Gavin Van Horn and Dave Aftandilian (Eds.)


When I left my home in Brooklyn and moved out to Grand Forks, North Dakota for my first faculty position two years ago, it was difficult to remember that I was moving to a city. Brooklyn, the most populous of New York’s boroughs, now has more than 2.6 million (human) residents. The entire state of North Dakota has less than 750,000 people. Grand Forks has less than 60,000. It felt, to me, like a dusty, windswept, isolated prairie.

And then, one afternoon, at the entrance to my apartment building, I was taken aback to find a prairie dog up on his haunches and huffing at me from on top of a new mound. I’d only seen prairie dogs on film, or at the zoo. I confess that I was charmed, and comforted, to learn that I was sharing space with this little creature. It dissipated a bit of that dusty, windswept, feeling of desolate isolation.

It was only a matter of days, however, before the mound had been sealed off by apartment building maintenance staff. Fresh new mounds would, of course, quickly reappear at other locations around the building within a matter of days. But this was my introduction to the battle for terrain that plays out between prairie dogs and people across the urban and rural flatlands of the American plains. Prairie dogs are populous here but are often reviled for their housekeeping (and house building) habits. Their numbers are dwindling due to changes in land use, hunting, poisoning, and the sylvatic plague. I started to sense a bit of that crush, and intensity, that comes along with encroaching development and urbanization. I also started to pay closer attention to where I was—I started to care, just bit more, about where I suddenly found myself.

Gavin Van Horn and David Aftandilian’s new edited volume, *City Creatures: Animal Encounters in the Chicago Wilderness* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), is full of stories like this. That is to say, it’s a book of stories—from a number of different contributors—about animal encounters in urban spaces. The city under discussion (Chicago) is nothing like Grand Forks, of course. But the book itself is an invitation to look toward animal life as a way of shifting perspective on the urban environments in which most of us now find ourselves living.

Van Horn is the director of Cultures of Conservation for the Center for Humans and Nature. Aftandilian is an academic who’s brought animal studies into the study of religion. The aim of their volume is to counteract what Robert Michael Pyle has called the “extinction of experience” (5) in an increasingly urbanized world—the extinction, that is, of informal contact with the non-
human. The contemporary city, they acknowledge, may resemble a termite’s mound or a beehive. But it is ultimately “a human-constructed membrane” (7). Hence, many of us experience the city itself—whatever city it might be—as a space that’s empty of wilderness and its nonhuman life forces.

Increasingly, however, ecologists are paying attention to the way that the wilderness continues to permeate and condition our urban environments. Van Horn and Aftandilian are interested in promoting a model of conservation that takes this into account and can help “retrain” us to think of cities as sites of encounter with, rather than isolation from nature. The natural, “in its supposedly purer forms,” they write, is still often associated with “the sublime, the out there, the not-city, the untrammeled and untamed beyond the edge of the frontier of exploration” (5). But Van Horn and Aftandilian encourage us to turn toward fellow animal creatures in these urban environments as one way of coming to terms with the fact that this may no longer be (if it ever was) the case.

Why animals? “Nonhuman animals,” as the editors put it, “are arguably the most available and perhaps most compelling means of understanding larger ecological, geographic, and historical issues regarding the relationships between humans and urban nature” (4). We develop relationships and connections with living, breathing, animals that are unlike the connections we can have with something as broad as a landscape, or an environment.

Why tell stories? We humans, the editors emphasize, are storytelling creatures. We tend to retain information more effectively when it’s passed along to us in story form. And stories about animals, they write, “can also make them present to us and change the way we perceive them” (3). Stories can help shift animal life from the less visible registers of our experience, to the more visible registers. And the stories we tell one another about other creatures can serve as reservoirs for moral, psychological, practical, and spiritual guidance.

Scholars of religion, theology, and ecology will find many of the stories in this volume rife with spiritual insight about urban environments. Terra Brockman’s essay “Keeping Chickens” is a reflection on “keeping creation”, and the virtues of urban chicken coops. Lea Schweitz’s essay “Mysterium Opossum” ponders a backyard encounter with this North American marsupial as the author comes to understand that she tends to expect encounters with the sacred or the holy in “special places” rather than in the gritty and ugly form of an opossum (48).

Many of these spiritual insights are generated in reflections on death and dying in the city—reflections, that is to say, on the mortality that we share with other creatures. Tom Montgomery Fate’s essay “Falling Apart” is a piece on animal resurrections that moves back and forth between a reflection on the death of a family friend and the death of a family cat. He encourages us to hear “the fragile steady pulse of Creation” that “lets the world fall apart so that it