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Finding Ourselves Among Others: A Review of *Among Animals 2*

***Among Animals 2* edited by JOHN YUNKER**
Ashland Creek, 2016 \$23.95

Reviewed by **GINA GRANTER**

In his introduction to *Among Animals 2*, John Yunker writes that he hopes the stories in the collection “not only open eyes and hearts, but open new ways of thinking and talking about our relationships with animals” (5). This collection doubtless delivers in these ways: readers have an array of opportunities to consider how characters relate to the animals they encounter and to each other. This is a powerful collection that succeeds not only on a pragmatic level of encouraging thought about, and consideration for, animals, but also on a literary level of beautifully rendered prose.

The stories in the collection feature animals of diverse species, from a leopard to a lost dog to a cockroach, and include such genetically modified creatures as a miniature polar bear created to be a pet, and a chicken-phoenix cross designed for the poultry industry. A notable commonality is that several of the stories are set in dystopic near-futures in which animal life has been diminished in the sorts of ways scientists have predicted are likely to come to pass if we do not make immediate and drastic changes to the ways we currently treat the other inhabitants of Earth. It is to this possible reality that the book speaks most urgently, and in these stories that the collection is at its strongest. They demonstrate Ballardian qualities, such as the anthropocentrism of our species, our fixation on technological remedies for preventable crises, and the bleak fate of

animal life on Earth if human attitudes and actions do not change. In “Phoenix Cross”—among the best stories in the collection—a farmer and his geneticist brother work together to claw back the family legacy from a corporate hatchery, and the farmer becomes aware of his changed relationship to what had previously simply been livestock; he also gains insight into his relationship with his brother. “The Truth of Ten Thousand Things” by Hunter Ligoure involves the death of the world’s last polar bear at the Bronx Zoo as it is euthanized because of cancer; in the meantime scientists with NoEndanger Labs have, with help from her genes, created “the polar puff smart bear™,” a miniature bear “the same size as a pet rabbit, with fur as soft as a synthetic Russ toy” (198). The new organism reflects human idealizations and the belief that as long as a creature is maintained in some form to satisfy human desires, not all is lost. The protagonist buys one for her child, but watches it die two days later, when it becomes a “bright, splotchy red from all the blood that had blossomed to the surface” (199). Such vivid depiction of animal death is part of what makes this collection unsettling in effective ways. In the book’s introduction, Yunker notes that he feels that the stories in the collection as a whole point to “a world in which humans and animals coexist far more harmoniously than they do today” but if it does, it does so through foreboding images of a darker, not a brighter future (5).

Death is a uniting feature of many of the stories. In Sascha Morrell’s “Roo,” a men’s hunting party kills a large kangaroo they believe to be male and find a joey when they inspect their kill. Afterward, the narrator reflects that

it doesn't take much figuring to work out how three men brave enough to shoot a defenseless herbivore could be too cowardly to wring her joey's neck. And it doesn't take too much working out to figure how three men that cowardly could lack bravery enough to talk about it. They're out there still, of course: that big thing lying dead, and the little thing that might not quite be dead yet, that might still be waving, drowning in the cold milk of loss.
(14)

This passage in the collection's first story makes it clear that this is a book of literary short fiction as much as it is a collection of stories about animals. The wasteful slaughter in the name of remembering a deceased friend in "Roo" becomes a potential occasion for mourning of another sort, but for the characters, ignoring the suffering is easier than merciful action or even acknowledgement. In the stories, humans contend with their errors in devastatingly realistic ways, and animal deaths are virtually always the responsibility of humans, whether intentionally or not. Anthony Sorge's "Captivity" beautifully and starkly conveys the difficulty and isolation of adolescence; the story's tragic arc comes down to a classic case of hubris: an act of kindness and solidarity taking an unanticipated turn because of a character's inattention to important information.

A number of stories, like "Captivity," feature people struggling with relationships with other humans, and turning to animals as a conduit or proxy. In "Vivarium" by Claire Ibarra, a lonely young woman, living

on her own for the first time, cannot bear to kill a cockroach and so keeps it as a pet in a Tupperware container; she then identifies with it, a social animal shut off from its kind. Her unusual pet impresses her more adventurous neighbour, who proclaims, "you got your freak flag flying!" and invites her to a party (114). In "How to Identify Birds in the Wild," a woman seeks to understand a man in the ways she can categorize birds. In "It Won't Be Long Now," a widow seeks communion with a disoriented seal only to discover deeply and intuitively how much of an other the animal is. Such a moment is refreshing and rare in a collection that mostly pursues similarities between humans and animals; the moments when there are impasses in communication between human and animal, or a disruption of human expectation of animal behaviour, are among the more fascinating.

Some of the stories in *Among Animals 2* are ultimately more dedicated to human relationships and understanding than to the animals, with animals serving purposes merely to anthropocentric ends, and there are some missed opportunities for ambiguity; still, for readers and educators interested in animal studies, these are great opportunities for reflection and discussion; even these occasional disappointments help the reader to consider how human relationships with animals have changed since the past, and how they might, hopefully, be different in the future.

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