

## Meeting 9 11am 8 March 2017, Corsham Empathy and Animals

### Present:

Colette Hill, Deb McCormick, Gerard Woodward, Grace Palmer, Owain Jones, Kate Rigby, Robert Sherman, Samantha Harvey, Andrei Branea, Tanvir Bush, Richard Kerridge, Linda Blair, Jenn Webb, David Hill, Jordan Atchinson, Maggie Gee [chairing].

**11am coffee, introductions** and welcome to three hours of listening to writing about the relevance of empathy to human relationships with other species, followed by questions and discussion.

### **Richard Kerridge, co-leader of the Creative Writing MA,**

<http://www.janklowandnesbit.co.uk/richardkerridge>, read a passage from his new work-in-progress which challenged any easy or automatic ideas of empathy between species. He took us to the dangerous edge of relations between human and non-human animals in a meditative piece that also recounted a real day's boat-trip out to snorkel on Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

The boat takes Richard-the-narrator out to the Reef. The leader of the trip refers to a previous incident where a pair of tourists was accidentally left behind in the water to die after the 'head count' went wrong at the end of a day's snorkelling. He speaks in a would-be reassuring way that actually leaves Richard beset with anxious questions like 'How long did it actually take the forgotten couple to die?' When he enters the water, worry goes with him, the spectre of the man-eating shark. Finally he actually sees one – though it is only a young, miniature version of the real thing. The trip leader reacts dismissively, but the narrator is left with nagging queries in his mind. Why does the shark above all other marine species represents absolute terror to a swimming human, why is it so far beyond the reach of empathy that in our human imagination the wide range of sharks seem to figure only as a single, identical malevolent grin? And with that query, Richard ended his presentation by showing an image of a huge grinning shark on the screen.

**2 Dr Tanvir Bush, <https://unbound.com/books/cull> @tanvirnaomi, recent BSU PhD graduate and part-time lecturer,** gave a talk called 'Being More Dog', which began by her describing, with slides, a lifetime of living with unique animals. For example, in her Zambian childhood, Sam, a 'sage and calm and gentle' fox terrier, as well as a jacaranda tree full of birds and lizards and ants; 'then, in the mid 80's the termites ate through the roots of several of the garden trees and on my return from school not only was there no Sam, but no tree.' More animals followed, all individual, not all easy to like: she never got on with a pony called Twiggy she was supposed to ride competitively. In 1991 she got her diagnosis of RP, Retina Pigmentosa, which has slowly worsened, and in 2009 she got her guide-dog Grace. Tanvir talked about how the human-dog partnership has to be worked on. Becoming a guide-dog is hard for the young animal who has just been moved yet again and also for the visually impaired human coming to terms with a distressing time in their lives. 'The bonding process from liking and respect to true trust and deep love took a year.' When Tanvir was accepted to do a PhD at BSU, she and Grace moved to Corsham. A year ago Tanvir noticed the dog was not quite herself, and now the spectre of retirement looms. But in the meanwhile, Grace contributed her special liveliness of spirit to Tanvir's Ph D novel, *Cull*, a satire on the current welfare system. There was a stage in the writing when it just wasn't working; then Tanvir realised that her fictional

protagonist Alex, a journalist with visual impairment like Tanvir, should also have a fictional guide dog. 'I turned to Grace. How do you see the world, I asked? Through stinks, she replied. We worked together and came up with the warm and funny Chris – in the darkness of the novel he becomes the lightness, the joyfulness. Living ... five times as fast as us humans.' Then Tanvir read a passage from the novel which was set entirely in Chris the dog's consciousness, where a red ball is the absolute centre of everything, and speed and smell is all.

'CULL is not just a furious torrid fist shake at the powers that be, it is also a tribute to my beautiful and loving friend. She is not human and she cannot speak English but she has taught me so much more than I could ever imagine. We should all be more dog,' Tanvir concluded.

**3 Owain Jones, Professor of Environmental Humanities, @BSUEnvHums,** read a piece of autobiographical writing, 'The Bee, the Water and the Flower', about daring to try and help an animal in trouble, knowing it might fail.

Arriving at Chippenham station far too early for his train to Paddington and grateful to find a warm waiting room, Owain was reading the free newspaper when suddenly a honey bee fell to the floor at his feet, 'landing on her back and gently rotating on the shiny stone floor as she waved her legs around', obviously in trouble. No windows were open so he decided to take her outside, offering his bank card as transport – she 'climbed aboard'. He then walked down the platform until he found some sunlight, and in it, a large round concrete planter of yellow and blue pansies. 'I offered the card to one of the flowers and the bee readily transferred onto one of the petals. And there she stood – and there I stood.' The weather had been very dry, and the waiting room warm. Could the bee be dehydrated? 'Almost as a gesture, I spat onto my fingers and let a small gob of spit drop next to the bee. She immediately started to drink, extending her proboscis into the fluid. I was a bit taken aback. And then worried that, maybe, my spit would carry harmful infection to the bee.'

But the bee kept drinking. Owen had a bottle of tap water with him, so he filled the cap and carefully poured it on to the flower near the bee. But the water slid off the petals 'like water off bird feathers'. So he tried again, even more carefully, and this time some water rested on top of the petals, and clung to their edges, and the bee drank, and kept drinking.

Finally she stopped and moved around in what seemed to Owen a 'sprightlier' manner. 'And then she started to clean her proboscis with her front legs.' Owen knew from watching cats that grooming is often a sign of well-being, so dared to go off and get a coffee. When he returned to check progress, 'the bee was now going thorough a vigorous all-over groom; scraping her back (or middle) legs along her wings; scratching at the fur on her belly with her back legs; running her front legs down her antenna, twisting her head each way in turn as she did so (like someone drying their hair with a towel). I filmed this for a minute or so – then finally had to depart.'

He concluded that the bee had indeed been dehydrated and revived by the water he gave her, and hoped all was well, with just a lingering worry lest his saliva was infectious. By contrast Owain seemed unworried by a fact he merely mentioned in passing – that during this experiment he lost the bank card which he had used to transport the bee!

#### **4 Maggie Gee, Professor of Creative Writing @maggiegeewriter**

Maggie talked about her hero Frans de Waal's view of the many animal cognitions (which tells us human intelligence is not necessarily the apex of cognition), particularly in relation to his latest book, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are*. He writes very well about non-human-animal empathy and intelligence with many examples, both within and across species: human-like capacity to copy, grieve, use tools, recognise self & other, etc.

#### **12.15 - 2.00pm Questions and debate: discussion continued over lunch**

We discussed among many, many other things the occasional hostile human reactions to humans trying to help other species: fear of sentimentality, repressed guilt about how badly we usually treat animals enforcing a view of them as non-sentient/non-thinking beings?