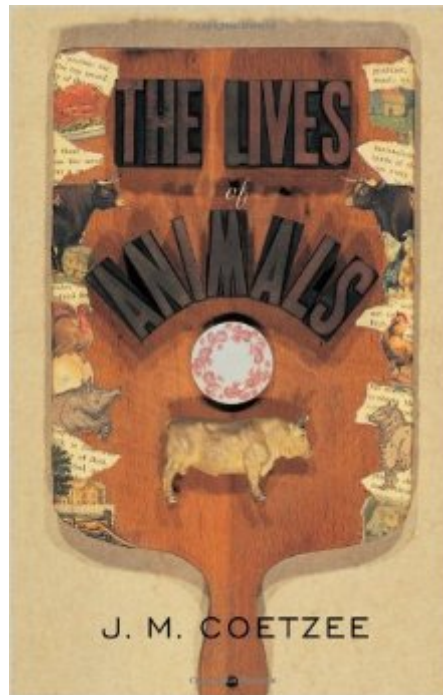


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The Lives Of Animals (The University Center For Human Values Series)



Synopsis

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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Customer Reviews

J. M. Coetzee is known for his critical eye in his novels and essays. With 'The lives of animals', Coetzee now turns that eye to the issue of animal cruelty, and he does it in a novel way that, to my judgement, is very effective. The issue of animal cruelty is so emotionally charged that it is virtually impossible to deal with it only from the realm of Western philosophy. On the one hand, Western philosophy tends to be too detached from the subject discussed. In making the issue more 'rational', Western philosophy loses its power to impact and to convince. On the other hand, Western philosophy is rarely accessible to most people, mainly because its language is so arcane that only an intellectual elite can understand it. In other words, animal cruelty, approached from the point of view of Western philosophy, becomes another academic issue, almost entirely alienated from the gruesome reality out there--a reality that needs to be exposed and addressed in more practical terms. With 'The lives of animals', Coetzee seems to be saying just that, and he deftly uses literature to approach the issue because only literature can make philosophy accessible and deal with emotions. Does Coetzee succeed in his enterprise? I think he did, but he does it by leaving everything unresolved. It seems that Coetzee is saying that, ultimately, it's a matter of personal choice and commitment. Since the issue is so complex, since so many variables enter into the equation, since any side can defend itself with any arguments just as convincingly, we are left on our own, with our own contradictions. Coetzee deserves to be credited for exposing the complexity of the issue, not in providing easy, sloganistic answers. The four commentaries to Coetzee's text attest to the complexity of the issue. I found Peter Singer's reflections particularly germane. He says: 'I feel, but I also think about what I feel. When people say we should only feel--and at times Costello [Coetzee's main 'character' in his text] comes close to that in her lecture--I'm reminded of Goring, who said, 'I think with my blood.' See where it led him. We can't take our feelings as moral data, immune from rational criticism.' I also found Barbara Smuts' reflections illuminating because of the wealth of her experience as researcher in animal behavior. Her thesis that we should learn to treat animals as 'persons' is cogently exposed, and deserves to be taken into account if we are to

make any progress in treating animals properly. In short, I recommend this little book to anyone interested in the issue of animal cruelty. It should be, indeed, required reading in some course on ethics to generate debate and try to come with more convincing and comprehensive answers.

J.M. Coetzee is never comfortable to read. Nor is he here. The book is a game, a riddle. The fictional form is simply a device. An ageing Australian author goes to visit her son at an American university. Her purpose is to give a speech and to attend a dinner. She chooses to explore the lives of animals. Coetzee's aim is not, apparently, to make friends, to espouse any particular point of view, or to convince anybody of anything. But he needles. And he teases. There is not a page in this slim and brilliantly efficient book that doesn't include some idea, or a challenge to received ideas, to confront us and to invite us to think more deeply. That is his achievement. At the end, any comfortable ideology we took into the book has been exposed. I defy anyone to read it and not to think in a new way about the processes of reason, the homo-centric nature of man, and - more than anything - about the lives of animals, whose place on this planet has never been so tenuous.

The Lives of Animals by J.M. Coetzee is a philosophical look at the heart of vegetarianism and animal suffering rather than a discussion of the hard raw facts that most books include on the subject. It takes a look at both sides of the issue, including some hypothetical thought-provoking questions from the "opposition". This is done in the form of a short novel in which author Elizabeth Costello is invited to give two lectures to her literary peers. She chooses to deliver her talks about the plight of animals, not by relating facts about slaughterhouses and veal crates, but by establishing certain theoretical truths about the way animals think and feel. "Reminding you only that the horrors I here omit are nevertheless at the center of this lecture," she says. Coetzee's book presents the case for animal rights in a way I had never seen before. It offers some good answers for those who ask about our vegetarianism, and it raised many questions for us to answer for ourselves. The Lives of Animals reaffirmed why I had chosen this lifestyle in the first place and strengthened my resolution. No longer do I do this simply because I can't bear to be a cause of suffering, but rather because animals - as thinking, emotional beings - deserve it. A highly recommended book that will renew convictions, but since it's heavy in philosophy it can be a little hard to follow. A collection of essays by various contributors following the story helps to clarify and extend the message of the book. --Reviewed by Rachel Crowley

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