

Empathy and the Unicorn: Exploring How *The Last Unicorn* Empowers Belief in the Feminine Other

Today, the ubiquity of the unicorn is undeniable, from children's TV shows to Gay Pride marches, to Starbucks unicorn frappuccinos. Unicorns are indeed popular emblems, but in the time of Trump politics, and an age when millennials have the purchasing power to revive memories of Lisa Frank unicorns and My Little Pony—items evocative of our collective nostalgia for the optimism of the 1990s—we seem to align ourselves even more with the unicorn. Unicorns are symbols of purity, magic, and hope. And belief in a unicorn is a belief in these things, but also increasingly, the belief in something so unique it must be safeguarded. Children's literature about animals routinely features nonhuman beings as a way to build empathic understandings. However, learning stories about a magical animal represented as being on the brink of extinction facilitates the child's sense of not only empathy but ethics and social and environmental justice and activism.¹ Stories like *The Last Unicorn* awaken the child's empathy in the nonhuman other and all the others the unicorn has come to represent.² The film version of Peter S. Beagle's original book especially explores the complex experiences of the other—here stridently the feminine other. Transformed into a human girl against her will—presented in the film as a violation³—the unicorn is disconnected from her former self, and the trauma of that experience forces an existential crisis. She travels to find other unicorns—other survivors who will believe her and help her make sense of her plight.⁴ Stories about unicorns have always been about belief in the other and their stories. One of the magical creature's first appearances in fantasy literature is in Lewis Carroll's *Through The Looking-Glass*, when the unicorn approaches Alice and remarks: “Well, now that we have seen each other,” said the unicorn, “if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you.” Perhaps the unicorn is so popular today because now more than ever we need to believe in each other's stories.⁵

¹ A slew of children's books and films from the 1990's feature a similar premise. Films include *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* (1992) about a secret fairy grotto, and *A Troll in Central Park* (1994) to name a few. Books might include *Stardust* (1999) and *The Witches of Eileanan* book series in which the protagonist, a witch, must save all the enchanted and magical beings on the verge of extinction from the machinations of the evil queen.

² In *The Last Unicorn*, the focus is on feminine others, but the unicorn can easily stand in for many others. For example, the unicorn has become a fixture in the LGBT community in recent years. Since 1978, the rainbow flag has been a symbol of the community's diversity. But rainbows and unicorns have been linked in the popular imagination for some time, so perhaps it is unsurprising that the unicorn now appears on T-shirts at Gay Pride with phrases such as “Gender is Imaginary.”

³ After turning into a human girl, the unicorn cries, “I can feel this body dying,” to Molly, the only other female in the cast of characters, hoping she can empathize with the unicorn's pain.

⁴ It's difficult not to read the story as a woman's experience surviving trauma. The unicorn is pushed to the end of the Earth by a demonic bull, a hyper-masculine animal evocative of virility. She is repeatedly sought after for her beauty and is later nearly owned by an evil king who wishes to add her to his collection of unicorns.

⁵ This trend still continues today in contemporary children's literature. In *Uni the Unicorn*, the unicorn believes in the existence of little girls, despite what friends say. By the end of the short children's story, the reader is introduced to a child who sits dreaming of the unicorn, despite what her parents and friends might think about the existence of unicorns.

