



# **Beasts: What Animals Can Teach Us About the Origins of Good and Evil**

*Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson*

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**Beasts: What Animals Can Teach Us About the Origins of Good and Evil** Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson  
In his previous bestsellers, Masson has showed us that animals can teach us much about our own emotions—love (dogs), contentment (cats), and grief (elephants), among others. In *Beasts*, he demonstrates that the violence we perceive in the “wild” is a matter of projection.

Animals predators kill to survive, but animal aggression is not even remotely equivalent to the violence of mankind. Humans are the most violent animals to our own kind in existence. We lack what all other animals have: a check on the aggression that would destroy the species rather than serve it. In *Beasts*, Masson brings to life the richness of the animal world and strips away our misconceptions of the creatures we fear, offering a powerful and compelling look at our uniquely human propensity toward aggression.

## Beasts: What Animals Can Teach Us About the Origins of Good and Evil Details

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# From Reader Review Beasts: What Animals Can Teach Us About the Origins of Good and Evil for online ebook

## Karen Allidina says

This is a book that will make you think. Masson poses more questions than answers, in a format verging on stream of consciousness. Readers in search of a well-honed thesis will be disappointed.

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## Fatima says

A thought-provoking read. Although there were times where it felt like the author was guilt-tripping the reader into becoming a vegetarian.. The book remains nonetheless a must-read.

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## jeremy says

humanity has a rich (albeit morally and ethically bankrupt) tradition of distancing ourselves from the rest of the animal kingdom. collectively we fancy our own species far superior – in nearly every conceivable way – to our earth-bound brethren. the hierarchical conception that places man atop the animal kingdom has had disastrous consequences for all of us, as well as for the world we must inhabit. in his new book, *beasts: what animals can teach us about the origins of good and evil*, longtime animal rights advocate, ex-psychoanalyst, and author jeffrey moussaieff masson argues there is much that we can learn from other large-brained mammals about the lesser angels of our nature.

in considering our "mania" for hierarchy, masson highlights "our propensity to divide the world into 'us' and 'them'" as an explanatory cause for "our species' singular capacity for violence." he goes on, "in humans, hierarchy seems to involve more than basic needs and to entail attempts to exalt ourselves at the expense of someone else. the 'other' is deemed inferior, and we are not to feel any particular empathy or even sympathy for him. hierarchy allows us to engage in genocide when no other animal does." the moral superiority we feel towards others, especially animals, has led us to betray our own ignorance and prejudices. while masson decries our misconceptions regarding the supposed violent nature of mammals and other apex predators, he also highlights animal altruism in species such as vampire bats and gorillas.

despite our penchant for ascribing our baser tendencies to an animalistic nature (but seldom our more honorable or tender ones), the cruelty, exploitation, hatred, indifference, and violence that proliferates within our species is largely absent from non-human ones. throughout the past century, we have killed some 200 million of our fellow homo sapiens, maintaining that nature is somehow intrinsically violent itself – employing an erroneous justification in stark contrast to what observations of the natural world actually demonstrate. "no serious evidence supports the idea that other animals besides humans engage in mass killing of one another," masson writes. of the nearly 5,500 mammal species on our planet, 90 percent are herbivores – making the notion of nature being "red in tooth and claw" a fallacious one at best.

late in his intriguing book, masson confesses, "i write not as a scientist, out to prove some impregnable thesis, but as somebody who has observed something of great interest." his genuine concern for our aberrant behavior is both thoughtful and compelling. the underlying question within *beasts* is a straightforward one:

"what makes us so violent to one another (never mind to other species), and is there anything to be done about it?" masson points to many answers, most notably the introduction of agriculture and the domestication of animals, the latter of which has "perpetuated a culture of cruelty and abuse."

as with previous works in which he has explored the emotional lives of animals, masson's writing is easily accessible to both a general audience and those already familiar with the subject. with a personal, passionate, and sympathetic style, masson makes an imperative case for "taking the lives of animals seriously, seeing both where we surpass them (our ability to pass on knowledge cumulatively) and where they surpass us (their general lack of ill will for others)." *beasts* implores us to rethink our long-entrenched beliefs regarding the nature of non-human animals, in hopes that by more accurately perceiving the world around us, we may learn to treat not only other species with greater kindness and compassion, but perhaps our own as well.

*if we acknowledge that the dark side of human nature exists, and if we can abolish the ugly aspects of the us/them distinction, the benefit for the human species would be incalculable. taking the lives of animals seriously, seeing both where we surpass them (our ability to pass on knowledge cumulatively) and where they surpass us (their general lack of ill will for others), could lead us to a better world.*

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### **Allie Cingi says**

Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson never disappoints. I read his books really slowly, because every paragraph is packed with information based on solid research and his wide expertise, all cross-pollinated to produce novel, eye-opening ideas - breezy, refreshing, inspiring, thought-provoking epiphanies! Plus - he writes beautifully, and is brimming with compassion. Why isn't this genius a household name??

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### **Jason says**

The 3 Stars is probably deceiving.

This book is far better than the 3 stars might let on, purely because it was very informational. But as far as readability goes, I found this book quite lacking.

This reads more like a university essay. And why wouldn't it? It's a book full of quotations and citing. It's about facts upon facts, mingled with the author's own revelations and commentary. There's nothing wrong with that; however, I found the argument to be confusing at times, and I sometimes lost track of what point the author was trying to make.

That being said, it was a wonderful and informational read, and I'd recommend it. I think everyone must strive to read non-fiction books once in a while just to learn something real and new. Fiction certainly teaches us things, but so can non-fiction, which often gets overshadowed. I really enjoyed the informational bits about the animals, and I learned a lot of things I never knew about them. That's the whole purpose of this book - to make you see other living beings (humans included) in a new light. In that way, it worked.

The argument could have been a little more coherent, but all in all, I enjoyed that I learned new things here. If you don't read this book, challenge yourself to go out and read something similar. It pays off to broaden one's knowledge.

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## **Maxine says**

We humans are just one of many apex predators, many of whom we compare our bad behaviour to – wolves, great cats, apes. Yet, none of these other animals come anywhere close to our level of violence. Just in the 20th century alone, we humans slaughtered more than 200 million of our own species. And this is nothing compared to the number of other species we have killed even to the point of extinction sometimes for food, sometimes for utility and/or profit, sometimes for fun and even, occasionally sometimes for revenge. When it comes to violence, we are in a class all our own.

We often hear that this urge to kill is written in our genes, that we have always shown this disposition for violence right back to our hunter gatherer forebears. Author and animal behaviourist Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson disagrees. In this book, he suggests that, in fact, we haven't always been the violent creatures we are today and that we have the ability to change if we choose to do so. As he points out, if it were true that we are predisposed to violence, then how to account for the many examples of people risking their own lives to help others, even people they don't know eg the people of Denmark during WWII who, almost as a whole, refused to hand over their Jewish citizens to the Nazis resulting in a survival rate of more than 90% of the 8000 Danish Jews. If, then, we are not naturally violent and it is very possible for us to learn to become more altruistic as a species, we can learn a lot about empathy and compassion by observing the behaviour of other apex predators.

Beasts is a fairly fast easy read but an interesting one. Masson avoids science speak to explain our behaviour and that of other species. At times, his descriptions become somewhat emotional as he describes for example what is done to bulls to make them behave as they do in bull fights. On the other hand, this did have the effect of making me, at least, feel shocked which I suspect was his intent. He also tends to anthropomorphize animals: cats are confused about why they play with their prey before killing it; a tiger deliberately stalks the man who injured it.

However, he also does a good job of showing how we demonize animals with very little evidence, but for our own purposes. We portray wolves and bears as mankillers when, in fact, there have been very few documented wolf or bear attacks on humans, certainly nowhere near the level of human attacks on wolves and bears. It is his contention that, if we learn to see other species as having the same sense of pain and the same desire to live as us, then perhaps we can learn, not only to coexist peacefully with them, but with each other.

I enjoyed this book. My guess, though, is that it will appeal to people who already share many of Masson's beliefs: vegans, Progressives, animal rights activists while those who disagree, hunters, farmers, etc will dislike it intensely. Personally, I'm not sure that it will, for example, change my eating habits but it certainly gave me food for thought.

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## **Jenny Boyce says**

<http://bookreviewsbyme2.wordpress.com...>

I was excited to read this book but found that once I started reading, I truly didn't like the way the author wrote and couldn't even finish the book.

The subject matter of this book is unique and interesting. The author takes a look at the behaviors of other large mammals and compares their behaviors to the behaviors of humans. The author then muses about how humans veered away from other mammals and why we assume we are superior as a species. I did enjoy the subject matter in this book. I found it interesting and unique, but I just couldn't take anything seriously because the authors writing style just ruined it for me.

*Do you remember back in grade school, how there was that one kid who thought they knew everything, talked constantly, and everyone despised? This author, and the way he writes, reminded me so much of that kid back in grade school.*

There is simply no other way for me to describe why this authors writing style annoyed me so much. There were a lot of times while I was reading this story that I found myself rolling my eyes and thinking to myself, "he just thinks he knows everything". I understand that the author is surely well qualified to be writing this book (or at least I hope that he is), but the way that he writes in the story makes it seem almost as if he is talking down on the reader.

Although I enjoyed the potential that this book had in regards to a unique topic, I just couldn't get passed the authors annoying writing style, making it a challenge for me to read this book.

I received this book for review purposes via NetGalley.

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## **Rebecca says**

The stimulus for writing this book was Masson's objection to emotive language used against animals, especially in comparison with humans: acting "beastly" or "like an animal," or derogatory names like "cow" or "pigs." On the contrary, we are the only species that kills arbitrarily – when we are not being threatened, and when we do not need the other creature for food. Masson also argues that humans are the only species to employ cruelty, genocide, slavery and torture. As 'bystander' laws and the Kitty Genovese case suggest, we can exhibit an alarming indifference to suffering.

Humans are so used to being a top-level predator that it is especially jarring when we find ourselves in situations where we are prey. The most memorable section of the book for me was the story of a woman who was attacked by a crocodile in 1985 and barely survived. Part of what Masson is trying to achieve here is an interrogation of whether human stories are inherently more valuable than animals'. Seeing animals as an 'other' or as a lower part of a hierarchy is unhelpful. Fear and hatred of sharks, wolves and bears, for instance, has always led to unwonted persecution.

What about unprovoked animal attacks? Masson suggests that increased aggression might be attributed to

trauma – that animals are living with PTSD, caused by human treatment. He also attempts to counter (or at least temper) contradictory examples such as chimpanzees making war, orcas hunting for the sheer playfulness of it, or tigers seeming to kill humans as ‘revenge.’ He feels there’s always an explanation behind these acts, relating to instinct or evolution; it’s never just arbitrary cruelty. I felt he did not wholly explain these counterarguments away, though; whether this is a mark of his nuanced understanding or a flaw in his rhetoric, I can’t be sure.

Masson also introduces examples of animal altruism that cannot be explained away by evolution; sometimes it appears that animals, too, can perform random acts of kindness. “It would almost seem that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who see the world filled with a billion acts of kindness, and those who do not,” he remarks. You might imagine those two camps being represented by the works of Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Dawkins. (However, Masson does not accept the premise of recent works by Steven Pinker, who believes human violence has greatly decreased.)

The author’s bias is clear: he’s a vegan animal-lover. (He also has an extremely interesting biography: he taught Sanskrit in Alberta, and was once projects director for the Freud Archives!) However, he has no veterinary or evolutionary biology background, as one might expect. He’s also not the best writer, occasionally relying too heavily on other authors’ opinions and words. I enjoyed this book well enough, but didn’t necessarily find it a helpful synthesis of all the topics covered. Moreover, the appendices (“Human Traits Unique to Us,” “Human Universals,” etc.) struck me as both odd and reductive. **(2.5 stars)**

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### Natalie Carey says

Okay. I did enjoy this, but I have a few ranty things to say about it.

First, I do think more people should read this. I went into this book already thinking that humans are selfish, rotten, only concerned with themselves, and that non-human creatures are totally better than humans. So I already knew majority of the points made in this book, but I think it would be quite eye-opening to most people (though, these people are likely not the ones to pick this up).

However, this wasn't written very well. The transitions were pretty abrupt, and I felt as though he relied on too many sources, quotes, and other books people have already written on some of these topics. And maybe this was intended to be something of a review (with Masson's addition of his overbearing opinion of the destruction of the animal world -which is something I agree with and still felt he was beating me over the head with it)...

Overall though, I do think more people should read this, and I completely agree that humans should be much more conscious of our actions and the ramifications - we aren't the only ones living on this planet, nor do we deserve to be here any more than any other species.

I do have some differing opinions from Masson as well, since I come from a background of biology, particularly when it come to the fundamentals of evolution and our history as a species. He comments about agriculture and domestication as the greatest mistakes human kind has made, and I agree when it comes to the atrocities we've committed on other species (creatures and plants alike - what we do to the environment isn't mentioned in this, by the way), but I disagree with his argument. Our species at the time was using the tools and abilities it had at the time to ensure its survival, and as it happens, they were successful. That's part of evolution, and it is what every other species does too. Every animal uses what attributes it was born with,

to survive as long as it can - those that make it to reproductive age and give rise to the next generation, passing on heritable traits, are actually what is survival of the fittest. Humans had already evolved to be intelligent enough to ensure their survival as a species via agriculture and domestication. That wasn't necessarily wrong then, but what we do now, by killing for pleasure and sport, etc., is wrong.

Also, he didn't really offer much by way of 'what animals can teach us about the ORIGINS of good and evil,' just that we don't know where our evilness, cruelty, etc., came from because we share it with no other species (with the concession of a few *rare* instances of animal-on-animal violence). So that was lackluster...

He also spoke about what animals are feeling, many times over. You/We can never truly know what any other being (animals OR humans) is thinking or feeling, ever. And I do understand that we can make some pretty accurate educated guesses, but he spoke as if he knew without a shadow of a doubt what animals feel and think. Knock it off.

Now for some more nit-picky gripes. I didn't like his frequent use of the word design. Animals were designed to .... Animals weren't designed to .... Humans weren't designed to .... It just rubbed me the wrong way, and felt so completely out of place in a book like this. I don't know. I don't have any real argument about it, but it stuck out like a sore thumb.

And something more pedantic: the appendices at the end that are lists of traits specific to humans, etc. They're ALMOST alphabetical, but there are some things in the list that aren't. Either alphabetize it or don't, but it looks clearly intentionally alphabetized, with like 10 items completely out of place. Who edited this and thought that was okay???

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### **Julie says**

I thought this book would be an interesting study of animal behavior. It's not. The author talks about the animals thoughts and desires as well as human thoughts and desires. Is it backed by studies? No. Years of observations? No. It's just grand statements and loosely connected examples. I stopped after the first chapter because I just didn't want to waste my time reading more musings about what humans believe and animals desire. By the way, the author missed the mark with me big time. Apparently the whole of human kind isn't aware they other animals consider us prey...we're completely unaware we are food to them. Really? There's evidence that would suggest otherwise.

If the author is that wrong about humans, perhaps he's equally wrong about animals.

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### **Vince Darcangelo says**

<http://ensuingchapters.com/2014/04/17...>

Review: Beasts

Posted on April 17, 2014

## Beasts: What Animals Can Teach Us About the Origins of Good and Evil

Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson

I've long struggled with the language people use when discussing animals. The idea of getting your cat or dog "fixed," for example, is simply moronic. There's nothing broken with our animals' reproductive systems. The problem is that they're working too good!

That's like removing the battery from a working clock and saying you've fixed it.

It's not that controlling the reproductive habits of our companion animals is a bad idea. Of course I'm a proponent of spaying and neutering—particularly TNR outreach programs that are doing amazing work throughout the world.

But as a writer I'm also a supporter of the rhyme and reason—the simple logic, if you will—of language. I can accept the phrase "put to sleep" as a euphemism for mercy killing, but "fixed"?

A similar misnomer—and one deserving of far more vehemence—concerns the use of animal language to describe acts of human cruelty. Killers and rapists are commonly referred to as "beasts," "brutes" or, in the parlance of Hollywood noir, "you filthy animal."

True, the animal kingdom is a violent world, but even the worst behavior is driven by the need to sate appetites, not for the sake of sadism. At an animal shelter where I worked, we once took in more than two dozen Australian shepherds from a puppy mill in Nebraska. Most of the puppies could be rescued. We were able to socialize, rehabilitate and adopt them out to loving homes.

A handful of others were too sick, malnourished or traumatized to recover and didn't respond to medical treatment or therapy. They were euthanized, and it was an act of kindness.

There were a few others dogs, however, who had been abused to the point of aggression—dogs with such an inbred fear of people that they couldn't improve under the best behavior mod training we had to offer.

There was one dog in particular who broke my heart. His life was a perpetual state of fight, flight or freeze—he was unable to flee and freezing wasn't in his nature. He filled with terrified rage anytime someone approached his kennel, even for feedings. He would fling his body from wall to wall and bash his head against the cage—climbing, jumping, snarling.

When it came time to euthanize him, it took four of us, a net and two vials of tranquilizer to get him sedated. The desperate, implacable fear in his eyes was disarming, and it still troubles me to think of the living conditions and daily abuse that had terrified him so. I hope I never again have to see a creature that afraid.

As we carried his unconscious body to the kill room, I wished that we were injecting toxins into the fucker who ran the puppy mill rather than the dog. It pained me to destroy that animal, but I would have had no guilt or second thoughts of putting that guy to sleep.

Like Dexter, I wanted him plastic-wrapped on my table.

I wiped my eyes after the dog died, and it's not hyperbole when I say I wouldn't have shed a single tear if I'd delivered the needle to the mill owner who did this to these dogs.

That's why I find it odd that when someone commits a heinous act, it is referred to as "animalistic" or "inhumane." I've never known a dog that would abuse people the way puppy mill workers mistreat and exploit animals for profit. Unlike the FBI, animal control doesn't need a profiler to understand the brutality of its species.

And dog fighting? As far as I can tell, we humans are alone in training and forcing other species to fight to the death for our entertainment.

No, I would say the likes of Michael Vick aren't "animals," "beasts" or less than human. To borrow from Nietzsche, I would say they are human, all too human.

Which brings me to *Beasts: What Animals Can Teach Us About the Origins of Good and Evil*, by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, a somewhat academic, somewhat philosophical and all-around interesting book about animals and morality.

Like his previous books, such as *Dogs Never Lie About Love* and *When Elephants Weep*, Masson studies the emotional behavior of animals (such as love, grief and contentment) and searches for lessons that can be applied to humans. In *Beasts*, he is looking at anger and aggression.

The centerpiece of his argument is concise as it is uncomfortable: Humans and orcas have the most complex brains in history, yet of these two, only humans kill members of their own species.

A poignant fact—and an excellent point of entry for a discussion on human behavior. Masson gives us much to think about as he lays out his argument; however, he oversteps from argument to advocacy in places, building off conclusions that seem far from settled.

I'm in agreement with Masson that humans are capable of and culpable for the greatest violence against our own species in the animal kingdom. We even get bonus marks for creativity. Predator drones, IEDs, beheadings, shoe bombs. Who would think to torture and kill other sentient beings in the absurdly original manner that we do?

However, Masson paints a pastoral of nature without humans, and this idyllic view makes it difficult to buy into the author's argument. I'm reminded of the episode of *Family Guy* in which Death goes on a date with Amy, the Pollyannaish pet-shop girl whose Disney-fied view of nature causes Death to "terminate" their relationship.

Masson has a complex and sophisticated view of nature, but his conclusions appear to be based more on opinion than evidence. Still, it's a compelling commentary, and I would recommend it for anyone interested in animals and nature.

I agree that we could learn much about social behavior from animals, but I would take Masson's conclusions as part of an ongoing discussion and an invitation to further research.

And for further reading, I would also suggest the magnificent and thought-provoking article by James McWilliams, "Loving Animals to Death," in the current *American Scholar*.

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## **Bobby says**

While this was not as strong of a book as the author's *When Elephants Weep*, it was still, as expected, a very interesting read. Also, it is a fairly easy read, not too technical for lay persons like myself.

The main point of the book is that while we as a species often think of ourselves as superior to mere animals, we often engage in evil acts that, by and large, no one else in the animal kingdom engages in. In fact, we've had to invent words for many of our acts, words/acts like genocide, murder, and torture. A close inspection of the animal kingdom shows that actions of this sort are unique to humans, therefore, perhaps we're not as superior as we'd like to think!

A couple of quotes from late in the book to sum up Masson's point(s), the first from biologist J.B.S. Haldane: "kindness to human beings and to animals usually go together. Those who ignore suffering in animals find it easier to ignore human suffering." This second quote is from Masson himself: "We would, in my ideal world (and why not strive for one?), stop eating animals, stop experimenting on them, stop wearing them, stop exploiting them in any way, and certainly stop comparing them to us negatively." While *Beasts* was not Masson's best book ever, it is still inspiring and, personally, has inspired me to make a more positive "footprint" in terms of these "beasts" we share the planet with.

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## **Isobel Hickey says**

Reads as though it was written in the midst of a three month fever dream. At times incoherent, impossibly organized, & impossibly precocious. Militant vegan propaganda disguised as a somewhat heartwarming, somewhat bleak, somewhat fabricated, philosophy rant. Masson does himself no favors with this, and can't really seem to present himself well at all. I loved the first ten pages but after breaching them I was quickly confronted by his increasingly acrid "hot takes" about animal biology, all of which left a sour taste in my mouth. Only worthwhile part past that point was the one where he took a shit on Sigmund Freud.

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## **Book says**

*Beasts: What Animals Can Teach Us About the Origins of Good and Evil* by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson

"Beasts" is a fascinating look at human nature and what animals can teach us about living in harmony. The self-proclaimed man of at least four lives, including accomplished author Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, shares his current knowledge and love of the study of animal emotions. He takes us on wonderful ride that enlightens and challenges us to look at animals and eventually ourselves in a different light. This provocative 225-page book includes the following twelve chapters: 1. Crocodiles and Us, 2. "The Other", 3. Conformity, 4. Cruelty, 5. War, 6. Killing, 7. Hatred, 8. Exploitation, 9. Indifference, 10. Wolves, 11. Kindness?, and 12. A Billion Acts of Kindness.

Positives:

1. Engaging, passionate and well written book that is accessible to the masses.
2. A fascinating topic in the hands of someone who knows and has passion for the topic. There is warmth and a philosophical air about this book.
3. Perhaps the strongest positive of this book. Masson is not afraid to challenge intellectuals (Diamond and

Pinker, to name a popular few), readers to think and argues quite convincingly that uncontrolled aggression or violence to our own kind is a uniquely human trait.

4. Interesting observations throughout the book. You may not agree with them all but it will make you think and that's what produces conversations worth having.

5. Great facts to know and share with friends. "Crocodiles have the hardest known bite force on earth. Their jaw pressure is at least five times that of the largest lion. And whereas another alpha predator, the orca—the so-called killer whale—has never killed a human in the wild, crocodiles do, even if not often."

6. The chapter on "The Other" is worth the price of admission. Consider the following enlightening paragraph, "Humans seem to have a mania for hierarchy, which inevitably signals the wish to dominate another. In this hierarchy we judge someone or some other being to be inferior and hence ultimately dispensable. Extermination starts with finding differences. In searching for our species's singular capacity for violence, the first candidate for an explanation is our propensity to divide the world into "us" and 'them.'"

7. The book does a wonderful job of debunking myths. "Yet many people think of wolves as vicious predators, willing to attack animals other than food prey. In fact, wolves are not like this at all. When forced into a dangerous encounter, they take the first opportunity to leave. That same response can be seen in dogs. Consider, for a moment, the implication of the descendants of wolves, namely dogs, behaving more humanely than humans."

8. Enlightening. How humans find ways to divide us. "Possibly the most persistent distinction humans make, right after the one between ourselves and other animals, revolves around religion. Religious loyalties are intimately connected to war, as many authors have noted. In the sense of religion being a specific ideology, we can claim that all wars are religious wars. We are fighting people who believe different things, worship different gods, and refuse to recognize that there can be only one true religion (mine) and that all others (yours, for example) are false. All beliefs that are not part of the one true religion are false beliefs. All behavior not dictated by that religion is heresy. Ideology is often mere window dressing to hide avarice for control and access to resources."

9. Excellent examples of human violence. "The central issue of the American Civil War, which cost nearly a million lives, was certainly slavery. Nearly four million people in the United States were enslaved when the war began in 1861, representing one third of the population of the South. The matter came to a head in 1857 with the Supreme Court decision in Dred Scott v. Sandford. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney's opinion said that slaves were "so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." In other words, a slave was the ultimate "other" and was thus declared inferior, for inherent to the concept of slavery was the right to abuse anyone labeled as a slave."

10. Mass killings in perspective. "If there is one insight I feel a reader should take away from this book, it is that no serious evidence supports the idea that other animals besides humans engage in mass killing of one another."

11. Human nature in perspective. "It is more useful to realize that there is no such thing as a single human nature, and that this amazing diversity of behavior is an important part of what it means to be human."

12. Animal societies. "For an elephant to be an elephant is to conform to elephant society. For humans, however, to be human can sometimes mean to struggle against what we have been taught to believe. Orwell knew that it was sometimes important to fight against the very beliefs one was raised with. Anything less has a tendency to lead to the worst forms of nationalism. 'Us' versus 'them' is not in our genes. It is something we learn."

13. An interesting theory on how cruelty emerged. "So I would add to Diamond's list of the disadvantages of agriculture that the domestication of animals gave early humans far too much room to exercise cruelty. When we were hunter-gatherers, we simply killed an animal. There was no additional cruelty involved beyond that of the killing itself. It was hard enough to catch an animal. But when animals were kept penned, corralled, and fenced—in other words, when they were no longer free beings, the hunting of whom could be dangerous to humans—it made it easier for humans to ignore the true nature of the animal. I am sure there are many

people who do not wish to be cruel but who nonetheless eat meat. But domestication of animals fed our worst instincts, or perhaps even created them in the first place.”

14. Warfare in perspective. “Warfare and genocide are unique to humans. However, it is not only warfare and genocide but also the notion of murdering fellow humans—even those who belong to the same clan, tribe, or nation—that takes much of human behavior out of the animal realm altogether.”

15. Masson does a great job of showing where we differ and where resemble other animals. “Chimpanzees, gorillas, and bonobos are closely related to one another genetically, yet the three differ completely in their behavior. Gorillas and bonobos are, by and large, peaceful; they also are primarily vegetarian. Bonobos practice a form of Gandhian nonviolence. The females form coalitions and are able to “take back the night” from any male foolish enough to entertain violent thoughts against them.”

16. The cruelty of bullfighting. “Domesticated bulls are hardly fighting machines. They almost never fight each other, and when they do, it is for access to mating, and is almost always ritualized. The outcome rarely leaves the other male seriously injured. I do not know of a single authoritative account of two bulls spontaneously fighting to the death. As for domesticated bulls wanting to kill humans, this is propaganda from the bullfighting industry.”

17. Interesting look at animal behavior, a recurring theme. “As with most animals, the more we learn, the more we need to overturn old prejudices, biased views, misinformation, ignorance, and sheer stupidity...”

18. So are we good or evil at heart? Find out what Masson has to say.

19. A compelling plea for kindness and compassion to animals. “India sometimes has this effect on people. After all, it is the only country in the world in which kindness and compassion to animals is mentioned in the constitution itself. Given that Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism have at their very heart a deep belief in ahimsa—that is, doing no harm—it is good to see at least one country where altruism is considered the whole point of human existence.”

20. Excellent appendices, notes and a formal bibliography.

Negatives:

1. Steven Pinker was referred to as a right-wing intellectual, really?

2. I respectfully prefer the term evolved over designed.

3. The lack of use of visual materials: timelines, graphs, maps that would have added value to this excellent book.

In summary, what a provocative and fun book this was. Let me share one philosophical question of the book that has left an indelible mark, “How can it be so easy to convince one human of the inhumanity of another?” And that’s why I love to read. Is this book free of flaws? Of course not, it was written by a human after all but one who should be commended for giving readers something of value to talk about. I highly recommend it!

Further recommendations: “Why Elephants Weep” by the same author, “Eat Like You Care” by Gary Francione, “Beg: A Radical New Way of Regarding Animals” by Rory Freedman, “Farm Sanctuary” by Gene Baur, “Zoobiquity” by Barbara Natterson-Horowitz, “The 10,000 Year Explosion” by Gregory Cochran, “Before the Dawn” by Nicholas Wade, “Last Ape Standing” by Chip Walter, and “The Bonobo and the Atheist” by Frans de Waal.

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## **Joodith says**

Having read some of this author’s previous books, I bought this thinking it would be as interesting and thought-provoking as they had been. Unfortunately this is such dry reading it has not enchanted me the way

those others did....

The subject matter is interesting – that we humans can learn a great deal from animals. Masson tells us that it only humans who wage war, engage in mass killing, and use torture and slavery. We are the only species who are cruel, who kill for food, unnecessarily, who kill for pleasure and for vengeance. We are the only species who continually threaten the very survival of other species – and yet we use certain terms to describe human behaviour we find silly, distasteful or abhorrent – rat, pig, animal, worm, chicken, bird brain etc, etc. – the list is long. We also breed animals specifically for the end product whether it be fur, leather or food.

The book is divided into chapters each of which deals with a specific type of human behaviour – Conformity, Cruelty, War, Killing, Hatred etc, followed by almost thirty pages of various Appendices, Notes and Index. He has obviously used a lot of other authors' material in this book – not plagiarised, as every use is annotated, but still, he sprinkles them liberally throughout. He also uses quotes from literature to illustrate his various points, but there is no anecdotal evidence such as his own observation of animal behaviour which, I think, would have added life and colour to the book.

There are a number of inconsistencies, for example: Chapter 4 on Cruelty he states that there is "...no example of torture before the advent of warfare. Warfare.....began only about five thousand years ago...." Okay fine, but in the following paragraph we have: "Simply because it has been with us for the last ten thousand years...." Which is it?

As a long-time vegetarian and animal rights advocate I really thought this would be up my street; sadly it isn't as the author has used a rather bombastic and pompous tone, which made me feel that I was being preached at. It's a shame he didn't use the same tone as in "The Pig Who Sang to the Moon" or "When Elephants Weep", both of which, in my opinion, made the same point as "Beasts" but in a much more friendly manner. I doubt this book will attract readers who do not already think along these lines anyway – in a way he is preaching to the converted and not telling us anything we do not already know or think about.

Very disappointing.

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