

# GOTHIC NATURE



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## GOTHIC NATURE II

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**Kira Jane Buxton, *Hollow Kingdom***  
(New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2019)

Annie Wenstrup

If all of humanity was destroyed, who would narrate the apocalypse? In *Hollow Kingdom*, Kira Buxton's debut novel, the last human story belongs to Shit Turd, a foul-mouthed domesticated crow, called S.T. for short. As he tells us, he is 'the rare bird who loves [our] kind, the ones who walk on two legs and built the things [we] dreamt of, including the Cheeto' (p. 4). S.T.'s love for humans, or as he calls us, MoFos, extends to his own domestication. S.T. considers himself an 'honorary MoFo', and it is through his consciously anthropomorphised perspective that we witness the world without us (p. 4).

S.T. suspects something's wrong when Big Jim, his human companion, loses an eye. Then, Big Jim stops drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and misses the Monster Truck Show, and S.T. fears Big Jim is sicker than he first realised. He sets off with Dennis, a bloodhound, for help. The pair quickly realise that Big Jim is not the only one who is sick: all of humanity has transformed into 'a pulsing mass of MoFos [that] swayed and lumbered' (p. 56). At this point, S.T. turns to the nonhuman world, first for help and then for answers. S.T. begins listening to *Aura*, one of the nonhuman's communication systems and, through *Aura*, he reconnects with the nonhuman world he had hoped to leave behind. As S.T. begins to grasp the scope of humankind's destruction, he sets off with Dennis on a quest to preserve humanity's legacy. Their journey takes them on a picaresque adventure through Seattle's most recognisable locations, including the Space Needle, Pike Place Market, and the Woodland Park Zoo. Throughout their journey, they encounter other animals, wild and domestic, and through them we learn how humans were destroyed. Additionally, they share how the nonhuman world is changing in response to our absence.

The story's episodic form poses a particular challenge, one that is familiar to anyone who has ever loved a long-running television series. What is at stake for the characters in the story changes with each new iteration of the overall quest. The story's initial premise, that it is a story about witnessing humankind's disappearance, is set aside once S.T. encounters a murder of crows.

He reluctantly befriends them, and the story shifts to an interrogation of S.T.'s identity as a domesticated crow. As S.T.—and his new murder—move through Seattle, what is at stake for S.T. changes based on which animals he interacts with. The episodic format allows Buxton to introduce multiple conflicts into the text, but at the expense of the overall narrative arc. The story's climax and resolution, another quest—this time to rural Alaska—falters because no quest can resolve S.T.'s existential dilemma or provide an answer to what happens when humanity disappears.

Speculative novels about pandemics and environmental change are rarely humorous or hopeful. Buxton's novel, on the other hand, is both. Deadpool fans will feel at home with S.T.'s irreverent narration full of profanity and pop-culture references. The novel also offers a fresh take on a worn genre. Instead of focusing on a small band of human survivors whose experiences ultimately dehumanise them, *Hollow Kingdom*'s crow asks what it means to live in a world without humans. As an anthropomorphised crow, S.T. acts as a scaffold for extending theory of mind to the nonhuman. His narration provides the reader with a bird's-eye view of apocalypse. Although S.T. is preoccupied by human events, his main concern is how those events affect him. As a result, S.T.'s narration works towards decentering the human experience. Buxton does her best writing when she takes advantage of S.T.'s perspective by describing a human-oriented opinion and then offering a counter-thought. Scenes like this, where S.T. considers how humans have altered nonhuman landscapes suggest how a nonhuman-worldview could be integrated into commercial fiction:

‘All this long, tangled turf and greedy green devouring buildings made me nervous and also made an excellent case for the Homeowners Association’s stringent rules. Moss, especially the Spanish kind, is a deadly conquistador, dampening the sounds and edges of the city right before my eyes. MoFos kept a tight order to things, the world cupped in their hand, squeezing when necessary. I had thought of the Green Mountain again, about how Big Jim had to trim it yearly to stop it from taking over the yard and so one day it didn’t ‘fucking fall over and crush our house like a can of Coors Light.’ Our house belonged to Green Mountain now. Maybe that wasn’t so bad. Maybe Green Mountain deserved it the most’. (pp. 73-74)

*Hollow Kingdom* is less successful in how it approaches ontology and biology. It is unclear what Buxton's overarching vision for the book is. The book alternates between celebrating humanity, particularly its crassness and excesses, to scolding humans for upsetting the balance of nature and insisting that they must be punished. Buxton is similarly ambivalent in her approach to the nonhuman; animals are alternately portrayed as bundles of dumb instinct and resilient, autonomous beings. The more abstract *nature* is a vengeful force, but also benevolently indifferent. Buxton does not address how these binary representations can coexist in her post-apocalyptic world, and the competing descriptions obscure her meaning rather than reveal complexity. Much of the text's confused characterisation stems from Buxton's casual approach to scientific terminology. Principles from evolutionary theory, adaptation and natural selection are applied to non-evolutionary actions that speak to individual resilience. The mantra 'adapt or die' reoccurs throughout the text as individual characters consciously make choices that go against their instincts. At the same time, the colloquial *nature* is ascribed intent when ecological collapse occurs. These misattributions are pervasive and messy. What could have been an engaging commentary on the limitations of individual agency and the unpredictability of biology instead becomes an unclear denouncement of screen time (yes, once again technology is our downfall). It might seem pedantic and unfair to criticise a fictional text for getting the science wrong, but in this case there is too much at stake not to. Everything compelling about Buxton's work—its humour, creativity, and hope—becomes compromised. By the novel's end, it is unclear if she is imagining a world where human and corvid agency can avert disaster, or if she has consigned us as victims of our own instinctual behaviour.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Buxton, K. J. (2019) *Hollow Kingdom*. New York: Grand Central Publishing.