



Attentive Parenting in a Distracted Age: Media, Childhood, and Ethical Imagination in Etgar Keret's "What Animal Are You?"

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Abstract

Etgar Keret's "What Animal Are You?" presents childhood and parenting within a media-saturated domestic environment in which private life is repeatedly transformed into performance. This article examines the story through the interconnected perspectives of media culture, childhood, attentive parenting, and ethical imagination. It argues that Keret's representation of the relationship between the narrator and his young son offers a productive way of reconsidering parental attention in contemporary digital culture. The child's recurring question, "What animal are you?", (Keret 291) establishes an imaginative mode of communication that challenges fixed distinctions between human and animal and invites adults to participate in the child's world. In contrast to the television crew's demand for performed authenticity, the child's imaginative play creates a form of interaction grounded in spontaneity and relational engagement. Particular attention is given to the father's final translation of the German reporter's description of herself as a "monster" into the image of a "red-feathered songbird." (Keret 293) This transformation is read as an act of ethical mediation through which the father interprets an unsettling adult reality for his child. Drawing on Ethics of Care and Childhood Studies, the article conceptualizes attentive parenting as involving listening, responsiveness, imaginative participation, and the mediation of difficult experiences. The discussion subsequently places Keret's media-conscious story in dialogue with contemporary research on digital parenting and parental technoference. Rather than arguing that screen use inherently produces unethical children or deficient parenting, the article considers how technologically mediated environments may interrupt opportunities for sustained parent-child attention and imaginative exchange. It proposes that Keret's story offers a literary framework for reflecting on the changing conditions of childhood in a screen-saturated age and, ultimately, on the ethical importance of being present, listening to children, and participating in their imaginative worlds.

Keywords: Etgar Keret, "What Animal Are You?", attentive parenting, childhood, media culture, digital parenting, parental technoference, Ethics of Care, ethical imagination, contemporary short fiction

Introduction

What happens to the relationship between parents and children when private family life becomes a performance for an audience? Etgar Keret's "What Animal Are You?" (Keret 291) begins with precisely such a situation. A German television crew enters the narrator's home and asks him to write naturally in front of the camera. The writer is expected to produce an apparently spontaneous act of creativity while simultaneously being watched, directed, and aesthetically arranged for television. The reporter asks him to "write naturally," (Keret 288) although the circumstances make natural writing almost impossible.

From the opening of the story, therefore, Keret places ordinary human interaction within a media environment in which reality is observed, performed, and transformed into spectacle.

The presence of the camera becomes particularly significant when the narrator's young son returns from nursery. The child runs toward his father, hugs him, and says, "I love you, Daddy." (Keret 290). Yet the narrator immediately reveals that this affectionate gesture has already become part of the family's media performance: "Whenever there's a television crew in the house, he hugs me." (Keret 290). The child is not yet four, but he already understands the conventions of television. The narrator calls him "a pro," (Keret 290) suggesting that the child has learned to perform himself for the camera. This seemingly humorous observation introduces one of the story's most significant tensions: the difference between experiencing an emotion and performing that emotion for an audience.

Keret's representation of the child becomes particularly relevant when considered in relation to contemporary childhood. Although the story is situated within the context of television rather than today's smartphone-dominated environment, it anticipates a culture in which media increasingly enters the intimate spaces of family life. The camera is no longer necessarily a professional device operated by a television crew; it may be a smartphone held by a parent or child. Children may grow up not only watching media but also recording themselves, being photographed, appearing in family videos, and becoming accustomed to the presence of an audience. Keret's story therefore offers a useful literary framework for thinking about the relationship between childhood and mediated self-presentation.

Within this media-saturated environment, the child's repeated question, "What animal are you?", (Keret 291) provides an important contrast to the logic of television performance. The television crew seeks to produce an attractive representation of reality, whereas the child creates a space of imaginative participation. His question does not ask for factual information. Instead, it invites another person to enter his imaginative world. The women who visit the upstairs neighbour understand this immediately. They respond by choosing animals for themselves, becoming mice, elephants, bears, butterflies, and other creatures. The narrator observes that they "get it right away." (Keret 291). Their willingness to participate demonstrates that the child's question is not meaningless childish speech but a form of imaginative communication.

The mother, however, refuses to enter this imaginative world. When her son asks what animal she is, she insists, "I'm not an animal, sweetie, I'm a person. I'm your mummy." (Keret 292). Her response is rational according to adult categories, but it produces an emotional consequence: the child begins to cry. The contrast between the child and his mother therefore reveals a fundamental tension between adult rationality and childhood imagination. The mother understands identity as fixed and factual, while the child understands identity as flexible and imaginative. His question invites adults to temporarily abandon their fixed identities and participate in a shared world of play.

The father occupies a more complicated position between these two perspectives. He is not presented as an ideal parent. His thoughts reveal anger, prejudice, frustration, and contradictions in his moral attitudes. He becomes irritated with his wife and admits that he wants to hit someone. His observations about the women visiting the upstairs neighbour and his reflections on political and racial categories further reveal the instability of his ethical position. Yet the father is also unusually attentive to his son's imaginative behaviour. He notices which adults participate in the animal game, recognizes his son's emotional response to his mother's refusal, and understands that the child's question demands something more than a literal answer.

This contradiction is important because Keret does not construct the father as a simple moral model. Instead, the story presents parenting as an imperfect and unstable practice. The father can be angry, judgmental, and morally inconsistent while still demonstrating moments of genuine attentiveness toward his child. Such moments suggest that ethical parenting should not necessarily be understood as moral perfection. Rather, it may be understood as a practice of responsiveness: the ability to notice the child's emotional and imaginative needs and to respond to them.

The most revealing example occurs at the end of the story, when the child asks the German reporter, "What animal are you?" The reporter jokingly identifies herself as a "monster" who has come from

across the ocean to eat children. The father does not translate her words literally for his son. Instead, he tells the child that she is “a red-feathered songbird” (Keret 293) who has flown from a faraway land. This moment is central to the present argument because the father's response constitutes more than a linguistic translation. It is an act of interpretation and mediation. He transforms a frightening image into an imaginative and beautiful one.

The father's transformation of “monster” into “songbird” can therefore be understood as an act of ethical mediation. He recognizes that the meaning of the reporter's statement may be different for an adult and for a young child. His response attempts to protect the child without eliminating imagination. Instead of simply hiding reality, he reshapes it into a form that the child can encounter through his own imaginative vocabulary. The father thus becomes a mediator between the adult world and the child's developing understanding of that world.

This form of mediation is particularly relevant to the Ethics of Care. Care ethics emphasizes relationships, responsiveness, attentiveness, dependency, and the responsibilities that emerge within human relationships. From this perspective, ethical behaviour is not merely a matter of following abstract rules. It also involves attending to the needs and perspectives of particular people. The father's response to his son can be understood in these terms because he does not respond to the reporter's statement solely according to its literal meaning. He considers how the child may receive it and alters his response accordingly.

The mother's refusal and the father's participation consequently become significant contrasts. The mother hears the child's question but rejects its imaginative premise. The father recognizes the logic of the question and responds within it. The distinction suggests that listening to a child involves more than hearing the words that the child speaks. It involves recognizing what the child is attempting to communicate through those words. The animal game becomes a form of relational communication in which imagination itself functions as a language.

This understanding of attentiveness becomes particularly significant when the story is placed in dialogue with contemporary digital parenting. In the contemporary home, parents and children may share the same physical space while simultaneously directing their attention toward different screens. Smart phones, tablets, computers, television, and other digital technologies have become integrated into everyday family life. The central concern, however, should not simply be described as “screen time.” A more precise concern is the possibility of divided or interrupted attention within parent–child relationships.

Research on parental technology use has developed the concept of “parental technofence” to describe situations in which digital devices interrupt or interfere with parent–child interaction. Such research does not mean that technology is inherently harmful, nor does it justify the conclusion that children who spend time with screens will necessarily lack ethical values. Rather, it draws attention to the quality of interaction between parents and children and to the ways in which technology can compete with face-to-face communication.

Keret's story is valuable in this context because media is not an external subject imposed upon the text. It is already embedded within the fictional world. The television crew enters the family home and alters the behaviour of everyone present. The father performs writing for the camera. The son performs affection. The mother becomes conscious of her appearance. The reporter directs the family's behaviour and determines what will appear in the final televised product. Media therefore becomes a presence within the intimate relationship between parent and child.

The child's behaviour is especially revealing. His ability to perform affection for the camera suggests that media literacy begins very early. He understands that certain actions produce desirable images. Yet the animal game represents another form of communication that is not primarily concerned with performance. When the child asks “What animal are you?”, he does not ask the adult to look attractive or successful. He asks the adult to imagine. The camera seeks an image, whereas the child seeks participation.

This distinction allows the story to speak meaningfully to contemporary parenting without reducing the literary text to a social warning about technology. The concern is not that parents should reject screens altogether. Rather, Keret's story encourages us to consider what kinds of interaction require sustained attention. The child's imaginative question cannot be meaningfully answered without some degree of participation. It requires the adult to stop, listen, and enter the child's imaginative framework. In this sense, the story suggests that attentive parenting depends not merely upon physical proximity but upon relational presence.

The concept of ethical imagination is therefore central to understanding the father's relationship with his son. Ethical imagination involves the ability to recognize that another person may experience the same event differently from oneself. The reporter's description of herself as a monster may be harmless to an adult, but the father understands that it could be disturbing to a young child. His transformation of the monster into a songbird demonstrates his attempt to imagine the child's perspective. He does not simply communicate what he has heard; he considers how his child will receive it.

The same principle can be extended to contemporary parenting. Parents constantly mediate the world for children. They decide how to explain frightening news, violence, death, illness, social conflict, prejudice, and other difficult experiences. Such mediation is unavoidable. The question is how parents perform it. Keret's story suggests that imaginative mediation can become a form of care because it acknowledges the child's developmental and emotional position without denying the complexity of the adult world.

At the same time, the father's intervention remains ethically ambiguous. His translation is protective, but it is also a distortion. He changes what the reporter actually said. This ambiguity prevents the story from becoming a simple celebration of protective parenting. The father possesses the power to determine what his child hears and how the child understands the world. Parental care can therefore protect, but it can also control. Mediation can make reality accessible, but it can also reshape reality according to the parent's own judgment.

This ambiguity makes Keret's story particularly suitable for an Ethics of Care reading. Care is not simply kindness. It involves responsibility and power. The adult possesses greater knowledge and authority, while the child depends upon the adult for interpretation and protection. The father's songbird therefore demonstrates both the tenderness and the power involved in parenting. He protects his child by altering the adult's message, but he also assumes the authority to decide what version of reality the child should receive.

The story's connection to contemporary digital parenting can be understood through the same tension. Parents today often mediate children's encounters with digital information. They determine what children can watch, what devices they can use, which platforms they can access, and how much time they can spend online. At the same time, parents themselves may become absorbed in digital environments. The problem is therefore not simply the child's screen use but the entire ecology of attention within the family.

Keret's television crew provides an early fictional image of such an ecology. Everyone is conscious of being watched. Everyone adjusts behaviour according to the demands of the medium. Even affection becomes performative. Yet the child's animal game opens a different space in which communication is not governed by the camera. It creates a temporary zone of shared imagination.

The significance of this imaginative space becomes clearer when the story is read as a reflection on ethical development. Children do not develop ethical awareness only through explicit moral instruction. They also learn through relationships, conversations, imaginative play, and experiences of being heard. When an adult responds seriously to a child's strange or playful question, the adult communicates that the child's perspective has value. When adults participate in imaginative play, they acknowledge the child's capacity to construct meaning. When adults mediate frightening experiences with sensitivity, they demonstrate that reality can be confronted without abandoning emotional care.

Keret therefore presents parenting as a form of ongoing negotiation between the child's world and the adult world. The father must negotiate between the television reporter's language and his son's imagination, between truth and protection, between performance and authenticity, and between the adult world's categories and the child's imaginative transformations. The story refuses to provide a simple resolution to these tensions. Instead, it suggests that parenting itself consists of navigating them.

The contemporary relevance of this argument lies in the increasing competition for human attention. Digital technology is not necessarily the enemy of family relationships, but it can become one of the forces that divide attention within those relationships. The literary question raised by Keret is therefore not simply whether children are looking at screens for too long. It is whether there remains sufficient space for the kind of slow, unpredictable, imaginative communication represented by the child's question, "What animal are you?"

The question itself offers a powerful metaphor for attentive parenting. It asks adults to stop relying upon conventional categories and to enter a child's imaginative perspective. The child does not demand a perfect parent. He demands participation. The women visiting the upstairs neighbour understand this immediately. The mother does not. The father, despite his many contradictions, does.

The final image of the songbird brings these concerns together. The father transforms the reporter's threatening monster into a bird capable of flying from a distant land. The transformation is imaginative, protective, and linguistic. It demonstrates that storytelling can become an ethical practice when it is used to mediate the world for another person. For the child, the world is not simply a collection of facts. It is a world of animals, monsters, songbirds, distant lands, and possibilities. The father recognizes this and answers within that imaginative vocabulary.

Keret's "What Animal Are You?" therefore offers a complex representation of parenting rather than a straightforward model of good or bad parenthood. The father is flawed, but he is capable of attention. The mother is caring, but she struggles to enter her child's imaginative world. The television reporter appears playful, but her humour produces an unsettling moment. The child is apparently innocent, yet he is already learning the conventions of media performance. These contradictions make the story particularly valuable for contemporary literary study.

The story ultimately invites us to reconsider what it means to be present for a child. Physical presence alone is insufficient. The father and son are physically together, but the television camera changes the nature of their interaction. What matters is whether attention is directed toward the child as a person with an imaginative and emotional world. In this sense, Keret's story suggests that ethical parenting begins with responsiveness: the willingness to notice the child's question, to take it seriously, and to enter the imaginative space that the question creates.

In an increasingly screen-mediated culture, this insight becomes particularly significant. The challenge is not simply to remove technology from children's lives but to preserve forms of interaction that technology cannot replace: sustained conversation, imaginative play, attentive listening, emotional interpretation, and shared storytelling. Keret's child asks a simple question, but the question opens a much larger ethical problem. **What happens when adults become too distracted to enter the child's world?**

"What Animal Are You?" does not provide a direct answer. Instead, through its mixture of humour, absurdity, violence, tenderness, and media satire, it demonstrates what may be at stake. The child's imaginative question creates an opportunity for connection, and the father's response shows that such connection depends upon attention. The story therefore offers a valuable literary perspective on contemporary parenting: ethical development may begin not with what adults tell children about morality, but with whether adults are willing to listen when children ask them to imagine.

That is perhaps the deeper significance of the father's final translation. He does not merely change a word. He changes the emotional world into which the child receives that word. The monster becomes a songbird. Fear becomes imagination. The adult world becomes temporarily accessible through the language of childhood. In this transformation, Keret suggests that parenting is itself a form of

translation—the continual attempt to make a complicated world understandable without extinguishing the child's capacity to imagine it differently.

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