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[Review] David Brooks, *The Grass Library*. Brandl and Scheslinger, 2019. 223pp

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Abstract

The *Grass Library* constitutes its own genre – a memoir of embodied humans and animals who write themselves not quite equally into the text – the nonhuman takes precedence. On the cover, fittingly, the human is an absence although there is evidence in the background, full bookshelves and a water bowl lovingly placed on a window shelf. In the foreground is one of the principal subjects, an assertive presence who gazes directly at the viewer with sheep-openness and beauty. Brooks mentions an antiquarian library elsewhere that had been subjected to ‘the scrutiny of grass’ (65). This book too has been scrutinised by grass, by nonhuman ways of being, by their narratives and their desires. If this book was originally conceptualised as part of a project ‘exposing animal cruelty’ (16) it is also a celebration of transpecies love and of living together. It is a book about writing ethically about animals, and what the process of writing reveals.

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Brooks writes lyrically of the animals who live with him and his partner, T. Even when they travel to Slovenia to visit T’s family the narrative does not limit itself to human concerns but centrally includes the biography of Bobbi, a beloved dog. The whole memoir conveys this expanded vision and the richness of human lives when nonhuman animals are democratically included. This *modus vivendi* is conscious, ethical and entirely without sentimentality. *The Grass Library* is a substantial foil to JM Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*. The latter engages with issues that emerge in the human-animal interface, but it neglects to represent an actual animal or a human-animal relationship in Costello’s world. *The Grass Library*, on the other hand, is populated (for want of a more appropriate word) by dogs, sheep, a goat passing through, rats and cicadas. The

text seamlessly includes debates about animal being, rights, sensibilities, and human practices but these debates are filtered through the lives of animals whom we as readers come to know by name and character.

Brooks' writing is a treasure chest of ideas, images, anecdotes. This book necessitates slow reading. The chapter on 'Herd Music', for example, opens up the issue of the trembling of Charlie, the fox terrier cross, and whether it relates to 'dusk anxiety'. In humans this anxiety can be traced genetically to the primitive anticipation of evening and the dangers of night as they headed off for the sanctuary of the cave; in alpacas, too, it spells fear of the predator. (Eugène Marais, author of *The Soul of the Ape* (1969), noticed this anxiety in chacma baboons with whom he lived and whom he observed in the early twentieth century, calling it 'hesperian depression'.) Brooks does not shy away from the ethical choices that face humans when we live openly with animals: castration, euthanasia, to name significant ones. There are other difficulties: the repercussions of an animal's history of abuse, the horror of a dog attacking Charlie, and what to do about a resident rat in their Blue Mountain home. In telling of the careful schemes to humanely relocate this rat, humour prevails as human efforts fail repeatedly due to the rat outwitting their strategems. Sheep presence loops through *The Grass Library*, grounding all the discussion in animal biographies – their stories of fields, being at home, the addition of a new member to the small herd, the introduction of Orpheus Pumpkin (named grandly and affectionately at once). So often the sheep confound human expectations, even as Brooks constantly examines his relationship with them. They assert their own wishes, and direct their own narratives as far as they are able within the geographical constraints of the farm.

Brooks' self-reflexivity defamiliarises many aspects of being open to animals, language being one of them. He calls attention to expressions which naturalise or condone the abuse of animals like 'killing two birds with one stone' (24), then reviews the cliché of 'the Elephant in the Room' by supplanting this grey bulkiness with an ever-present 'Human in the room, a very large Human [with] many faces, many voices, many idioms' (24), a critical 'it' who levels the charge of anthropomorphism when we regard animals as being capable of feeling or expressing emotions. Scientific objectivity is impossible, Brooks argues, in response to animal

behaviourism, noting the ‘intellectual violence’ (26) of the very term ‘animal’ (which, we use strategically, as Brooks does, ‘so as not to erase’ (27)). The chapter ends with mist from the mountains covering the farm and its creatures as well as, by implication, the ideas that the ‘Human in the room’ holds dear.

The image of the fence recurs – the real fences on the farm that need tending and fixing, and symbolic fences: the species barrier (so-called) which is like a fence (53), or a ‘bewilderment of fences’ (67) set there by historical forces. Now, as a writer and a reader who has ‘gone to the side of the animal’ (68), looking through the fence as it were, Brooks registers how many novels have apparently sympathetic characters represented as prolific and thoughtless meat-eaters, or as cruel to animals in other unremarked ways.

If this book asks us to examine our relationships with animals and to be aware of their life stories it also proffers fitting words for human-animal connections. ‘Gift’ is such a word, for that space that opens up between human and animal without demands on either side – a serene openness and acceptance (210). The photographs proffer such gifts: the animals are quiet, even meditative, open to being viewed – not constantly active as wildlife documentaries so often depict their lives. Perhaps the saddest photograph is of the very still, drowned duckling. Many of her siblings drowned too, victims apparently of their parents’ inexperience. They inspire Brooks to think about the limitations of language as he is assailed by a ‘deep, inexpressible sadness’ which is ‘much older than language’ (131).

The Grass Library reaches to such feelings that we don’t usually name, as we humans are ushered out of the room and beyond fences to an embodied animal-connection with creatures who live their stories, if we can only appreciate them and write them