words, from Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, seem to support such a view. It is not only that the woman is responsible for her own demise, but that this control is damaging to the male perpetrator. Yet the final phrase indicates how Spark subverts the very story she seems to relate. The repetition and reversal of the final words returns the reader to the opening sequence, where the same phrase appears in multiple guises. The narrative of tragedy and male victimhood is not fixed, she implies, but is as inconsistent, as subject to readerly bias, as her central narrative. At the same time, she shows that the entire narrative of male tragedy, the fall of a great man, is a social construction to the same extent as the misogynistic narratives she has earlier portrayed. Both Lise and Richard may be trapped in particular pre-ordained stories: *The Driver’s Seat* sets out to expose their artificiality.

The artificiality of narrative, especially the narrative of gender stereotypes, is most fully realised through the character of Mrs Fiedke, another tourist who is, presumably, also Richard’s aunt. Mrs Fiedke and Lise form a friendship based around shopping; Mrs Fiedke repeatedly insists that Lise and her nephew are destined for one another, and that

his earlier committal to an institution has not been a matter of choice. Her views are certainly odd, including a vehement anti-Catholicism, but nowhere more so than in her surreal diatribe against “the male sex”:

They are demanding equal rights with us [...]. There was a time when they would stand up and open the door for you. They would take their hat off. But they want their equality today. All I say is that if God had intended them to be as good as us he wouldn't have made them different from us to the naked eye. (71-72)

This may be no more than a pointed inversion, and yet it is crucial that, even in satirical form, the clearest arguments against gender equality are voiced by women. Lise's clothing and actions are almost always pronounced on by other women, whereas the men in the novel think only of themselves. For Manne, women's value under patriarchal terms is based on their ability to provide other people with love, pleasure, nurture, and so on. Lise's failure to do so marks her, to the other women in the novel, as an unproductive member of society. Through Mrs Fiedke, Spark not only highlights the absurdity of patriarchal and misogynistic narratives, but shows that they are as likely to be enforced by women as well as men.

Throughout the novel, then, Lise is seen and interpreted by other characters, and each of her actions is linked to her final demise. If Lise's image, after her death, is formed by identikit, her life is just as much formed by scattered glimpses that do not reveal a whole. She is a dress, a mouth, a paperback book, but never a whole person. Lise has neither body nor mind, but only public appearance. If, as Rebecca Kukla argues, “[p]ositive bodily agency is as much a component of autonomy as is negative freedom from unwanted bodily intrusion” (71), Lise is shown as lacking in both fronts. Her body is pronounced on without ever being wholly seen; her actions are only deemed significant as they fit into a pre-constructed narrative. This is nowhere more apparent than in the complex depiction of her deliberately ambiguous rape at the novel's end.

Lise instructs Richard carefully on how he is to kill her, and specifically forbids sex:

“I don’t want any sex,” she shouts. “You can have it afterwards. Tie my feet and kill, that’s all. They will come and sweep it up in the morning.”
All the same, he plunges into her, with the knife poised high.
“Kill me,” she says, and repeats it in four languages. (106)

As Kolocotroni clearly argues, Lise’s protest might, in fact, be the only way in which she can be raped: “Scarily, magnificently, Spark here turns the horrific logic of misogyny inside out: the standard line of defense implies that a woman ‘asks for it’ by saying ‘no’ (‘no’ means ‘yes’, etc.) and that’s what Lise does” (1548). In this admittedly perverse reading, Lise performs non-consent in order to guarantee her desired outcome. Likewise, referring to her body as ‘it’ is an act of intentional self-dehumanisation. Lise then appears to embrace a misogynistic narrative that leads both to rape and murder: her ultimate embodied selfhood is as victim.

This is clearly troubling and may be one of the reasons critics have focused on more abstract questions of narrative. Students are often divided on whether or not a rape takes place: the “plunging” could just as easily be the knife. Focusing on the question of rape might, as Kukla cautions, lead to an overly simplified binary between “rape” and “nonrape” that diminishes important ethical distinctions. Certainly, the novel resists anything like a definitive solution. The ambiguity of this final scene, however, can be connected to recent discussions of corroboration in rape cases. The Republican senator Susan Collins, who throughout the Kavanaugh hearings was positioned by the media as a potential swing vote, claimed in a later interview that she supported Kavanaugh because “there was no corroborating evidence”; she acknowledges that Catherine Blassey Ford, on whose testimony the hearings hinged, “had a traumatic sexual assault” but nevertheless argued in favour of “a presumption of innocence” (Trautwein). Kavanaugh, in this instance, becomes a potential victim,

much as Richard does, because it is presumed right that men be the centre of the story, and that their potential innocence be made paramount. As Lili Loofbourow has recently argued, in response to allegations of rape against President Donald Trump, “#MeToo skeptics” are troubled by the possibility that such charges turn “gray-area (and even transactional) casting-couch scenarios into a struggle between innocents and malefactors” (Loofbourow). This scepticism is particularly visible in cases, as in *The Driver’s Seat*, where the perpetrator’s potential mental illness is a factor. Elle Benjamin, in a comment on Manne’s work, argues that in such cases—specifically the killer Elliot Rodger—the “condition is not the real target”; rather, sceptics want “to divert attention” away from the conversation about misogyny” (23). Spark’s novel approaches this dynamic with surprising directness: the novel is structured specifically to make the misogyny it depicts seem natural, and to characterise perpetrators as potentially innocent and victims as potentially culpable. Positioning the characters’ actions simply as ambiguous is, perhaps, to avoid confronting the cultural context in which they take place.

Instead, Spark foregrounds not the significance of actions on their own terms, but the way in which they are consistently framed. Manne, in her account of victimhood, frequently draws attention to the scripted nature of such accounts: the “core case of victimhood cleaves to this script”; audience reactions “are somewhat scripted”; “claiming victimhood effectively involves placing oneself at the center of the story” (224-225). Linda Martín Alcoff likewise suggests that:

Rape cultures produce a discursive formation in which the intelligibility of claims is organized not by logical argument or evidence, but by frames that set out who can be victimized, who can be accused, which are plausible narratives, and in what contexts rape may be spoken about, even in private spaces. (3)

As Alcoff cautions, the very term “victim” needs to be approached warily, as it can over-inflate individual agency (172). Nevertheless, Alcoff’s idea of “plausible narrative” and Manne’s of effective claims of

victimhood suggest a new approach to Spark's novel. The reader is faced with a fundamental choice: either they must rely on the narrative structure, in which case the novel is, as it appears to be, a story of a woman who seeks her own death, and possibly rape, for reasons that remain completely opaque, or they must deny the narrative structure, in which case there seems little point to engaging with the novel at all. Neither is remotely satisfactory. Instead, it is perhaps most appropriate to consider the way Spark explores discursive formations in general, both those particular to rape culture and those particular to genre fiction. In Bava's film, Nora's marriage at the end is presented as a solution to threats from predatory men. In *The Driver's Seat*, however, the situation is left unresolved. In attempting to piece Lise back together and amalgamate the various glimpses of her actions and personality, the reader begins to understand the way in which preordained narratives are always partial, and in which even claims to individual agency are placed within a pre-existing structure. There is no way to approach Lise outside the narrative, and yet Spark repeatedly indicates how flawed that narrative is.

Foregrounding the rape narrative of *The Driver's Seat* at the expense of the rest of the novel is itself problematic, of course. Even my students who were sensitive to the contemporary resonances of the novel argued that to approach it through this light might be "a politically motivated reading being retroactively forced on to a book." While one student initially approached the novel as "a kind of propaganda for men," others argued that the novel's value "really lies in its ultimate ambiguity" or its implication that any "feeling of control is an illusion." As one student continued, "our own personal fiction will always obscure our perception of the world. For as long as we fail to see this, these 'fictions' will remain in the driver's seat." For other students, however, the novel was immediately troubling, and had unwelcome resonances with their own experiences of sexual violence. Yet what conversations around the book in 2018 revealed is that students' sense of contextual narratives has changed. Students read the book simultaneously as a critique of detective fiction as a genre and as a critique—or an endorsement—of narratives surrounding rape culture, which themselves can be seen in generic terms. Whether or not the novel can usefully be placed in

relation to #MeToo and related discourses, the fact that the question has emerged indicates how much our reading of a given novel is shaped by external contexts.

Rereading *The Driver's Seat* in the age of #MeToo does not simplify the ethical and narrative dilemmas Spark's novel poses to readers. The difficulty of the novel, however, becomes more pronounced when it is not treated simply as a philosophical puzzle. Spark's work indicates the extent to which the story of women's bodies is always already framed by a pre-existing narrative structure that cannot simply be denied or repudiated. Instead, it becomes essential to use such structures against themselves. The only way of making the female body visible, she distressingly suggests, is through identikit. There is no final truth in the novel but this, Spark implies, is because novels are not designed as vehicles for truth in the first place. In order to see the body, you first have to see the narrative through which it is constructed, and the narratives of the reader's own experience are as influential as those presented in the novel itself. Writing women's bodily experiences honestly requires establishing a new form of narrative; until that point, Spark suggests, the misogynistic narratives that underlie both literary and political culture can only be disrupted.¹

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Biography

Timothy C. Baker is Senior Lecturer in Scottish and Contemporary Literature at the University of Aberdeen. He is the

author of three monographs, most recently *Writing Animals: Language, Suffering, and Animality in Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (2019).