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Animals Among Us: the Lives of Human and Animals in Contemporary American Fiction by JOHN YUNKER

Ashland Creek, 2014 \$16.95

Reviewed by **ASHLEY E. REIS**

Editor John Yunker has compiled for the recently established Ashland Creek Press a poignant and moving compilation of stories that remind us at once of our own human limitations and at the same time of our animalistic possibilities. The stories in *Animals Among Us: the Lives of Human and Animals in Contemporary American Fiction* call attention to the interconnection between humans and animals, which our culture's speciesist ideology typically denies us. These stories question the cultural tropes that conventionally position nonhuman animals as either beneath or beside the human, and ask us to instead reconsider animals, in the words of W.J.T. Mitchell, as "actively constitutive of the human" (xiv).

The stories in this collection astutely question humans' ethically, politically, and culturally privileged place in the subjective order. The stories offer exigent revisions of traditional narratives in which individual animals go unacknowledged and ignored due to humans' inability to listen in "the right way" to what they have to tell and teach us. For instance, in Diane Lefer's "Alas, Falada!" a zoologist acknowledges an individual eland's overlooked sacrifice in the name of both the animal's herd and scientific knowledge, placing this individual instance within a complex tradition of utilitarian human-animal encounters that withhold from animals their due and misplace their value. Similarly, Jean Ryan's "Greyhound" examines the practice of adopting a defected racing dog, who

ultimately rehabilitates her human companions while they help her adapt to what they hope is a more carefree, joyful life as a pet. This animal has something to offer, although the women who rescue her must reassess their own expectations before the dog can heal them in return. Moreover, in Jessica Zbeida's "Emu," Beth, a housewife, encounters an escaped exotic bird, raised by a neighbor for food. Only Beth recognizes the emu's agency and inherent worth beyond its use value to humans. In the end, she is nonetheless powerless to alter her husband's perception of the bird; the emu is food to Lloyd, who is innocently perplexed by her reverence for it. Beth will be faced with hard days to come, we learn as the story closes, for her atypical compassion will likely perpetuate isolation and disconnection from her family members following the emu's meaningless death. And finally, Philip Armstrong's "Litter" risks the pitfalls of anthropomorphism in the name of questioning subjectivity's role as human by default, as he negotiates the challenge of representation that comes along with interpreting a stray dog's intuitions, emotions, and motivations. In his story, Armstrong provides a fresh perspective that requires a radical revision of the ways we understand the independent operation of animal minds.

While these stories indicate what might be gained from a willful vulnerability to other knowledges, instincts, and ways of being in the world, others in this collection ask us to consider our own rights and freedoms, given that these privileges are only possible in light of absolute control over animals, who endure the harmful, disproportionate effects of human ways of life. In particular, C.S. Malerich's "Meat," which questions the complacency with

which humans accept the systematic putting to death of animals, shrewdly refuses to congratulate the agricultural practice of “humane” animal farming, and the consumption patterns involved in “conscientious carnivorousism.” Herein, as part of her parents’ experiment in raising the family’s food, a young child helps rear a pig as a house pet, with the knowledge that the family will eventually consume the animal, aptly named “Meat.” Meat’s eventual slaughter stands out as a particularly astute indictment of “humane” animal agriculture, which, despite generally pushing a more ethical agenda than factory farming, nonetheless entails the slaughtering of emotionally sophisticated, sentient beings, who have been stripped of their right to moral consideration. The entirety of “Meat” makes the case for animals’ interests and emotions and thus, as James McWilliams notes in his captivating *American Scholar* article, “Loving Animals to Death,” for changing what we eat, which may be more important than improving its source.

Among Animals is as provocative as it is urgent, and as accessible as it is emotional. This collection will be useful to animal studies specialists, posthumanist scholars, and ecocritics alike, as it attests to the multifarious systems within which humans co-exist with non-human others. The collection will serve readers with professed interests in the identity and subject formation of any social “other,” who is systematically and institutionally overlooked and undervalued, for the discourse that surrounds “the question of the animal” is by no means limited to the effects of a humanistic hierarchy on animals alone. And finally, beyond *Among Animals*’ tremendous theoretical and philosophical promise, the stories herein will leave an indelible impression on a compassionate

readership that questions and challenges humans’ particularly privileged subject position in order to engender a more ethical framework for living not as entities separated from the world, but as sensitive and reciprocal elements of an inherently valuable, shared environment.

Works Cited

McWilliams, James. “Loving Animals to Death: how can we raise them humanely and then butcher them?” *The American Scholar* (Spring 2014): n. pag. Web. 15 May 2014.

Mitchel, W.J.T. “Foreword: The Rights of Things.” *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*. By Cary Wolfe. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003. ix-xv.

ASHLEY E. REIS is a PhD Candidate and Teaching Fellow in English at the University of North Texas. Ashley conducts her research and teaching according to a primary inquiry: to understand the ways that literature and writing can lead humans to a more ethical understanding of their places within their ecological communities. Her in-progress dissertation research investigates the postwar American Novel’s representation of environmentally-induced mental illness.