Among Animals: The Lives of Animals and Humans in Contemporary Short Fiction, edited by John Yunker. Ashland, ON: Ashland Creek Press, 2014.

Reviewed by Sascha Morrell
University of New England

John Yunker's introduction to this valuable short story collection points to how humans have traditionally favoured certain animals over others:

> Some animals we welcome into our homes and our lives… Other animals do not receive such adoration or protection. Some are viewed as nuisances, others as expendable. We keep our distance from these species. (Yunker 1)

Although the introduction suggests the book will challenge such distinctions ('the many walls we have constructed') readers will find that the more favoured animal species remain very much at the fore in the pages that follow. *Among Animals* presents fifteen short stories centring on human-animal interactions. The humans are primarily middle-class, educated and articulate. The animals are without exception vertebrates, and are overwhelmingly mammals. This weighting is not necessarily a weakness, but it does mean that the editor's promise that 'the stories you will read here are as diverse as the species they depict' (1) should be taken on caution. It might have been better to emphasise the common ground that emerges, as the echoes and resonances between these stories are often more intriguing and revealing than their contrasts.

Yunker is a novelist, animal rights activist and co-founder of Ashland Creek Press, a small press that (according to its website) aims to 'foster an appreciation for worlds outside our own'. The contributors, mainly based in the United States, include both established and newer writers, a number of whom are also academics, scientists and/or activists. Unsurprisingly, the introduction outlines the book's aesthetic aims in explicitly political terms:

> Ultimately, it is our hope that this collection, while bringing us into so many different and varied worlds, sends a larger message as well – that we are all animals sharing this planet, and it is up to human animals to be better neighbors. (3)

Cumulatively, the stories can be seen to further some of these goals, although the synergy between medium and message is not always ideally attained; there are moments where aesthetic, scientific and ethical discourses might have been more fully synthesised. For example in the opening story 'Alas, Falada!', the narrator (employed in a zoo) informs the reader rather dryly:

> ...cooperation [is] something I believe humans are genetically programmed for. Followers of Robert Ardrey (*African Genesis*, 1961 – not that we have anyone like that working here – would argue that no, our hardwiring is for aggression. (11)

At other points, *more* factual consistency may be wished for: the release of a freshwater dolphin into salt water at the conclusion of 'The Boto's Child' detracts from the mythic coherence of this otherwise arresting tale.

Such quibbles aside, the stories assembled in *Among Animals* provide rewarding reading – alternately moving, intriguing, inspiring and harrowing (with little comic relief). First-person human narration predominates, with some of the strongest stories in the collection exploring one-on-one intimacies between human and non-human characters – in all their complexity and ambiguity. Many examine the ways we attempt to discern or imagine the attitude of animals towards us and towards their surrounds. In the story 'Greyhound', the narrator senses her dog 'apprais[ing]' her but admits, 'there's no telling what she concludes' (18). As they negotiate the ethics of pet ownership, the narrator and her partner try to give the ex-racing animal the space to learn 'how to be a dog' (29).

This and other stories raise the problem of how we can ground what Kari Weil calls 'ethics toward an unknowable or incalculable other', an 'other we cannot presume to know (Weil 17). Like many others, I have long been immensely irritated by claims of human superiority based on assumptions that animals do not possess language, abstract reasoning, self-awareness, the capacity for love, and so on. On the whole, the stories in *Among Animals* are gratifyingly free of sure assertions about the bases of human-animal sameness and difference – there is a far more nuanced and speculative tone to most of this writing. One of the most balanced is 'The Ecstatic Cry', in which the narrator speculates that 'tens of thousands of male emperors huddle together' through the Antarctic winter despite near starvation because it's 'what they're programmed to do' (101–02), yet maintains, 'I believe that penguins mourn' (111).

It is disturbing (and perhaps all too revealing) just how many of these stories centre on damaged or dying animals: the hanged chimpanzee and euthanased eland in 'Alas, Falada!', the maimed cat in 'Aren't You Pretty?', the maladjusted 'Greyhound', the dying dolphin in 'Beyond the Strandline', the starved three-legged stray in 'Litter', the doomed creatures in 'Meat', 'Blue Murder', 'Emu', 'Bad Berry Season', 'Miriam's Lantern' – and so on. The pattern suggests that our most intense and meaningful interspecies encounters may, rather perversely, be those involving human efforts to repair harms done to animals by human practices. Meanwhile, the humans themselves are in need of rescue. *Among Animals'* contributors explore the human desire for deeper communion with non-human animals, and the mutually therapeutic possibilities of interspecies bonds. In 'Aren't You Pretty?', caring for a cat with skin problems teaches a woman how to care for her injured niece, a burns victim. In 'The Weight of Things Unsaid', the grief of losing a beloved dog aids the narrator in working through her grief over a miscarriage.

Probing the tensions between pet-keeping and meat-eating, 'Meat' is a gripping study that puts on display the control that the power of naming gives us over animals, and our emotional responses to them. A family raising a domestic animal (species unspecified) for slaughter name it 'Meat', providing the set-up for biting statements like 'Dad always said we should think about Meat's feelings and give her a nice life' (66). Against the obfuscatory language that turns cattle, sheep and pigs into 'beef', 'lamb' and 'pork', this unsparingly literal application of the generic name 'Meat' to a living animal collapses such spurious distinctions, precisely by pushing them to their logical extent. Of course, the act of naming is wholly ineffectual, as the cared-for pet emphatically fails to be mere meat, and this *différance* leads to a painful conclusion which lays bare the ethical loopholes in the symbolic order. The story simultaneously interrogates the weakness of the platitudes through which people rationalise animal exploitation ('some life has to end so that other life can begin', 65). In foregrounding the limits of language, the story reveals the shortcomings of the very medium humans have claimed as a basis of their superiority to other animals.

Given the collection's overriding concern with human-animal intimacies, it is hardly surprising that dogs feature prominently: a species bred selectively for human companionship, the dog has long been appreciated for its perceived capacity for love and 'emotive sharing'; as such, as Kuzniar points out, it may offer the 'test case' *par excellence* for exploring the 'philosophical, ethical and imaginary connections and impasses … between the human and animal world' (Kuzniar 3-4). Still, when approximately eighty per cent of the world's species are insects – and when so many of the world's most endangered creatures are insects, fish, molluscs, crustaceans and amphibians – the need for us to turn our minds and imaginative efforts towards a wide range of animal classes is palpable. The only cold-blooded animal to feature in *Among Animals* is the turtle in 'The Weight of Things Unsaid', and even here a dog takes over the focus. No collection of this length (nor one much longer, for that matter) could hope to cover a full range of possible human-animal encounters, but there are points where I felt the balance in this anthology might have been adjusted. Partly this has to do with the stories' arrangement: for example, it is striking that the first two stories each feature a first-person, female, city-dwelling, North American protagonist in a same-sex relationship with a thin and 'childlike' partner (19, 26), and both concern efforts to communicate with damaged mammals, which on a first reading led me to wonder how much diversity the stories to follow would show.

However, this and other instances of overlap between consecutive pieces would be less apparent to those 'dipping in' or reading the stories out of sequence.

One story that certainly challenges the favouritism shown to particular animal species is 'Emu', in which the narrator's strong sense of attachment to a stray emu is treated as aberrant, and she is forced to accept a puppy as a substitute (this resonates with another story, 'Blue Murder', in which a Japanese man falls in love with a wild bird which is then eaten by the family cat). By no coincidence, 'Emu' is also one of the stories more attentive to the divisions between human beings based on gender and class: in contrast with the rather well-off, educated protagonists of other tales, the 'Emu' narrator lives in a broken-down trailer and is dominated by her 'sort of' husband Lloyd and his associates. The emu becomes an emotive symbol of the narrator's own oppression when she reflects:

> Whether I threw myself over the emu or tied myself to it with a rope, in the end they would win—I'd have to give up and go back to my life, to taking care of Lloyd and the kids. (151)

The story's violent conclusion creates a terrible sense of defeat. Somewhat ironically, the depiction of human-human relationships is the most engrossing aspect of some tales in *Among Animals*, including 'Emu', with animals serving as foils or catalysts in human interactions. Such creative work may be read in conjunction with animal studies scholarship that has queried to what extent we should look to non-human animals for 'emotional metaphor[s]' (Fellenz 14).

Some authors attempt a more direct representation of non-human animal being. The story 'Litter' is written in the second person, putting the reader in a canine subject position: 'It was this time last year you met your most recent human companions' (108). The result is not always satisfactory: there is clearly an attempt to avoid words that would require cultural understanding (sausages become 'meat cylinders' and a refrigerator is a 'white oblong', 111) but this is inconsistent (urban youths wear 'hoodies' and the reader-as-dog notices 'shopping bags', 112). Moreover, the dog appears to possess a human sense of time ('twenty minutes' pass and rain falls 'all week', 113, 107). This is nonetheless a valuable exercise in empathy, reminiscent of Jack London in its effort to imagine the instinctual and sensory qualities of canine life, and in its heightened attention to the paralinguistic cues that Derrida and others have seized on in suggesting continuity between human and animal languages (see Wolfe, 'In the Shadow' 40-41).

Other stories foreground the animality of human being. In 'The Ecstatic Cry', a man and woman engage in sexual intercourse 'by instinct, and, as with the birds, it's all we know' (102), and the tale's restrained juxtaposition of human and penguin sociability is highly effective. 'With Sheep' attempts to imagine a subject position somewhere between human and ovine being, simultaneously blurring individual and collective subjectivity, inventing a hybrid or transitional species known as a 'woolie'. The peculiar dynamics that result may be glimpsed in the following excerpt:

> In the morning, I watched through the diminishing veil of language as my farmer-protector (body like love was once your body) opened the giant door and herded my flock, my family, into a pen. (153)

In effect, the 'woolie' is not a living creature but an unstable embodiment of the ambiguous conceptual divide between ourselves and animal others. Both 'Litter' and 'With Sheep' recall recent suggestions that the growth of posthuman animal studies may have to do with our association of animals with a 'purity of affect' (Dekoven 367) or 'an unmediated perspective on reality' (Fellenz 14) we feel may be lost in our own heavily conditioned, mediated experience.

If such imaginative efforts will not convince all readers, this is no great criticism, for the authors are attempting the impossible. As the opening story's narrator reflects, 'If I could shed my humanness, I would. But such transformation happens only in myths and fairy tales' (15). This is where we perceive the advantages of literary over academic language, as the former allows for sustained ambiguity, irresolution, obliquity, or escape into dreamlike surreality on questions that the theorist must face square-on. At its most basic, this is the distinction between imagining and knowing, and both can afford a rich basis for engaged critique and action. As the narrator of 'Alas, Falada!' points out, '*aesthetic* is the opposite of *anaesthetic*' (9).

Ernest Seton, a contemporary of Jack London, said that in his fiction he had attempted to 'emphasize our kinship with the animals by showing that in them we can find the virtues most admired in Man' (Seton 8–9). In presenting their animal 'characters', numerous contributors to *Among Animals* exhibit a similar impulse. As such, the collection raises some of the questions and doubts that inhere in human-animal studies as an academic discipline, including the tendency to privilege qualities in other species that we humans (especially in the West) have conventionally valued in ourselves: individuality and originality, self-consciousness, complex communication, intellectual curiosity, family values, and even aesthetic judgement. 'If an orangutan can think in aesthetic terms, a human should be able to', comments the narrator of 'Alas, Falada!', who also observes that humans and chimpanzees 'share almost 100 percent of our DNA' (8–9), while the narrator of 'The Weight of Things Unsaid' asks, 'If fish can feel paternal, couldn't reptiles?' (170). The 'Greyhound' narrator is intrigued by the racing dog's sudden refusal to run ('Funny the way she quit', 18), highlighting a moment of individual autonomy that reflects the emphasis on self-determination in modern liberal thought. When we seek for and celebrate these qualities in non-human animals, saying 'see, they're like us!', we risk reinforcing human standards as a measure for valuing other species, by which animals may be held up to human levels of attainment and judged wanting. On the other hand, when the protagonist of 'Beyond the Strandline' reflects '*my wife's a* vegetable' (42, emphasis added), the pointed word choice reminds us how using judgements about intellectual capacity or autonomy (for instance) as the basis for valuing other species can recoil on us, opening up troubling categories within the human itself.[1]

Some HAS scholars have specifically asked for more consideration of animals 'as individuals' (see, for example, Flynn xvi), and fiction of the kind presented in *Among Animals* will certainly enrich such thinking – but this can only be one approach among others. Indeed, an individualistic outlook can create difficulties: for example, how do we contend with the introduced possum species that devastates New Zealand native habitats if we have to engage with each possum as an individual with equal claim on life? These are questions that animal studies scholars working on indigeneity and 'feral' species have already been richly exploring. If we resist an ecocentric view that takes account of both humans and animals as part of collective, interactive (eco)systems and impose our contingent individualism on the lifeworlds of other species, we may miss the most important insights that viewing ourselves ‘among animals’ can afford.

As well as shifting how we think and act towards other species, seeing humanity itself as a species-being among other species-beings can require us to look more critically at our own structures of inequality based on gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality (and so on), even as it demands that we recognise and change the patterns in our institutionalised exploitation of other animals and their environments. Critical and creative engagement with human-animal connections may also lead us to recognitions of irreducible difference when it comes to the particular traits, talents, sensory endowments and adaptability of other species – alternative standards by which the human animal falls well short. As I contemplate my blindness compared to a buzzard, and my weakness compared to a leaf-cutter ant, I am reminded of how much I will never understand about the lived experience of any other subject (human or non-human). Such recognitions must surely form the basis for deeper respect. This is in line with Marc Fellenz’s suggestion that philosophical or intuitive engagement with non-human animals can illuminate what is ‘left unthought by traditional [human] systems’ (Fellenz 7–8).

With all this in mind, one standout story in *Among Animals* is ‘Miriam’s Lantern’, a quasi-mythic tale which ingeniously weaves together questions of species extinction with questions of economic redundancy, developing a complex, indefinite parallel between the blacksmith narrator (and the artisan mode of production generally) and the doomed passenger pigeon, in the early twentieth-century United States. As his meaningful work evaporates thanks to rapid industrialisation, the blacksmith has to adapt to life as a tourist attraction (‘hour after hour I hammered out shoes no horse would ever wear’), hearing one onlooker comment, ‘It’s like going to the zoo’ (207–09). He subsequently finds work as a zoo caretaker and is tasked with watching over the last living passenger pigeon. As he maintains the doomed vigil, he realises his own complicity in the species’ destruction, while developing only the most imperfect connection with his charge: ‘the tiny bird gazed back at me and at whomever else was there or not there, at all of us, the present and absent with equal equanimity as if presence or absence beyond the mesh could not have the slightest impact on the greater absence within' (213).

Imaginative writing about human-animal relationships of the kind *Among Animals* presents summons us to greater awareness about our (perhaps unavoidable) anthropomorphism and anthropocentricism, and the limits of our guesswork in imagining the experiences of non-human others. As she transports the severed head of a dead eland, the narrator of 'Alas, Falada!' expresses her feeling that '[the] head in the passenger seat, mute in life, had something to say … Surely there was a message' (10). We sometimes believe we can intuit the emotions of the animals we encounter, and we want our efforts at communication to be reciprocated. But as Weil writes, via analogy with trauma studies, 'we cannot count on [animals] to tell us their stories or what to do about them', and it seems inevitable that 'humans have the last word' (Weil 17, 60). Yet at the time of writing this review, a youtube video titled 'Husky Dog Talking – 'I love you' has had 89,544,490 hits, and videos of parrots demonstrating impressive vocabularies go viral, showing how we continue to cherish the fantasy of direct and bilateral spoken-word communication with the animals we love.

Only humans will be reading *Among Animals.* Those who do will find the experience worthwhile, and may well feel, with the editor, that such writing could have 'an important role to play in not only reflecting the world around us but in changing it for the better' (2). Still, one wonders whether – coming through a small, independent, specialist press – this collection will be speaking largely to those already converted. 'Surely there is a message', but the question remains of how to make our messages more widely heard and heeded.

Note

[1] Whereas human-animal comparisons have traditionally been divisive, offering a site for racism and other forms of discrimination, they are now being reclaimed as a site of inclusiveness, in which our common humanity is our common animality: see, for example, Tiffin; Wolfe, 'Old Orders'.

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