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## Review: Only the Animals by Ceridwen Dovey

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### **Abstract**

Ceridwen Dovey, *Only the Animals*. Melbourne: Penguin 2014, pp248. ISBN 978-1-926428-58-1

Reviewed by Leigh Dale, University of Wollongong.

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Ceridwen Dovey's *Only the Animals* is a collection of ten short stories, each of which ends with the death of an animal. The first sentence of the back cover blurb reads, 'The souls of ten animals caught up in human conflicts over the last century tell their astonishing stories of life and death'; most are 'bit players' in stories already told, their voices amplified here. Thus the 'only' in the title is condemnatory, ironic, and elegiac as Dovey presents a new perspective on assumptions about animality and narrative point of view. Unusually, the title of each story signals the double ending – for example, 'Somewhere Along the Line the Pearl Would be Handed to Me: Soul of Mussel. Died 1941, United States of America'. This is the fifth story, the title of which uses a quote from Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Dovey's story is about a boy mussel or gang of boy mussels whose ecstatic flood of reproductive energy is itself engulfed by the bombing of Pearl Harbour. Ten times, these stories show us how an ending might be reached, and a more extended discussion of this book could usefully focus on how the very idea of cessation or finitude is engaged.

Dovey's spotlight is on the cultural and theoretical questions raised by the conjunction of death, animality, and the problem of telling stories. The other conceit that links the stories is the relationship between recursion and reading: in this book, it is implied that our retelling of stories is always a reading, and reading always implicitly a re-telling or re-animation. In this way, story-telling itself – even about death – is a way of staving off the equal silence of animal and death. For Susan McHugh, narrative is a 'zone of integration', because the 'indeterminacy' of stories is productive of new 'conditions of possibility' for ways of being (2). Just as the ambiguity and complexity of texts, particularly when coupled with innovations in narrative form, enable the identification of new modes of subjectivity, she suggests, so too do new critical

modes enable writers to shape their ambitions in new ways. What I see here is not so much a desire to explore this problematic as Dovey's desire to *interact* with theories of animal studies. If we think of writers interacting with theory, as being agents of theory rather than their stories being the *object* of theory, it becomes easier to understand where this collection of stories is positioned: as an intervention in the theorising of animal subjectivity through literary experimentation. I could verify Dovey's interests in theory via the brief bio at [ceridwendovey.com](http://ceridwendovey.com), which confirms that she has been a graduate student in social anthropology at NYU after taking a first degree from Harvard in the same field. But it is evident from the book, which is highly self-conscious. Each story has a list of sources, although unhappily these are given in a web document rather than being printed in the book (paper cost? 'corruption' of a work of fiction by four pages of references?). The sources, roughly a dozen for each story, consist of literary works; historical works, especially popular ones; and *Camel* and *Tortoise* from Reaktion's Animal series. Literary writers whose work is cited include Collette, Günter Grass, Franz Kafka, Jack Kerouac, Henry Lawson, Sylvia Plath, and Tom Stoppard.

At times these writers themselves become characters, that characterisation part of the exploration of the problematic of story-telling. The first story ends with Lawson exclaiming in pleasure, triumphantly announcing the ending of his now canonical story 'The Bush Undertaker'. Dovey depicts Lawson as a writer so excited by having thought of a resonant final sentence that he seems to miss the fact that the camel is experiencing a horrible death, a death quite as horrible as the deaths Lawson imagines. So here we have death, but also *envy* of Lawson by the camel for his capacity to tell a story, a resentment perhaps magnified by the fact that the camel had been omitted from Lawson's story in the first place. Dovey concludes *her* story by pointing out that there are other possible endings, and she proffers several. One is a quotation from an actual historical letter, already used in her story, written by a man who died of thirst soon after writing the letter. This man constitutes a kind of prefiguring or echo of the camel, who is thirsty although does not die of that thirst. Then there is this challenge: 'Oh, Mister Lawson, be careful. You're not the only one who can tell a good story about death in the wastelands' (13). If we are meant to believe that Dovey found the letter a more compelling work than Lawson's, there is a sense here also that she is challenging the authority of Lawson's

account of animal death, that she is challenging not only Lawson's position *as a writer* but his requisitioning of animals and death to stories which she suspects of having dealt inadequately with both topics.

In moments like these, the writing has the feel of criticism, or perhaps critique, not so much of the depiction of animals and the choices made by literary authors – Lawson in regard to his depiction of a fictional goanna, Collette in regard to her actual but also textual cat – but at the level of style. There is extensive quotation, in the manner of commentary; there is reformulation, reflection, interrogation, all under the signature of the animal asked to tell the story of their own death. The dolphin is the most critical of this conceit, the most self-reflexive, and funny:

So when I was first asked to tell my story, I thought, *Absolutely not*. But the brief became more interesting to me when it was suggested I might think about a human writer who meant something to me, and let my thoughts of him or her infuse whatever I decided to say. (204)

And there it is: the taking up of McHugh's challenge, an exploration of that 'zone of integration', but more particularly, opening out the ways in which the persona of the animal (not the writer) inflects the story-telling of the animal (not the writer).

At one level I have to give a lot of credit to a book that had me wondering whether my sister's late border collie was a Presbyterian. At another, that I should briefly entertain this question shows the problem, the leap of faith, demanded by any representations of animal interiority. Of course every narrative act is an act of the imagination: even the most careful biographer of a living human subject, having the accuracy of their words confirmed, must surely wonder whether their own story displaced or at least reformatted the experience being described. So on what basis do I question Dovey's implicit assertion that camels are Muslims, made when the camel narrator of her first story, 'The Bones: Soul of Camel: Died 1892, Australia' struggles to face Mecca? It can only be because I believe systems of religion to be artefacts of human culture rather than expressions of absolute truths, and thus I found this moment jarringly implausible. Perhaps I felt less persuaded by a story that took me into 'The Bush Undertaker' than the mainly European literary works with which I am less familiar. As it happens, Lawson's home town was Gulgong, where my sister lives and where I began to draft

this review. And because I was gazing at her back yard when I was writing, and because Ky the (Presbyterian?) dog is buried in the corner, that brought him to mind. But my interest in the mismatch between Dovey's story and my imagined world of Lawson's imagination signals that I have asked the wrong question. I have asked the question of the lay reader, that of authenticity, usually framed as 'How real is this?' This is not a question in which Dovey is interested.

Dovey's stories are about narrative form and animal subjectivity. Whilst she deals with some 'famous' animals she also invents some marvellous creatures – the mussel already mentioned, effusively sensual, channelling Jack Kerouac; a dolphin who writes a letter to Sylvia Plath. In the case of the Lawson story, the camel is an invention. This raised another question for me: Lawson's own story has a wonderful goanna who lurks on the edges of the events, who is menacing and enigmatic. Why not go with the goanna, I cannot help wondering, although the goanna *is* in Dovey's story, and indeed the camel is shot by mistake, the intended victim having been the goanna. I like goannas, and when one got into our lounge room via the chimney I thought it was wonderful. The goanna, that is, not the getting in, although the getting out was more difficult: my Dad negotiated the situation pretty well, catching the frightened and angry creature with his bare hands and putting it out the front door. Which I mention because Dad has just died and of course with the camel dying and me being in Gulgong reading about animal death and looking at Ky's now unmarked grave it all seemed to come together, even if it did not make sense.

The ostensible question posed by Dovey's volume as a whole is this: what differences do animal perspectives make to stories? But buried in the decision to focus on story-telling, literary texts, and the problem of endings, implicitly the larger question is this: what differences can style make to the way in which we think about animal death? So, with that question in mind, can I agree with other readers that this is 'remarkable', 'dazzling', 'audacious', 'walking a high wire without a net'. Does *Only the Animals* make 'much contemporary fiction seem stodgy and grey', as the reviews quoted on [ceridwendovey.com](http://ceridwendovey.com) have it? I found the writing intellectually playful, prismatic, but not especially poetic. I did not find myself underlining the deft phrase or brilliant image, so much as puzzling over the premises of voice and representation opened out by these stories. I could not help comparing this book with Sonya Hartnett's tribute to narrative animals in *The Silver Donkey*, a novel which reflects on stories and myths and death in a more

poetic way. Dovey's much more obviously intellectualised writing has its own deep attractions, and is likely to generate more of the kind of theorising and reflection from which it springs and to which it speaks. The book is brave in flirting with two dangers, the obvious one being the decision to insist that readers focus their attention on form by daring to give away the ending. The second question is whether the decision to give a mussel the voice of Jack Kerouac really does work to focus our attention on animal death. But Dovey, it seems, has got there first in thinking about this: the tortoise who converses with Tolstoy and Woolf reports of the latter that 'She sensed that I did not like it when the tone veered towards the ironic, tongue-in-cheek style that humans seem to adopt automatically when writing from the perspective of an animal' (133). Abhorrent as it might be, style, this book suggests, does matter, if we are to draw attention to animal deaths.

## Works Cited

McHugh, Susan. *Animal Stories: Narrating across Species Lines*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.