**Literary Review – Ceridwen Dovey’s *Only the Animals***

Ceridwen Dovey’s 2014 short story collection *Only the Animals* (*Animals*) is a confronting and necessary novel. Chronologically ordered from 1892 to 2006, and spanning a variety of human conflicts from colonial Australia to the Israel-Hezbollah War, *Animals* presents ten harrowing stories posthumously narrated by the souls of animals who died in these conflicts. In her post on the *Sydney Review of Books* about her upcoming ‘sequel’ for *Animals* (in which she tackles objects), Dovey made her intentions with *Animals* clear: “to understand the empathetic bond between humans and other living animals” (Feb 2023:para.1). Ultimately, *Animals* is concerned with posthumanist ideas around how humans and non-humans are “mutually dependent and co-evolving” (Nayar 2013:19).

The collection is rife with literary allusions and historical nuggets: the chimpanzee Red Peter is lifted straight from Franz Kafka’s *A Report to an Academy*; Collete’s cat finds herself lost in the Western Front trenches; a sex-crazed, drifter mussel, evoking Jack Kerouac, is blown to bits in Pearl Harbour; and a Naval-trained dolphin writes to Sylvia Plath, to name a few. According to Robert Chamber, parody is an “art that plays … with art” (2010:11); and Dovey freely and unflinchingly plays with and revises art to create confronting stories that examine humanity’s relationship with animals. She “bang[s], bind[s], and blend[s]” contrasting material and a fable-like narrative of anthropomorphised animals into a parodic pastiche that destabilises the reader (ibid:5).

The third tale, *Red Peter’s Little Lady*, is inspired by Kafka’s own narrator-ape Red Peter (RP). The epistolary tale is set in Germany during World War I (WWI), focussing on RP, his mate-to-be, Hazel, and Evelyn, Hazel’s human trainer. We follow their correspondence as Hazel is trained to “fully embrace human ways” (50); a feat that RP has already attained. The narrative builds as WWI brings death and a food shortage, revealing an affair between RP and Evelyn. The intricate relationship between human and non-human animals is slowly revealed through each letter. RP has little memory of his life before ‘being’ human, and he prefers it that way. Hazel, however, is more delightfully complex; like a child, she expresses resistance to her education. She remarks in one letter:

I am itchy. Itchy, itchy, itchy. Frau Oberndorff won’t let me scratch ... She says my breath is a problem. It stinks. I like the stink. I breathe out and sniff it in … I scratch my bum, sniff my fingers. How did you become what you are? (53-54)

She is resistant but curious. But is this curiosity due to a desire for humanity or for her affections towards RP? After all, Hazel asks him, “Would you like me to be … more or less human?” (60-61), and even withdraws to her cage to starve when learning of his affair. Evelyn believes that love is the “shimmering jewel in the crown of human evolution” (53), so the love evident in the two apes blurs the line between human and non-human species. An interesting thread that adds to this is RP’s belief that humans are restrained animals, claiming all Hazel needs to do “is put those bars back in place” to achieve the masochistic “strength in deprivation” that divides them (52).

This blurring, however, is at risk in the face of WWI. Repeatedly we are told of how “nobody wants to see an ape eat when there are humans going hungry” (64). Once a novelty at parties, they throw stones at RP and strip him of his suits. Dovey’s story––and ultimately her entire collection––forces you to confront your own perspective of this indifference to human/animal (co-)existence. *Posthumanism* author, Pramod K. Nayar asks us, “when we share mortality and vulnerability with animals, how do we live *with* other life forms? (2013:22). Rather than giving us easy answers, Dovey’s stories urge us to ponder the question ourselves.

The tale that hit me the hardest is *Telling Fairy Tales*, subtitled ‘Soul of Bear’. It follows the two surviving bears of the Sarajevo zoo caught in the midst of the 1992 Serbian siege. A black bear waits for a blind brown bear to die so he may eat her. With bombs dropping around them and a witch for company, the brown bear tells a tale of a bear adopted into the Polish army (inspired by a true story of Wojtek the bear who served in the Polish II Corps). The epigraph is where *Animals* takes its title: “*What does it mean to be human? Perhaps only the animals can know*” from the work of Boria Sax (169). I believe this is the strongest story of the collection to explore this question. The story even opens with the witch instructing the black bear to silence, as he “will be judged on [human] terms” (169); a notion the black bear already understands as he waits to eat the brown bear because “humans favour displays of fairness in animals” (180).

This story showcases the blurring of the humanist human/animal boundary. Through the brown bear’s own fairy tales (of humans trapped in bearskins) and the similarity between being trapped within a zoo and trapped within the city of Sarajevo, we are asked, again, ‘what is the difference’? As the black bear eats his brown bear wife, we are left with the final line: “beloved consumed at last by their loves” (188). If love is the dividing line between human and animal, then Dovey says this line is blurred.

Though the two surviving bears become a beacon of hope to the people, with many people risking “sacred offerings of food” for them (173), and though the people recognise that “civil wars tend to be hardest on animals”, when it comes to rescuing the bears, we are asked, “Why bears, not babies?” (180). Once again, we see how limited human sympathy becomes when conflict arises. The reader is left to navigate these questions as we stay inside the minds of these animals, feeling their feelings, thinking their thoughts, asking ‘why?’ indeed.

Dovey does not attempt to answer any of the questions that these tales evoke. Us readers are left to ponder on our own, equipped only with the raw emotion and confrontation that the collection engenders. I felt fully entranced in this posthumanist world, wondering how I could ever divide the animal from me.

(1044 words, incl. citations)

**REFERENCE LIST**

Chambers R (2010) 'A Beside-or-Against Song', in *Parody: The Art That Plays with Art*, Peter Lang Publishing Inc, New York.

Dovey C (2015) *Only the Animals*, Kobo edn, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York.

Dovey C (20 February 2023) [‘Telling Stories From The Perspectives Of Objects'](https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essay/the-perspectives-of-objects-dovey/), *Sydney Review of Books*, accessed 11 December 2023.

Nayar PK (2013) ‘Revisiting the Human: Critical Humanisms’, in *Posthumanism*, Polity Press.