



The Lives of Animals (The University Center for Human Values Series)

By J. M. Coetzee, Marjorie Garber, Peter Singer, Wendy Doniger, Barbara Smuts

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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.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The audience of the 1997-98 Tanner Lectures at Princeton probably expected South African novelist Coetzee to deliver a pair of formal essays similar to those on censorship he presented in *Giving Offence*. Instead, he gave his listeners fiction: a philosophical narrative about an imaginary feminist novelist, Elizabeth Costello, and the lectures she reads at the fictional Appleton College on the subject of animal rights. Platonic in structure and coolly tight-lipped in style, Coetzee's two stories, "The Philosophers and the Animals" and "The Poets and the Animals," mirror the sometimes acrimonious exchanges in academic debate. While Coetzee is on Costello's side, he does not make her infallible; she is not only uncompromising and sometimes rude, but also an extremist in her antirationalism and an occasionally muddled reasoner. The Appleton professors score intellectual points off her even as she implores them to open their hearts to animals. Coetzee's fictional gambit makes it awkward for the real-life scholars who respond to him in the ultimate section of the book, "Reflections." The criticisms of literary critic Marjorie Garber, bioethicist Peter Singer, religious scholar Wendy Doniger and primatologist Barbara Smuts seem redundant after the overdetermined self-criticism of the novel.

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From Kirkus Reviews

Fluent, challenging lectures on the ethics that shape the human-animal relationship, from South African novelist and essayist Coetzee (*The Master of Petersburg*, 1994, etc.). Princeton's Tanner Lectures are usually philosophical essays exploring human values. Here Coetzee subverts that formula by shaping his talks into fictional lectures given by an elderly novelist, Elizabeth Costello, on ``an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of": our treatment of animals. It is now an old and troubling notion, this analogy between the death camps and the meat business, but it is compelling for Costello: she is troubled by our willed ignorance of the past and present existence of slaughterhouses, the sickness of soul that denies any creature the sensation of being alive, our poverty of sympathetic imagination. ``The horror is that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims . . . They do not say 'How would it be if I were burning?' . . . In other words, they closed their hearts." Coetzee is obviously aware of the potential noxiousness of this terrain (the poet Abraham Stern scorns Costello's use of the analogy: ``You misunderstand the nature of likenesses; I would even say you misunderstand willfully, to the point of blasphemy"), and he uses it with provocative intent. Self-evident, though, is our collective failure of nerve (Thomas Aquinas through Descartes and Kant to today) to unleash ``the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another." Perhaps, Coetzee implies, rational thought, lagging behind sympathy, will follow its lead if powerful fictions and images can trigger our fellow feelings. Coetzee takes no prisoners; there is always suffering on the road to salvation. That includes Costello's painful relationship with her son, a terrain so emotionally arid it makes the skin crawl. Included are four commentaries by literary theorist Marjorie Garber, philosopher Peter Singer, religious scholar Wendy Doniger, and primatologist Barbara Smuts that add touchwood, and a measure of windiness, to Coetzee's ethical tinderbox. -- *Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Review

J.M. Coetzee, Winner of the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature

"*The Lives of Animals* is a moral argument within a fictional framework. . . . But fiction has the power to disturb and inspire strong emotions, and this book, thoughtfully argued and committed, is certainly a case in

point."--**Maren Meinhardt**, *Times Literary Supplement*

"[A] beautifully constructed, troubling, provocative book which resonates in the mind and heart long after you've turned the last page."--**Helen Kaye**, *The Jerusalem Post*

"If Coetzee . . . were an animal, he would be a fox-quick, aloof and crafty. . . . [A]nimal rights and ethical vegetarianism are natural subjects for him. The debate about them turns on questions of suffering, something to which Coetzee's sensorium is pitched with particular keenness."--**Benjamin Kunkel**, *The Nation*

"The audience of the 1997-98 Tanner Lectures at Princeton probably expected South African novelist Coetzee to deliver a pair of formal essays. . . . Instead, he gave his listeners fiction: a philosophical narrative about an imaginary feminist novelist . . . and the lectures she reads at the fictional Appleton College."--**Publishers Weekly**

"For Coetzee fans and others interested in the links between philosophy, reason, and the rights of nonhumans."--**Booklist**

"Fluent, challenging lectures on the ethics that shape the human-animal relationship. . . . Coetzee takes no prisoners. . . . [An] ethical tinderbox."--**Kirkus Reviews**

"An accessible, thought-provoking introduction to the issues surrounding animal rights."--**Adam Lively**, *The Sunday Telegraph*

"Coetzee's dense, witty hybrid is very welcome; . . . [he] brings a rich array of themes into play, including the differences between animals and humans, the nature of philosophy and poetry, the purpose of a university, the role of a reason and the emotions in moral deliberation."--**Ben Rogers**, *Financial Times*

"*The Lives of Animals* is a stimulating and worrying book. It is hard to imagine anyone coming away from it without a new perspective on our relation not only to animals but to the natural world in general, and, indeed, to ourselves."--**John Banville**, *The Irish Times*

"I found *The Lives of Animals* a genuinely troubling book. . . . I imagine that Coetzee feels the force of almost all the ideas and emotions that his characters express. He is working and living at the edge of our moral sensibilities about animals."--**Ian Hacking**, *The New York Review of Books*

"There is a general message that resonates throughout this novella, and one that I found quite compelling. It is that we often assess our relationships with animals based on whether they have human-like mental status, like rationality or self-consciousness, and if they don't, then we feel justified in using them as objects . . . I found the book deeply disturbing . . . [It] offers a passionate and compelling look at one side of the debate."--**Asif A. Ghazanfar**, *Nature Neuroscience*

"A little-known but brilliant tour de force. . . . It's the most artful, thoughtful piece of writing I've come across on the subject of animal rights."--**Marni Jackson**, *The Globe and Mail*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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