Human-Animal Relationship Stories Shed Light on Modern Challenges

John Yunker (Ed.)

Among Animals is a wonderfully varied collection, with a plethora of ethical issues in relation to non-human animals embedded in the stories. The stories range in genre from realism to fantasy, from satire to parable. Each story gives insight into a different realm of human-animal interaction. The reader learns, for example, about greyhounds retired from the track, dolphin rescuing, penguin and pelican research, bear hunting, the intimate raising of an animal for slaughter, the etymology of “taxidermy,” and that animals have necropsies not autopsies. Many of these examples have a strong ecological context, as they alert the reader to the vulnerabilities of the planet, as well its non-human denizens.

Many of the stories interconnect the abuse of animals with the abuse of women. “Litter” by Philip Armstrong, unusually, is written in the second person with the unnamed narrator addressing the street dog. It is a risky point of view to adopt, as it can seem contrived, but in this story it deftly ushers the reader into the perceptions of a bitch who is about to whelp and the embodied way she experiences the world through her skin and through her attuned sense of smell. Jessica Zbeida’s “Emu” creates almost unbearable anticipation of male violence as the narrator nurses her baby close to where “the inedible parts of [her] pet” (p. 134) have been dumped on a trash heap. Zbeida’s representation of the body of a beloved animal being barbecued is understated, even though interacting with the bird had brought about an epiphany for the narrator who saw the bird as angelic in the creature's otherness.

In other stories, too, the human tragedy intertwines with the animal tragedy, as one comes to metonymize the other. In Mary Akers’s “Beyond the Strandline,” the central character’s wife exists in a submarine world after a diving accident; dolphins who have beached themselves also suffer in an in-between state from which they might not be rescued. The unlikeable central character might have our sympathy for his predicament, but the ending of the
Some of the most compelling stories are those that cross over between reality and fantasy or between reality and fairy tale. “With Sheep” by Carol Guess and Kelly Magee cleverly depicts a “woolie,” who was once a human, giving birth. The narrator’s perspective on the world shifts entirely as she literally becomes animal and loses human language. “The Boto’s Child” by Rosalie Loewen also imagines a conception and birth that are not conventionally human. Loewen delightfully updates a legend about a pink dolphin, the boto, impregnating a human in contemporary life. The ecstasy of swimming with dolphins is given a new take with the ending both tragic and celebratory. Ferality and the erasing of boundaries between human and non-human recur in these stories, which anticipate that the reader will be open to entertaining such impermeabilities.

“Alas Falada!” reflects on “The Goose Girl,” a Grimms’ fairy tale in which a princess, betrayed into poverty, communicates with her murdered horse, Falada, whose head is nailed to the city gateway. Diane Lefer has her contemporary character comment that in the ending of the story the princess marries the prince, but the horse does not feature: “Nothing more is said about the head of the ever-faithful horse…. An oversight? I consider it injustice” (p. 13).

Analyses that critique representations of the non-human in myths and fairy tales are imperative, as Lefer implicitly suggests. The Grimms’ story is modernized with the narrator, who works at a zoo, having to transport the head of an eland who has been euthanized to the museum where her skull will be put on show. The reader is nudged into questioning the practices of museums, which display only the deathly and not the living, and the story is brought to closure without a modern ritual to acknowledge the death of this magnificent antelope, so revered by the Khoisan people of southern Africa.

“Bad Berry Season” has indigenous connections with bears in North America as a kind of ironic comment on the narrator’s ex-boyfriend’s tragic statement about loss of self and going feral. Melodie Edwards has written an evocative description of the hunting season in ranch country and the ongoing differences between nature conservationists and hunters. The story shocks with its depiction of a cross-over between human and bear.

Many of these stories issue a challenge to the reader as they jolt one into reconceptualizing what is customarily acceptable in relation to non-human animals. Perhaps the most chilling story is the masterly “Meat” by C.S. Malerich, which gives the lie to the claim that any child who has witnessed abattoir-killing will become a vegetarian for life. The first person narrator is a naïve child whose family raises a generic animal (whose species is never defined)