

[Review] Laura Jean McKay,
The Animals in That Country.
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Philip Armstrong
University of Canterbury

How do animals experience their lives and their worlds? How can we know? How can we represent their interests if we *can't* know? Should we be trying to speak on their behalf at all?

These are simultaneously the most crucial and the most intransigent questions in animal studies. Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country* confronts them head on, more audaciously than anything I have read for a very long time.

Of course, there quite a few novels (I'm thinking here of serious novels for adults, not children's or young adult novels, or comic or satirical ones) that ventriloquize the minds of animals by adopting first-person narrators of various nonhuman species. Some of these are very good: for example Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone* (1999) evokes the inner lives of elephants to remarkable effect, while J.M. Lydgard's *Giraffe* (2006) begins with a bravura scene in which the eponymous animal narrates her own birth. These novels require the reader to suspend disbelief from the outset, by accepting a nonhuman animal as the novel's narrating consciousness – an animal whose perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and worldview will be expressed in the English language.

McKay's novel does something very different. *The Animals in That Country* is narrated from the point of view of a human being, Jean, a rough-but-sensitive middle-aged Australian woman who works as a zoo guide. The suspension of disbelief comes when we hear, via snippets of news overheard and read by Jean, that a pandemic called 'zooflu' is sweeping Australia which

produces, as a bizarre aftereffect, a hyper-sensitization of humans' cognitive and perceptual apparatus that allows them to understand the 'voices' of animals. Crucially, though, the novel never imagines the animals themselves using human language. The most impressive and arresting imaginative achievement of the book is the way in which it tries to make visible – and audible and tactile, and sensible to smell and taste and pheromonal, hormonal and chemical awareness – the intersecting and multi-dimensional ways in which nonhuman animals actually do communicate. Because Jean and the reader are humans, these many types of messaging are, ultimately, rendered as words in English (of a sort!), but McKay never allows us to forget that these 'translations' into words are reductive, partial, and potentially misleading. One of the reactions provoked in the reader by this technique is a vivid recognition of how intensely rich, varied, and subtle the experiences and communications of animals must truly be – and how impoverished our own might seem by comparison; especially how blind, deaf and insensate we usually are towards so many aspects of the nonhuman world.

At the start of the novel, both Jean and the visitors she guides around the zoo indulge in the kind of anthropomorphic ventriloquism that is the default setting of most of us in our encounters with animals. After watching Jean enter an enclosure (against the rules) to free her favourite dingo, Sue, who has caught her paw in a fence, the visitors are bursting with the desire to understand what the animal has said to her. But this is before anyone has heard of 'zooflu', the pandemic that will grant them all that capacity, so Jean ventriloquizes as usual:

One little girl is sitting up behind the driver's carriage.

'What did she say?' she asks. 'The dingo. What did she say to you?'

The whole lot of them is listening so I get the mic out. Make my voice high and feathery, like a wild dog tail. 'She said, "Jeanie-girl, you're my best friend"'.
 They love that. (8-9)

After this realistic first part of the novel, McKay is appropriately careful in how she introduces the highly speculative trope of a virus that allows humans to understand animals. We hear about

zooflu only gradually, as Jean does, and so our understanding of it, our scepticism, and our growing recognition of its implications, are meticulously paced and managed through our narrator's own reactions. In an especially skilful moment, McKay simultaneously invites and exorcises our resistance to this outlandish idea by implicitly comparing it with – and differentiating it from – the childhood fantasy of talking animals. After reading online about the approaching virus, Jean sits watching *The Lion King* with her granddaughter: 'In the movie, the animals are chatting away to each other, arguing and dishing out wisdoms' (36). Thinking about what she has just been reading regarding the virus, Jean asks the child, Kimberly, '[w]hat would you say if you really could talk to animals?', to which her granddaughter giggles and replies, 'I'd say, "Hello, are you my friend?"' (37).

As the days go by, Jean watches others succumb to the zooflu, and sees the devastating impact of their dawning awareness of animals' 'voice'. Gradually again, through Jean, we realise that the dream of talking with animals might turn out to be a nightmare. At one point she and Kim, themselves uninfected, encounter a pig-hunter who is deeply shaken by what the virus has allowed him to overhear:

'I want to talk to a dog', Kim tells him.

The man straps his mask back on. 'No you don't. My hunting bitch was a tough, mean, fighting machine dog that didn't take shit from nothing. But what she had to say once I knew what it was she was saying –'

'What'd she say?' Me and Kim say it at the same time. Snap. But the guy turns away. (54-5)

Once Jean's fellow-workers at the park contract the zooflu, and can understand animals, she begins to appreciate how disturbing this new skill might be. The first thing she discovers when her co-workers translate for her is that most of the animals are terrified of humans: the main theme of their communications is '[t]hat we're predators. That every time we come near them

we're trying to eat them' (72). A lizard 'darts a thin pink tongue' out in the direction of one of the zoo workers, who translates: 'He can *taste* me. I'm like deadly salt. I'm poison' (73).

The most virtuosic part of the novel, though, occurs when Jean herself, having at last contracted the virus, begins to understand animals' communications. They come at her in all forms. The first signals she is aware of are emitted by a room full of terrified captive mice, raised as live food for snakes and lizards in the zoo. At first Jean mistakes their messages for toxic gas, but then she sees the miasma is rising from the bodies of the little animals themselves: 'They scream bloody murder, the death of everyone, death in the cages and death in the walls. All the little kids in the whole world will die' (75-6).

Running outside in horror, Jean is nearly knocked over by 'a bulk of scent... Personal. Someone you don't know waving their rude bits around... [A]ll around me, trails of glowing messages have been laid out overnight. In stench, in calls, in piss, in tracks, in blood, in shit, in sex, in bodies' (77). Before long, Jean's human-language-oriented brain starts to sort this multitude of data out and present it in words – although these still remain very difficult to make sense of. As Justine Jordan puts it in her review of the novel:

McKay sets out the animals' communications in bold font, as short gnomic poems that hover somewhere between concrete poetry and a bad translation app. '**The/ one made of bones and/ biscuits. The (Yesterday) party./ I'm here for the/ Queen,**' is Sue's message to Jean when they come face to face. 'Well. I don't have any fucking idea', Jean replies. (83)

It is only with her granddaughter Kim's help that Jean eventually figures out how to understand these defamiliarizing communications:

'You've got to look at them, Gran.... You have to look at all their whole body all at the same time, not just the bits.'

**Get
together,**

says a tail.

Sip it —

an eyelash.

Musky fog from a bum calls,

Fancy.

‘But the bits say different things’. (92-3)

As the novel goes on, Jean does learn to put it together, and like everyone else, she finds the results devastating. Through her increasingly appalled protagonist, McKay forces us to overhear the traumatised puzzlement of lifelong captive animals, the tragically hopeful thoughts of factory-farmed pigs on their way to slaughter, the unappeasable maternal grief of dairy cows still wondering where their calves have been taken.

Although these freshly raw and intimate encounters with animals are at the centre of the book, McKay gives her novel a human story too: Jean’s free-spirit son Lee turns up, and takes off with his daughter Kimberly when the girl’s mother, Angela, goes into a zooflu-induced paranoid hibernation. With Sue the dingo in the passenger seat, Jean embarks on a road-trip to find her son and granddaughter. But really, this human-interest story remains something of a pretext, a narrative background that allows the novel to concentrate on the two things it is most interested in. The first is imagining the impact on society at large of a sudden, universal, and unignorable realisation of the realities of animals’ consciousness and experience; the second is the relationship between Jean and Sue, who are this novel’s Thelma and Louise.

The first of these themes turns the novel, at times, into a post-apocalyptic horror story. Almost all the people Jean and Sue encounter on their way south are reacting to their sudden ability to understand animals in the most ghastly ways: some become violent; some become paranoid; some self-harm – there’s a terrible scene amongst a group of people conducting do-it-yourself brain surgery in an attempt to turn off the animal ‘voices’. Cruelty to animals, counter-intuitively but realistically, becomes exacerbated rather than reduced. In other dismaying

scenes, a religious group eviscerates a pet dog, and Jean and Sue discover a whole town in which all the animals and birds have been entirely eliminated. The lowest point of this Dantesque journey is Jean and Sue's arrival at the coast, where hundreds of people (including Lee) have become so mesmerised by the voices of whales that they swim out to meet them and are drowned. All these scenes struck me as so plausible that I couldn't help wondering what that says about the human animal. Are other animals so much saner than we are? Or is our version of sanity dependent, at least today, on the extent to which we are able to cut ourselves off from communication with the rest of the sentient world? If that's the case, what does that imply about us?

As mentioned above, the other primary motif in the novel is the central relationship between Jean and Sue. Over the course of the novel this relationship shifts and evolves intriguingly. At the outset – before the zooflu, in her everyday world as a zoo guide – Jean already feels she has a special relationship with Sue. Guiding visitors toward the dingo enclosure, she always looks first for her special friend: '[I] [u]sually spot her right away even if she's in hiding because we see one another, me and Sue' (6). At night, when from her accommodation Jean hears the dingoes howl, she wants to howl along with them (15). It's one example of the lovely coherence achieved by this novel about incoherence that, many pages later, lost in the chaos of social breakdown resulting from the pandemic, alone with Sue in a barn and desperately sick from an infected bite inflicted by Sue herself, Jean does just that: she hears the distant howls of other dingoes and the '[s]ound of it gets me in my valves. A commotion in my throat. Before I know it, I'm crawling from the hay bed with my gob open, and I'm calling too' (243).

In between those two moments – the wish to become-dingo and the becoming-dingo – Jean's relationship with Sue unfolds, deepens, and develops in a very rich and satisfying way. Sue is the first animal whose complex utterances Jean learns to put together into something approaching coherence:

She isn't talking with her mouth or her mind but ... through her whole damned body.... Her voice isn't made of words either. It's odours, echoes, noises with random meanings popping out of them. Creaking sounds of welcome in her throat that don't say what they should say.... I've spent the last six or so years staring at Sue but I never saw her white chest blaze talk two ways.... She bursts forward, body dancing...[,] her quick-skipping paws, the rumbles in her throat, her smooth pelt and her smart-as-a-whip ears [speaking] all together. (82-3)

As Jean learns to correct the assumptions she has made about Sue over the years by 'listening' to her now, she finds out how different their relationship really is from her former understanding. And of course, she continues to make mistakes, ones that demonstrate the stubbornness of our anthropocentrism. When Sue uses the word '**Queen**', as she often does, Jean assumes it refers to herself: she's using the default setting for understanding human-canid relations, as provided by the dog-trainer's canard that our companion canines regard humans as 'alpha dogs'. But as Jean is increasingly humbled by the awful things she experiences during the course of the novel, and as she becomes physically weaker – not least due the infection from Sue's bite – and eventually dependent on the dingo for food and protection and warmth, it becomes apparent she has never been the dominant partner. The 'names' Sue uses for Jean reflect the growing sense of the dingo's innate authority: Jean eventually realises that Sue is referring to her when she says '**Yesterday**' (presumably because of Jean's age), '**bad dog**', '**bitch**', and – very rudely, coming from a canid – '**cat**'. Eventually Sue seems to settle on '**cat dog**' as her standard appellation for Jean, a nickname simultaneously affectionate and pejorative.

None of this can last, and the novel concludes with a *deus ex machina* that restores something that might resemble 'normality', although it seems impossible things can ever be the same again. In fact the final, heartbreaking insight delivered by this extraordinary novel comes by means of an ending that quietly (and I choose that word with care), makes the restoration of the *status quo ante* even more distressing than the events that have gone before.

It will be clear by now that I was bowled over by this novel. I have been studying animals and books about animals for many years, but *The Animals in That Country* did something to me I didn't expect. Every day, for the last twenty years, I've walked 'my' dog up the hill behind our house. But after reading this novel, on these walks I have felt changed. My awareness of the dog's presence has been knocked off-kilter. I've always loved to watch how she pays attention to the world, and to guess how she might be experiencing it. But now, wondering about that seems different – more open, more unsettled. I find myself thinking not just about the evident delight she takes in things, but also about how she might often feel anger, frustration, fear – all sorts of difficult emotions I can only guess at. Of course, like most dogs, she's very good at communicating love and loyalty and excitement and playfulness. But now I keep thinking: what about all her other thoughts and feelings? how might she be expressing those, in ways I've never been able to pick up on – or never tried to? How could I be more open to that? What would it mean for our relationship if I was? And what would it mean if I expanded that openness to all other animals?

This is a novel, then, with the potential to change how you read novels, and how you read animals. Like the zooflu, it's simultaneously a gift and a dilemma.

Works Cited

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