

The Lives of Animals

J.M. Coetzee , Amy Gutmann (Editor) , Peter Singer (Contribution by) , Wendy Doniger (Contribution by) , Barbara Smuts (Contribution by) , Marjorie Garber

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The idea of human cruelty to animals so consumes novelist Elizabeth Costello in her later years that she can no longer look another person in the eye: humans, especially meat-eating ones, seem to her to be conspirators in a crime of stupefying magnitude taking place on farms and in slaughterhouses, factories, and laboratories across the world.

Costello's son, a physics professor, admires her literary achievements, but dreads his mother's lecturing on animal rights at the college where he teaches. His colleagues resist her argument that human reason is overrated and that the inability to reason does not diminish the value of life; his wife denounces his mother's vegetarianism as a form of moral superiority.

At the dinner that follows her first lecture, the guests confront Costello with a range of sympathetic and skeptical reactions to issues of animal rights, touching on broad philosophical, anthropological, and religious perspectives. Painfully for her son, Elizabeth Costello seems offensive and flaky, but—dare he admit it?—strangely on target.

Here the internationally renowned writer J. M. Coetzee uses fiction to present a powerfully moving discussion of animal rights in all their complexity. He draws us into Elizabeth Costello's own sense of mortality, her compassion for animals, and her alienation from humans, even from her own family. In his fable, presented as a Tanner Lecture sponsored by the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University, Coetzee immerses us in a drama reflecting the real-life situation at hand: a writer delivering a lecture on an emotionally charged issue at a prestigious university. Literature, philosophy, performance, and deep human conviction—Coetzee brings all these elements into play.

As in the story of Elizabeth Costello, the Tanner Lecture is followed by responses treating the reader to a variety of perspectives, delivered by leading thinkers in different fields. Coetzee's text is accompanied by an introduction by political philosopher Amy Gutmann and responsive essays by religion scholar Wendy Doniger, primatologist Barbara Smuts, literary theorist Marjorie Garber, and moral philosopher Peter Singer, author of *Animal Liberation*. Together the lecture-fable and the essays explore the palpable social consequences of uncompromising moral conflict and confrontation.

The Lives of Animals Details

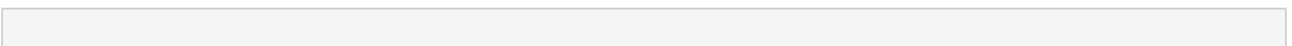
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From Reader Review The Lives of Animals for online ebook

Yvonne says

Dierenleven

De hoofdpersoon in 'Dierenleven' is de Australische romanschrijfster Elizabeth Costello, die op de universiteit van Appleton een lezing en een gastcollege komt geven over een door haar gekozen thema. Ze kiest voor de wijze waarop wij de rationele mens eenzijdig verheerlijken en het niet-rationele dier verachten. Dit leidt er haars inziens toe dat we het dier slecht behandelen. Scherp is haar vergelijking tussen de dood van joden in de concentratiekampen en de uitbuiting van dieren in de bioindustrie. Maar hoewel haar vergelijking totaal misplaatst is, is haar doel enkel om erop te wijzen, dat wij in beide situaties de toeschouwer zijn die niet ingrijpt. Ze wil ons bewustzijn verhogen voor het leed dat dieren wordt aangedaan. Op Appleton geeft haar zoon John les als docent natuur- en sterrenkunde en hij schaamt zich voor zijn moeder, die als activiste steeds weer de weinig vruchtbare confrontatie zoekt. Haar schoondochter Norma bekritiseert als eminente filosofe openlijk de lacunes in het denken van haar schoonmoeder. Ook het publiek geeft tegengas. Het zwakke betoog van Elizabeth roept een zekere sympathie op bij de lezer. Aangezien er geen alomvattend antwoord komt, nodigt dit ons wel uit om zelf onze positie te bepalen over de slechte verhouding tussen mens en dier en uiteindelijk ook tussen mens en mens.

Alison says

This story is ingeniously written. Coetzee, invited to give two talks as part of a university lecture series, instead delivers a fictional story in two parts about a novelist who is invited to give a series of university talks. His lecturer, Elizabeth Costello, chooses to engage with the philosophies underlying vegetarianism and humane treatment of animals, rather than speak about her own work. Meanwhile, his protagonist (her son and a junior professor at the university), must navigate the social territory that accompanies the uncomfortable discussions his mother initiates.

The format of the piece is so smart-- Coetzee gives us the perfect fictionalized staging of these issues, using his narrative to avoid the common clichés and rhetorical format of discussions of animal welfare. The edition I read included response pieces from interdisciplinary scholars, each of whose approaches was forcibly broadened and questioned just by virtue of Coetzee's chosen style of address. A perfect strategy for writing, and, as a result, a magnificent book.

Camila says

Excellent. Brief and resounding.

Highly recommend. Though a bit intellectual at times, very human and bits and pieces resonated with me very deeply. It left me pondering and wondering about some ideas, and most importantly, towards the end it managed to put into words something that had implicitly and covertly been troubling me for a while:

“- { ... } What is it that you can't say?

- It's that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime

of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money.

It is as if I were to visit friends, and to make some polite remark about the lamp in their living room, and they were to say, “Yes, it’s nice, isn’t it? Polish-Jewish skin it’s made of, we find that’s best, the skins of young Polish-Jewish virgins.” And then I go to the bathroom and the soap wrapper says, “Treblinka – 100% human steriate.” Am I dreaming, I say to myself? What kind of house is this?

Yet I’m not dreaming. I look into your eyes, into Norma’s, into the children’s, and I see only kindness, human kindness. Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you? Why can’t you?”

Manuel Alfonseca says

ENGLISH: This book by a Nobel Prize, well-known vegetarian, defender of the rights of animals, is very well written and tries to keep an impartial tone where the main character, Elizabeth Costello, defends her position in public, is answered by those who do not share her ideas, and sometimes even cannot answer.

ESPAÑOL: Este libro de un Premio Nobel, conocido vegetariano, defensor de los derechos de los animales, está muy bien escrito y trata de mantener un tono imparcial. El personaje principal, Elizabeth Costello, defiende su postura en público, le responden quienes no comparten sus ideas, y algunas veces no encuentra respuesta.

Rafa says

Adoro la facilidad con la que crea un buen texto; incluso con su personaje menos atractivo.

Sasha says

This novella is actually the two-part lecture that Coetzee gave at Princeton in 1997. Here Coetzee presents the topic of human cruelty toward animals through fiction, with fiction writer Elizabeth Costello invited to give a distinguished lecture at a university, and this is her topic of choice. The controversy of her lecture is argued, discussed, and rebutted by academic characters including Costello's son and his wife. The philosophical, poetical, and literal approaches to Costello's chosen subject are many layers within the novel. Morality and ethics come into question, but the story itself is not just a clear-cut animal rights argument; on the contrary, Costello's lecture on animal cruelty has anything but a solid conclusion, or even solution. There seems to be more at work here than what Coetzee presents on the surface.

With reflective essays by a moral philosopher, religion scholar, literary critic, and primatologist to give Coetzee's lectures even more dimension, this novella is a thought-provoking and mysteriously crafted narrative. It questions the morality and empathy of human beings in our treatment of animals, but also engages us on a more cognitive level. As Marjorie Garber says in her essay, "In these two elegant lectures we thought John Coetzee was talking about animals. Could it be, however, that all along he was really

asking, 'What is the value of literature?'. In all, it's good food for thought.

Suellen Rubira says

Alguns livros (talvez todos) possuem um tempo certo para serem lidos e quase intuitivamente esse foi o melhor momento para ler *The lives of animals*. Coetzee, que não é bobo, organiza esse romance (ou novela, alguns podem preferir assim) em forma de palestras dadas pela escritora Elizabeth Costello, super envolvida na causa animal. Mediando essa situação, temos o filho dela, John, e a nora, Norma. Obviamente a relação entre as duas não é das melhores e isso se mostra claramente através dos questionamentos filosóficos super racionais de Norma.

Coetzee tira o corpo fora, mas colocando muito de suas convicções nessa história: os animais merecem viver? É preciso mesmo parar de comer carne? Ainda, uma pergunta quase sutil, mas que acaba gritando: a literatura pode, em algum sentido, mudar alguma coisa?

O mais bacana foi ver uma série de autores com os quais convivi através de leituras durante esse ano servindo de argumento para as palestras de Costello: Mary Midgley, Tim Ingold, Peter Singer. Além, claro, de reiterar os pensamentos clássicos sobre o tema, de Platão a Kant.

Excelente livro, sem ser aquela enchida de saco panfletária. Convida à reflexão.

Orsodimondo says

MISE EN ABYME

In *La vita degli animali* Coetzee sguazza nella metaletteratura come un ippopotamo nel fiume fangoso, e io con lui, sguazzo e godo da fan della narrativa sulla narrativa quale sono.

Very post-modern: ma credo che sentirsi definire così spingerebbe Coetzee a storcere naso e bocca rischiando un attacco allergico.

Gioco di specchi potrebbe stargli meglio: e probabilmente romanzo accademico anche di più.

Ma suppongo che Coetzee, come la maggior parte degli artisti, preferirebbe non essere etichettato, circoscritto, catalogato.

Otto, detto Casotto.

Ha poca importanza l'argomento, la vita degli animali, i loro diritti, il nostro rapprocciarsi a loro, capirli o meno, sentirlo o meno, dividerli o meno, la sofferenza che noi animali umani infliggiamo agli animali non umani.

Ha di certo poca importanza per me che avrei goduto leggendo un libro così anche se avesse discusso del sesso degli angeli, di lana caprina, del peso dell'anima, dell'angoscia del portiere prima del calcio di rigore o della perplessità degli artisti sotto la tenda del circo.

Otto, detto Casotto.

Conosco la personale opinione di Coetzee sul tema in questione, eppure è così abile a destreggiarsi che riesce a enunciarla senza sbilanciarsi, senza favoritismi, lasciando che venga contraddetta con argomenti altrettanto credibili e solidi, al punto che si può perfino dubitare sul suo pensiero e sentimento autentico.

Le varie posizioni sono esposte da personaggi che sono tutti accademici, docenti universitari e ricercatori, i quali danno la garanzia di essere ben documentati: etologia, ecologia, poesia, filosofia, religione...

Al punto che alla fine possiamo chiederci se Coetzee abbia davvero parlato degli animali e non invece 'solo' del valore della letteratura.

Otto, detto Casotto. Lo so, sembra innocuo, dolce, remissivo: ma è un coccodrillo.

Blake says

In the late 90s, the novelist J. M. Coetzee was invited to Princeton to give the Tanner Lectures. He chose to speak on the topic that is sometimes referred to in philosophy as "the moral status of animals" and the result is *The Lives of Animals*. Given the simple and elegant form of a meta-fictional novella, the two parts, *The Philosophers and the Animals* and *The Poets and the Animals*, combine to an extended narrative about fictional novelist Elizabeth Costello, who has been invited to the (also) fictional Appleton College to speak on a topic of her choosing. Her topic of choice is our treatment of animals. What follows is a sometimes moving, sometimes funny, consistently thoughtful and eloquent reflection on *the animal* and animals in philosophy and literature, the connections we have with them and the kind of animal we are. Rather than an avowal of his own, Coetzee distances the main character from his authorial voice and repeatedly undermines any attempts to identify him finally with his protagonist or his position with hers. And with her personal and compassionate perspective against the entrenched rationalism of Costello's interlocutors and contemporaries, he shapes a descriptive chasm in place of an argumentative resolution. It's in this state of remove, I think, that the piece gets its novel quality of freedom.

Following on from Coetzee's centrepiece are several commentaries from his own contemporaries. Marjorie Garber turns to the literary and psychological aspects of the piece and appropriates Coetzee's narrative to a psychoanalytic piece. Peter Singer creates his own rather didactic fictional account to take Costello's argumentative points to task. Wendy Doniger attempts to document anthropological points of interest that enlarge and complement the more understated sections of Coetzee's narrative. And Barbara Smuts turns to her personal experience working with and studying animals in the wild to reflect on what compassion in ethics and science might teach us.

While Coetzee is consistently good, the commentaries vary in quality and attention. Garber's piece, following as it does so soon on the turns of horror and compassion of the main action, reads almost as a hostile case of deflection from the other into the familiar. Singer, similarly, seems somehow threatened by Costello's critique of philosophy (or of Singer's way of doing philosophy) and Coetzee's refusal to *be* these positions. As these two depart and Doniger begins her more modest and search piece, the colour seems to return the book. And it's with Smuts and her delicate and suggestive firsthand account of real animal lives that the open spirit of Coetzee's piece returns and speaks with a new and evocative optimism.

Emily says

I stopped eating meat, for environmental reasons, during my first year of college. Then a few years passed, and I entered that slippery state of "flexitarianism," which really means, "I eat meat when I want to," i.e. too

often. I picked up *The Lives of Animals* as an intervention. The book has pleasantly surprised me, in a couple ways.

First, it doesn't have a clear political agenda. It helps that J.M. Coetzee can hide behind his fictional characters (or step behind, if "hide" sounds too evasive). His characters disagree in many ways about the eating of animals, and not all of them disagree in convincing ways.

I was surprised when Elizabeth Costello, the aging novelist and guest lecturer at Appleton College, began her talk. Her argument against the eating of animals is not very philosophically rigorous. She uses the word "reason" to mean at least three different things, and she makes new-agey assertions like, "There is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another." J.M. Coetzee acknowledges this; he has his other characters scoff, cringe, or politely disagree during and after Costello's lectures. But if Costello isn't making a coherent case against meat-eating, why are her lectures at the center of this book? What's the point?

Two valuable things come from Costello's lectures.

The first is her objection to using an animal's capacity or incapacity to "reason" as the deciding factor in its fate. (Here, Costello uses "reason" to mean something like "self-awareness" or "advanced consciousness.") "What is so special about the form of consciousness we [humans] recognize that makes killing a bearer of it a crime while killing an animal goes unpunished?" she asks. "Reason looks to me suspiciously like the being of human thought." In other words, the worship of reason is convenient, because, what do you know!, humans have human-reason and animals lack it. The value we place on "reason" justifies that which we have already decided to do: eat animals. Costello's objection seems coherent, and therefore it troubles me. She has given me something to think about.

The second has nothing to with the content of her argument, but everything to do with its emotional register. Here's a woman (a fictional one, but still) to whom "the idea of human cruelty to animals so consumes [her] that she can no longer look another person in the eye: humans, especially meat-eating ones, seem to her to be conspirators in a crime of stupefying magnitude." It is too easy to forget that pork is pig, that beef is cow, but Costello's gravity reminds me that when I am eating meat, I am eating an animal. A tray of chicken wings is a tray of wings from many different chickens, all dead, in a pile, covered with sauce. What's this called? That's right -- defamiliarization. It's good for us.

The essays ("Reflections") at the end of the book are too short to do any good work, but they are fun to read anyway. Marjorie Garber (literary scholar) begins her piece with five great questions, the most important and ambitious being "What is the value of literary study in today's world?", but she barely begins to answer them in her very short essay. Peter Singer (moral philosopher) writes in semi-fictional dialogue form—a conversation with his daughter—and gives us more of a primer on his basic animal rights argument than a real digging-into of Costello's talk. The best piece comes from primatologist Barbara Smuts, writing about the friendships she's had with chimps and (the best part!) her dog, Safi.

Izlinda says

I read this book for my writing course, *Our Animal Selves*. Coetzee writes about a famous author, Elizabeth Costello, who is invited to give a talk at a university. Coincidentally, her son works there. While there,

Costello doesn't give an expected speech about literary works, but about human-animal relations. The next day she gave a seminar about poets and animals and finished her visit with a debate with a philosophy professor.

It was kind of hard to pick apart the arguments Costello used since she was very convoluted, especially in her first speech. She refers to a lot of other stories and poems, so if you are not familiar with them, the book may lack some depth. I had read Kafka's story about Red Peter, and "The Panther" by Rilke but haven't read *Gulliver's Travels* and there was a substantial question about that after her seminar. In a way I found her debate with the professor (O'Hearne) to be the clearest medium of her points.

At the end of the book are four responses to Coetzee's work. A primatologist, a philosopher (Peter Singer, no less), someone who wrote a literary analysis and a religious professor. For class I only had to read the response by Barbara Smuts, the primatologist, who responded very specifically to a curious lack in Costello's speeches and responses.

Costello does use the comparison of slaughter houses to the Holocaust, and doesn't eat meat, while still wearing leather and having a leather purse. She's vegetarian, then, not vegan. Costello was a hard character to relate to, because of her brusqueness. We also pondered in class if Coetzee used a work of fiction to relay his point of views, without having to directly answer to critiques of his arguments, since it wasn't a scholarly paper.

Sridhar says

A brilliant work by a Nobel laureate in literature and a wonderful book to start the year with. A superb form of academic novel (a novel genre, I could say, if the pun may be forgiven), this is top-notch writing on a theme of profound and enduring significance for anyone concerned with human values and connections with other animals.

J. M. Coetzee, invited to Princeton to deliver the prestigious Tanner Lectures on Human Values, presents the lectures as a fictional story with debate and dialogue crafted into the form of this book. Within it is the story of Elizabeth Costello, herself an academic, invited to deliver lectures at a University, and the lectures she delivers and the ensuing responses. Reading it as a sort of literary dialectic, one is swept by Coetzee's tight and engaging prose into central moral, philosophical and ethical issues related to the lives of animals. The four commentaries that accompany the central work by Coetzee are excellent, too. The book's introduction by political philosopher Amy Gutmann, and accompanying essay commentaries by Wendy Doniger (religion scholar), Barbara Smuts (primatologist), Marjorie Garber (literary theorist), and Peter Singer (moral philosopher and author of *Animal Liberation*) are worth reading and add great value to this book.

My first reaction to this astounding book, as a practicing wildlife scientist with a claim to be involved in animal research and conservation over the last two decades was: "Why were these profoundly important issues never a formal and thorough part of my academic training or practice?". Is it because issues of morals and ethics are considered outside the pale of training to be a scientist? Is it because they are considered wishy-washy or vague, or, devil-take-you, subjective? Or is simply because most present-day wildlife scientists actually do not have a deep understanding or appreciation of the central issues, or if they do, they prefer to keep it to themselves? But why not? We use animals in research. We make claim to efforts to understand them. We make conservation appeals, ostensibly, on their behalf. We collect, we probe, we peer, we tag, we handle, we follow, we even sometimes kill animals in the name of scientific study. Do we really

do all this on the basis of a comprehensive ethical and moral foundation?

Coetzee touches on vital issues that relate to whether we perceive other animals as beings with interests or as objects for our manipulation. Cruelty, sentience, sympathy, empathy, and the morality of our actions towards other sentient beings is the undercurrent of Coetzee's words, of Costello's debate. Vegetarianism, animal intelligence and how we may perceive it, even as trained scientists, pain and suffering, animal slaughter or 'sacrifice', these are all themes seamlessly woven into a gripping narrative thread. Coetzee brings sudden and scathing clarity and depth to the work of a litany of earlier writers, scientists, and philosophers, of Thomas Aquinas and Jeremy Bentham, Franz Kafka and Tom Regan, Wolfgang Köhler and Mary Midgely, and many others.

And yet, the implications are not thrust on you as absolutes, as dogma. It comes in measured words, prompting a dawning awareness. Then, Costello's words only seem to echo the hidden voice of Coetzee: "I want to find a way of speaking to fellow human beings that will be cool rather than heated, philosophical rather than polemical, that will bring enlightenment rather than seeking to divide us into the righteous and the sinners, the saved and the damned, the sheep and the goats."

A phenomenal work, worth reading and re-reading, even if only to be touched by Coetzee's prose, or perhaps for introspective and outwardly illumination.

Lucas says

this short work cleverly uses the platform of a fictive academic lecture -- which Coetzee later presented, metatextually, at Princeton -- to condense many familiar and unfamiliar arguments about eating and treating animals. Is Costello, the impassioned novelist and lecturer in the book, a mouthpiece for Coetzee? probably not. that ambiguity is likely what allows Coetzee to lay out such a morally charged and ultimately irresolvable exchange.

the impasse in which humans find themselves when it comes to animals is fully (and usefully) captured here. love the cheap shots at reason, such as the fact that Costello's antagonistic daughter-in-law, herself an analytic philosopher, is named Norma. also, how Costello speaks of the "piddling distinctions" of analytic philosophy.

choice quote:

"...children all over the world consort quite naturally with animals. They don't see any dividing line. That is something they have to be taught."

Arybo ? says

L'ultimo intervento è veramente commovente, a tratti.

Primo libro che leggo di Coetzee, non sarà l'ultimo. Mi ha incuriosito e mi ha spinto a prendere altro di suo. Tra un po' leggerò, infatti, *Nel cuore del paese*. Vediamo come se la cava con un romanzo vero e proprio. ?

Troy Martin says

I am VERY much an animal lover; however I think it is impertinent to use the Holocaust as an analogy for the production of food (or for any analogy at that). Leave the dead to rest in peace. Using it as an analogy trivializes the Holocaust, and for lack of a better word, "cheapens" it. I think it is quite disrespectful to the millions of Jews, Blacks, Homosexuals, Gypsies, and many others who lost their lives in such a horrific manner. Even if the "how" is similar (how they treat animals when compared to the treatment of Holocaust prisoners), the "why" is different. Nazis killed Jews because they wanted them to be completely exterminated. I don't think anyone eats a chicken sandwich and thinks "Oh, that's one less chicken in the world! YES!" Also is she calling the Jews animals? Is she calling Meat Eaters, Nazis?

I did like how it showed differing points of view. The ending made me feel quite sad for the protagonist actually. I don't think she even knew what she wanted really.

Benjaminxjackson says

This is another Odyssey project reading.

The book as a whole is kind of interesting because of the essays that accompany the main story, which is a pair of lectures written as a fiction story.

That said, the main story of the novelist giving lectures about how humans should do something in regards to animals differently than they do now falls flat for me. Coetzee's apparent alter ego of Costello doesn't seem to know what she wants people to do. She is a vegetarian, but doesn't suggest that for others, and she suggests that animals and people are equal, or should be on some level. But both the arguments and their consequences are never fully explored.

While the book made me think about humans and their relationship to animals, I didn't feel like it covered much new ground.

Rachel says

I'm glad I was able to read it and especially glad I didn't have to pay \$20 to buy it. I thought Coetzee's "academic novella" had poorly written characters and a badly told story, if it was supposed to be story.

However, I was delighted and surprised to see Peter Singer's work of "fiction." Seems like he had a ball writing that! What a talented writer and astute ethicist (Singer). I bet Singer would have written a much better academic novella than Coetzee. And ... isn't Coetzee a fiction writer, normally? That's what I get from some of the references the other writers made toward him. If that's the case, I'm surprised that Coetzee's part

of the book was such a chore to read.

Here are my impressions as I read the 6 sections of the book:

1) Introduction (written by Amy Gutmann) ... "Gee, is this a Cliff's notes version of Coetzee's novella and the responses that follow?" I wondered. And, having read this, I wondered, do I even need to bother reading the book? Gutmann's introduction did not whet my appetite for reading more. However, I dutifully read on.

2) Coetzee's novella ... Some of the arguments discussed are interesting. For example, I liked the discussion of "rational thinking" experiments on primates and enjoyed reading about the alternate questions that one might consider when presented with a challenge. Unfortunately, the various ideas were presented in such a mish-mash, through the eyes of very unsympathetic characters, one and all. Well, I just couldn't wait to finish reading and be done with it.

REFLECTIONS

3) Marjorie Garber (Literary Analysis) ... Not being very well-read in literature and ethics myself, I clearly missed all the inside jokes that were happening ... names of characters and places specifically chosen to sound like fictional characters and places, or real-world writers and scholars, etc. OK. But that didn't change my feeling of how poorly written this was! I was intrigued by the idea that perhaps Coetzee "wasn't writing the book we thought he was writing," and that instead he was writing a book about the value of literature. I love that concept, but what an awful way to go about it. In my opinion, writing something so lacking in emotional depth or entertainment value is a terrible way to argue for the value of literature.

4) Peter Singer (Animal Rights / Ethics) ... Oh my goodness, what a surprise!!!! This is truly a lovely read. Humorous and full of life, and astutely written! And now, finally ... because of the delightful way that Singer writes about his own assignment to respond to Coetzee's lecture material ... I FINALLY understand what the heck is going on with what I thought was a poorly written novella by Coetzee. Apparently Coetzee was tasked with writing and presenting 2 lectures at a university (the Tanner Lectures?). So, Coetzee created a two-part novella with fictional characters who would discuss the topics that he had planned to cover in his lecture.

Aha! I see it now. Yes, if you were expecting to show up and listen to some droll essay on animal rights, and instead, the lecturer spiced it up by presenting it within this "fictional framework," you'd be delighted! You'd say, "Oh, goody!" You know how the whole room bursts into laughter when an academic lecturer makes even the most feeble attempt at humor? People are bored out of their gourds, and they're stuck there, too ... a captive audience ... they are dying for even the slightest bit of levity or humor. So, in an academic lecture setting, the bar is set very low for what qualifies as passable entertainment. Very well then. Now I understand.

Receiving this bit of news from Peter Singer's commentary ... so late in the game, in fact, so long AFTER the game was over ... (i.e., I was already DONE reading Coetzee's novella) ... I think the INTRODUCTION fails miserably for not making the situation clear from the beginning.

I believe a more effective intro would have been something like what follows:

"The work you are about to read was written for a lecture series given by the author at such and such University on such and such date. Sit back and imagine yourself stuck in a lecture hall, prepared to hear a long and potentially droll, possibly even rambling, exposition on ethics. Then imagine your surprise when

the lecturer instead presents the work as a piece of fiction.

"As you read, don't expect a novel written specifically for entertainment or emotional engagement, and don't be surprised that the fictional characters and events are thinly cobbled together. The lecturer would have expected the audience to recognize immediately that these are merely devices for portraying the philosophical and ethical arguments that are the true subject of the lecture. Instead, imagine yourself in a stuffy and crowded lecture hall, listening as a lecturer presents his points in a novel and surprising way.

"After Coetzee's two-part novella, we have included commentary on the content and writing style, written by individuals hailing from four different backgrounds: literary criticism, animal rights/ethics, religious education, and animal behavior science. We hope these voices will provide additional insight into Coetzee's work."

Something like that (written by a professional writer who could do a much better job, of course) would have been SO HELPFUL as the introduction. If I were the editor, I would completely toss the current "Introduction" and replace it with a simple statement such as the one above.

Oh, but back to how I feel about Singer's contribution. Yes, it was awesome. Not only was it witty and funny and smart, for its own sake, but even more importantly, it made me understand what I was supposed to be "getting" as I read Coetzee's work. Sadly, by shining so brightly, Singer's commentary demonstrated how effective Coetzee's literary device could have been and how far it fell short. Even so, I feel inspired to go back and re-read Coetzee's writing ... it certainly may feel different (and may seem much improved!) now that I know the context.

5) Wendy Doniger (Religious Education/Spirituality) ... the comments on how various religions and cultures perceive animal and human sacrifices and/or vegetarianism were interesting, and I learned some new things. But the essay didn't add much insight into Coetzee's work or why he wrote it the way he did.

6) Barbara Smuts (Animal Behavioral Science) ... I enjoyed reading about Smuts' experience with animals, but here again, I don't believe the essay added very much insight into Coetzee's work. Perhaps the point was simply to remark on some ideas that Smuts believes Coetzee should have included.

I'm curious to see how I will feel about all of the above after a re-read. I've seen the rave reviews, and obviously I'm not "feelin' it" right now. It's possible this is one of those books that requires a second read to fully appreciate.

Anyway, the book will make for some very good book club discussion, I think!

Dagio_maya says

“«In altre parole hanno chiuso i loro cuori. Nel cuore risiede una facoltà, l'empatia, che talvolta ci permette di condividere l'essere di un'altra persona. L'empatia ha tutto a che fare con il soggetto e poco a che fare con l'oggetto, con l'altro, una cosa di cui ci rendiamo subito conto (...)»

Non è facile commentare questo libro. Dovrò sicuramente rileggerlo perché so di essermi un po' persa nella densità dei discorsi concentrati in così poche pagine.

La prima difficoltà sta nella forma.

Gli scritti de "La vita degli animali" sono lezioni frontali (cosiddette *Tanner lectures*) tenute nel 1997-1998 presso l'Università di Princeton con la caratteristica di essere una racconto a cornice.

Elizabeth Costello, anch'essa scrittrice, si reca all'Appleton College per tenere due conferenze che trattano del modo in cui gli uomini si pongono nei confronti degli animali.

Dunque: Coetzee presenta due conferenze in cui non espone un saggio ma legge un racconto in cui la protagonista tiene due conferenze.

Va sottolineato, inoltre, che le parole di Elizabeth Costello sono filtrate dallo sguardo del figlio che la ospita proprio per partecipare all'evento e che cerca di mediare l'opposizione netta della moglie Norma (nome ovviamente non scelto caso) alle posizioni radicali della madre.

La Costello tiene due conferenze che corrispondono alle due parti del racconto:

- I filosofi e gli animali
- I poeti e gli animali

In entrambi c'è una precisa accusa e denuncia agli uomini per la crudeltà con cui trattano il genere animale.

L'argomento si declina dunque in un discorso più razionale (il discorso filosofico) e in un discorso maggiormente estetico (il discorso letterario e poetico che supplisce a ciò che la *ratio* non è in grado di esprimere). Sia nel primo che nel secondo discorso si intrecciano svariate citazioni di filosofi e letterati che danno spessore alle argomentazioni e al racconto stesso conformandolo come perfetto esempio di metaletteratura.

In uno sforzo di semplificazione possiamo dire che il messaggio che Coetzee affida alla voce della Costello è quello del fallimento della filosofia laddove questa non è in grado di suscitare una vera comprensione del mondo animale.

Il discorso filosofico è come una macchia d'olio che galleggia sull'acqua: non riesce a penetrare nella dimensione emotiva.

In sintesi: la filosofia è incapace di suscitare empatia.

Il compito allora è affidato alla letteratura che assume in definitiva un concreto compito etico.

" «Cogito ergo sum, ha anche detto Cartesio, e le sue parole sono diventate famose. È una formula che mi ha sempre procurato disagio. Implica che se un essere vivente non si dedica a ciò che chiamiamo pensiero è in qualche modo un essere di seconda categoria. Al pensiero, alla cogitazione, io oppongo la pienezza, l'essere racchiusi in un corpo, la sensazione di essere: non la coscienza di sé come di una fantomatica macchina ragionante che produce pensieri, bensì, al contrario, la sensazione - una sensazione pesantemente affettiva - di essere un corpo con arti che si estendono nello spazio, di essere vivi e aperti al mondo. Una simile pienezza è in forte contrasto con lo stato fondamentale di Cartesio, che evoca una sensazione di vuoto: la sensazione di un pisello che sbatte di qua e di là in un baccello. »

La capacità di provare emozione è qualcosa che travalica ogni discorso possibile sull'argomento e non a caso sono le lacrime di Elizabeth Costello a concludere il racconto.

Lacrime che hanno acceso la mia quinta stella perché è sì un libro molto forte nelle sue argomentazioni così piene di spunti riflessivi, così ricche di riferimenti.

E' realmente un'Opera degna di essere scritta con la lettera maiuscola anche per l'attenta costruzione che la rende un prezioso congegno. Ma c'è quel qualcosa in più che entra nel proprio personale vissuto e che non puoi ignorare.

Foer in *Se niente importa*: Perché mangiamo gli animali? fa un'affermazione importante per questo tipo di discorso:

" Vedere le cose in qualunque altro modo richiede uno sforzo. "

C'è un'incomprensione profonda in molte persone che sentenziano quasi disgustate sul tuo non voler cibare di animali.

Fra di scherno che vogliono ridicolizzare l'etica che ti sei costruito.

Questo sforzo di capire lo fanno ben pochi e qui Coetzee mi ha detto qualcosa di più:

le decisioni di come condurre la mia vita non sono frutto di un cieco asservimento ideologico ma nascono dalla convinzione di non poter far altro che provare empatia.

Forse è una questione di sensibilità che ci divide...

"concludo invitando chiunque abbia interesse per i diritti degli animali ad aprire il suo cuore agli animali che ha intorno, e a scoprire per conto suo cos'è l'amicizia con una persona non umana." [BARBARA SMUTS*]

* Dopo il testo di Coetzee seguono le riflessioni di quattro differenti accademici che rispondono ai quesiti posti dall'autore.

Barbara Smuts è docente di Psicologia e Antropologia all'Università del Michigan.

Dvd (VanitasVanitatumOmniaVanitas) says

Ho colpevolmente impiegato una eternità a concludere questo libricino, nonostante le dimensioni ridotte. E l'ho pure intermezzato con una corposa (ma piacevole) lettura di carattere storico.

Il fatto sorprendente è che la mia sciatteria non è dovuta a un giudizio negativo sull'opera, anzi, ma al fatto che - completamente oberato di cose da studiare/fare/pensare per ragioni lavorative - la tipologia assolutamente particolare di questo libro richiedeva, a me, una concentrazione di gran lunga superiore a un saggio sul sacco di Roma di Alarico. Ognuno ha la testa che funziona a modo suo (fortunatamente!).

Ciò detto, è un gran bel libro. Romanzo, non so se è il caso di definirlo tale. La prima metà del libro ci porta a conoscere la scrittrice Elizabeth Costello, che ospitata nell'università in cui insegna fisica il figlio John, vi deve tenere una serie di conferenze su un argomento che le sta molto a cuore: il rapporto fra l'uomo e gli animali e, in particolare, la nostra tarata concezione dei loro sentimenti, sofferenza compresa. Elizabeth è, oltre che animalista, vegetariano-vegana convinta e per questo - e per tutta la sua concezione animalista assolutamente radicale - in famiglia vi è un conflitto strisciante con la nuora, Norma, le cui idee a riguardo sono dettate semplicemente dal caro, vecchio buon senso comune. Il povero John si ritrova così, sospeso fra l'amore per la moglie e l'affetto filiale per la madre, a cercare di mediare e smussare, pur nella consapevolezza di propendere sostanzialmente per la moglie nella diatriba ideologica che divide le due donne.

Anche nelle conferenze che vedono opporsi Elizabeth con altri studiosi e umanisti, e che vengono riportate integralmente nel libro, la donna appare sostanzialmente come Don Chisciotte che combatte, sola, i mulini a vento: il paragone che fa fra i moderni mattatoi e i campi di sterminio nazisti, stabilendo una perfetta analogia, fa rumoreggiare e indignare pubblico e esperti. La vecchia signora combatte, tuttavia, e difende le sue opinioni con ottima dialettica e fini ragionamenti (analogamente ai suoi avversari ideologici, che utilizzano tuttavia esclusivamente la fredda - ma stringente - razionalità). E alla fine, mentre il figlio la accompagna all'aeroporto, in un grande momento di letteratura, la si sente crollare emotivamente, piangere e sfogarsi col figlio riflettendo se è davvero lei a essere fuori dal mondo e irrazionalmente radicale e se tutto

l'orrore derivante dallo sfruttamento senza pietà e dal genocidio quotidiano (così lo chiama) del regno animale che ci sta tutto intorno sia solo una sua malata fantasia.

La seconda parte del libro è composta da una serie di commenti al libro stesso, fatti da studiosi (reali) di vari ambiti umanistici che - da punti di vista diversi - analizzano il pensiero e le opinioni di Elizabeth Costello (personaggio di fantasia, ma fino a un certo punto: appare chiaro che sia un alter ego letterario di Coetzee stesso).

Seppur alcuni commenti siano oltremodo noiosi, degni di un saggio antropologico (ho una certa idiosincrasia verso i saggi antropologici), la maggior parte sono interessanti punti di vista sull'ideologia animalista (moderata, diciamo così, o radicale) e sul post-modernismo del romanzo.

In generale è uno dei libri più banalmente intelligenti che abbia mai letto. L'utilizzo dell'alter ego letterario permette a Coetzee di affrontare l'argomento - il rapporto uomo-animale - esponendolo a punti di vista e considerazioni diametralmente opposti: tesi e controtesi, argomentazioni e controargomentazioni davvero mai banali. Alla fine da che parte penda l'autore non lo si capisce fino in fondo, e sostanzialmente non importa: conta solo l'aver fatto ragionare il lettore sulle ragioni dell'uno o dell'altro punto di vista. E averlo fatto riflettere sulle ragioni degli animali, sul rispetto a loro dovuto in quanto essere viventi pensanti, sul rapporto complesso e contorto che abbiamo nei loro confronti (e che ci fa spendere cifre spaventose per vezzeggiare i nostri adorati animali domestici mentre tutti i giorni compriamo trasformiamo o cuciniamo pezzi di altri animali - meno fortunati e meno coccolosi - nella più totale indifferenza e normalità).

E questi giganteschi punti etici, comunque la si pensi, ci penzolano sopra la testa come inquietanti spade di Damocle.

Dal punto di vista narrativo, la prima parte è scritta magnificamente; riuscitissima, in particolare, la scelta di utilizzare il tempo verbale al presente e la terza persona nelle descrizioni ambientali: accompagnata da uno stile secco e senza fronzoli, la costruzione sintattica così composta dona un ritmo serrato di straordinaria intensità al racconto (particolarità tipica anche di McCarthy, per dire).

Direi che tutto - l'idea strutturale, l'abilità narrativa dell'autore, la profondità culturale, la sovrapposizione fra realtà e finzione - fa sì che il mio giudizio estetico/letterario, inappellabile, propenda per le 5 stelle: la lettura a spizzichi e bocconi, dovuta sicuramente a una certa verbosa pomposità accademica sparsa qua e là che il mio inappellabile giudizio di cui sopra ha certamente colto - e non gradito fino in fondo - rigettando il tutto con le pause di lettura conseguenti, indicano tuttavia, più moderatamente, 4 stelle come giudizio equo e definitivo.

Ma rimane un grande libro. Da consigliare soprattutto ai carnivori impenitenti come me: fa sempre bene riflettere sbattendo il muso contro la cruda realtà. E contro le contraddizioni del nostro personale agire. E dedicato al sig. Giotto, che nel frattempo ronfava abbastanza indifferente a quello che leggevo (ma sono sicuro capisca benissimo le conclusioni a cui ero già arrivato di mio a riguardo).

Lisa Vegan says

I read this for my book club; I'm the one who suggested this book. I'd wanted to read it for many years. I had thought that it was a novel whose main character is an animal rights advocate. It's not and for me that was a disappointment.

It's mostly essays by other authors than the main author, referring back to Coetzee's pieces: Amy Gutmann, Marjorie Garber, Peter Singer, Wendy Doniger, and Barbara Smuts. Except for Singer's, which is a fiction piece, they're basically non-fiction pieces.

The author's portions are two fiction chapters/essays that make up one story. Short story? Novella? But not novel. They were written to be lectures. I'd say perhaps they'd be more interesting to listen to as lectures but I don't think for me they would be any better than reading them as I did.

I found most of the book dry and even boring at times, and definitely not what I'd expected. Philosophizing via a fiction piece could be interesting. Maybe I'd have found it interesting in the 1970s or 1980s when I was starting to think about animal rights issues. Now, I mostly found most of it irritating. I like thinking about these issues, and discussing them, but how they were presented in this book is not my style, and usually not my current way of thinking either.

The writing is fine, and my amusement at the Singer piece and enjoyment of the Smuts piece, particularly when she is talking about her dog, make this book okay. So 2 stars it is.

Now I'll have to read other reviews (and hope that my book club members like it better than I did) because I swear this book had high average ratings. Once again, could it be me, in this space and time?? Perhaps. If I'd known what it was before I started it, I might have enjoyed it more. Luckily, it's short, and while the print is small, the contents are not as dense as I'd feared. It's a quick read, just not a particularly fun one for me. Someone who read my library copy at some point (the book is old enough that it still has the attached slip where they used to stamp due dates) must have read it for school because there is a lot of underlining throughout the book. Kind of annoying, kind of interesting to see what someone else found important.
