

[Review] Vicki Hutton, *A Reason to Live: HIV and Animal Companions*. Purdue University Press, 2019. 257pp

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In 2012, Vicki Hutton interviewed eleven men in Australia who had contracted HIV. The interviews focused on the healing effects of living with ‘companion animals’, some of whom attended the interviews. Hutton illustrates repeatedly how these animals embodied a reason for HIV survivors to live in spite of the repercussions of the disease they suffered – stigma, social alienation and often traumatic treatments. Caring for an animal inspired the human to choose life over succumbing to death. Statistics can only overwhelm but meeting these men and their animals personalises the tragedies of contracting HIV – particularly for those who became ill in the early outbreak of the disease. Hutton does not explain, however, why she only interviewed men living with HIV and did not include women.

The interviews are compassionately conducted and engagingly narrativised. The life of Drew, entirely isolated in the 1980s, was transformed by the support of Caesar, a bull mastiff who signalled when Drew’s partner was about to have a seizure. Ben told how connecting deeply with his horses shifted his depression and facilitated mindfulness about his situation. Brenton related the calming effect of Tom’s purring and carried a recording of his cat to stabilise him. Mick’s anxiety was allayed by mindfully observing his beloved fish in a tank. Gus the retriever ensured that Dylan took his medication. Feathers, the African grey parrot, returned self-respect to Joe. Sheila, the ferret, accompanied Simon so he could function in public, nestling unobtrusively under his shirt.

A book of such emotive content could easily be marred by sentimentality but Hutton contextualises the interviews, including the medical histories of HIV during the 1980s, the 1990s and from 2000 onward showing how the experience of people living with HIV/AIDS shifted medically and socially, particularly when AZTs were replaced by antiretroviral drugs, meaning that HIV was no longer a death sentence. While the book focuses on the narratives of men living in Australia, brief histories of HIV/Aids in Africa and the developing world also feature as Hutton acknowledges the differences in medical support and quality of life in ill-equipped countries.

Hutton refers constantly to the literature on specific issues that emerge in the interviews, presenting both sides of debates. The question is raised early on whether human-animal bonding is potentially neurotic and a poor substitute for a human-human connection; the text is an extended rejoinder with discussions of attachments between humans and animals. Contextualising human-animal relationships in relation to relevant scholarship grounds them in scientific research which will do much to convince the general reader of the validity of trans-species bonds and their healing effects for the human. Neurochemical studies show the prevalence of oxytocin in mutual attachment between dogs and humans, for example. Nonhuman animal capabilities that a HAS scholar might accept as a given are named and analysed: trans-species ‘emotional contagion’ is when an animal shares human affect (92). In ‘social eavesdropping’ (40) dogs, in particular, evaluate humans according to observed interactions between them.

Anthropomorphism, the usual sticking point in discussions of human-animal relationships, is raised often, with Hutton pointing to scientific confirmation that animals are capable of feeling emotions and having intentions. Much of the research Hutton refers to is sympathetic to human-animal relationships. The term ‘disenfranchised grief’ (32), for example, refers to mourning for an animal companion given the lack of social acknowledgement of grief over a nonhuman animal. A family becomes ‘hybrid’ when an animal is centrally included (174). When Simon narrates his experiences about rescuing animals after extensive bush fires, Hutton

discusses the phenomenon, seen after Hurricane Katrina particularly, of humans taking life-threatening risks to save their animals during disasters.

Hutton is sceptical, at times, of the literature when the emphasis is on measurement and verifiable results. She notes that while ‘horse-assisted therapies’ might not have achieved scientific recognition, Ben’s descriptions of his relationship with horses and how they helped him to emotional stability constitute subjective testimony. Besides the healing presence of animals in the lives of many of the men that Hutton interviewed, a more encompassing love of nature generally recurs. Biophilia and mindfulness are considered extensively as sources of healing.

In her nuanced descriptions of animals and humans at interviews, Hutton discusses reciprocal emotional attachment and empathy between animals and humans. She acknowledges, for example, how an elderly dog, Bellamy, who brings ‘trust’ to her connection with Robbie also displayed a ‘fearful, shaking demeanor’ (98). Yet she never addresses directly the stress that an animal may feel because a human *in extremis* is utterly dependent on him or her. Consequently, in this respect, animals come close to being instrumentalised, functioning merely as caring support systems for their respective humans. Bellamy, an old dog, who watches Robbie constantly, is merely a ‘safe haven’ (88) whose presence enables the narrator to continue with his story. Sheila, a heat-sensitive ferret whose head appears through Simon’s shirt with her ‘nose wrinkled in disgust’ (208), is ‘seemingly resigned to buffering her human’s distress’ (208) as Simon relies entirely on her ‘unwavering loyalty and dynamic energy’ (215).

Hutton is acutely aware of animals’ agencies, and admittedly she only meets some of the animal companions at interviews. In addition, paying attention to animal subjectivities to this depth would generate a broader set of research questions. Still, it is a pity that Hutton with her sensitive observational skills did not recognise putative animal stress due to the weight of their responsibilities. In the conclusion to this study Hutton confirms the priority of human needs yet concedes that applying theories of attachment, biophilia and social support does not do justice to the ‘complexity’ of the human-animal relationships. My critique aside, *A Reason to Live* engagingly portrays the therapeutic effects of trans-species attachments and how love for their respective animal companions motivated HIV-Positive men to live.