BOOK REVIEW

# How to Win Multispecies Friends and Influence Anthropocentric People

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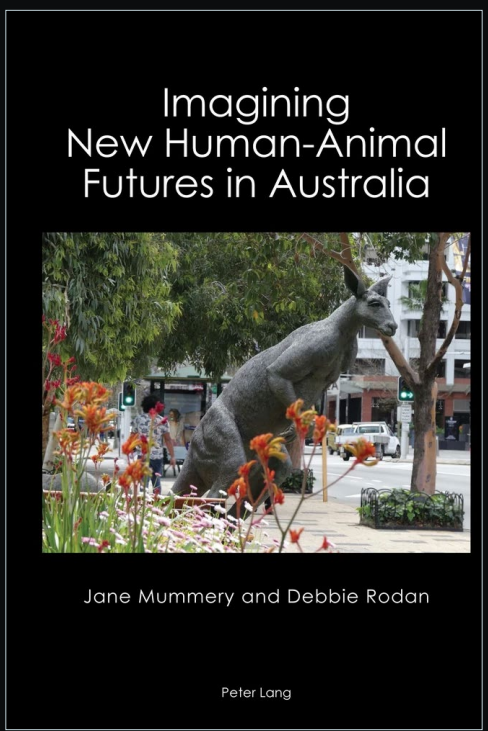


*Review of:*
Jane Mummery and Debbie Rodan, *Imagining New Human–Animal Futures in Australia*. Australian Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives 5. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022. xiv, 348pp., 14 colour illus., US$82.95 (hb)

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In the not unlikely event that you, reading this review, are *not* Australian, you may well be wondering how much relevance a book on narratives surrounding animals in Australia has for you. At best, you're thinking—and I know this is what you're thinking, because upon learning that I am Australian, this is *always* what non-Australians ask me about—the book will offer thrilling accounts of the various sharp-toothed and venomous creatures Down Under that delight in preying upon hapless tourists. Or perhaps the book will explore views on iconic marsupial species—a safe bet, given a statue of one, the kangaroo, features on the book's cover. If this is the case, then the book may be an amusing read but perhaps one whose subject matter is somewhat removed from the experiences of non-Australians.

While I can confirm that the book does feature sharks and "salties" (saltwater crocodiles), kangaroos and koalas, and more besides, the uniqueness of Australia's animal population does not render the value of book's analysis unique to Australia. Indeed, it is somewhat ironic, given the number of endemic species in Australia and how these animals are used to promote the Australian "brand", that the country's views on animals are not more distinctively progressive—if only to ensure the long-term viability of the eco-tourist dollar. Instead, as *Imagining New Human–Animal Futures in Australia* shows, mainstream narratives towards animals in Australia are underpinned by an ideological framework that is shared all-too-commonly around the world: anthropocentrism. The book's purpose, then, is to make explicit the anthropocentric narratives that surround animals in Australia. Throughout, Mummery and Rodan explore how these narratives are being challenged with alternatives that focus on the sentience of other animals, and provide examples of where the latter are already emerging in Australian society: in the work of activists, in film and television, and even in local policy.

The first chapter outlines the concept of the "imaginary", which is used to frame the subsequent analysis. As the authors suggest, an imaginary is an amalgamation of the views, understandings, and norms, that a group has about the world around them. Furthermore, in shaping the way that people see their place in, and interactions with, the world


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around them, an imaginary "*makes* that world" (5). The importance of the social imaginary when thinking about human–animal relationships is that it "provides the background legitimacy for any given society's daily routines and social repertoires" (4). Understanding the nature of the imaginaries that influence our view of the world, then, is vital if we want to challenge the norms that shape our relationships with animals; it allows us to see that our use and abuse of animals is not inevitable.

Another important feature of the book's analysis which is introduced in this chapter is its engagement with ideas from Australian First Nations Peoples in relation to animals and "Country".[1] Over the course of the book, these ideas offer a compelling alternative to the anthropocentric, Western narratives that underpin mainstream Australian society, and are an indication of the increasing (and for all too long, denied) importance that is being accorded to Indigenous perspectives. No doubt aware of a history of cultural exploitation of Indigenous cultures, the authors are also careful to acknowledge that, as scholars without First Nations heritage themselves, they are only and necessarily scratching at the surface of the Indigenous ontologies that they describe (11).

After setting the conceptual groundwork, the book considers five prominent spaces in Australia where we can see contested animal narratives. Chapters two and three, which look at the "livestock" industry and meat-eating respectively, introduce the concept of "sentience", and how its recognition can serve as an antidote to anthropocentric narratives. The chapter highlights this point, for example, with reference to Australia's live export scandals of the 2010s, which were catalysed by the release of undercover footage that revealed cruel and systemic treatment of the sheep and cows in this industry. With Australians around the country responding so viscerally to the sight of their pain, we were reminded of the essential similarities that we share with them.

Chapter four considers how human–animal relationships are presented on screen, with an analysis of Australian films and television programs like *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo*, *Red Dog*, and *Penguin Bloom*. This chapter, with its heart-warming insights on the nature

1 "Welcome to Country", *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies* (2022), https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/welcome-country

of friendship, is particularly valuable; it is a reminder that we can *all* make a difference in the lives of other animals (and vice versa) by cultivating truly respectful, "other-regarding" relationships with them.

The fifth chapter, which looks at those animals who are "neither food nor friend", is also particularly insightful. Its focus on the stories we tell about "pest" and "feral" animals reveals how framing certain animals (including certain *native* animals, whose ancestors were living in Australia tens of thousands of years before European colonization!) serves a useful purpose in blame-shifting. Rather than addressing our own exploitation of the land, we can point to *them* when ecological "imbalances" occur. Having lived in the Australian capital, Canberra, for several years, where local nature reserves are closed off annually for kangaroo "culls", I find this blame-shifting all too familiar; the problem is not that we have taken their lands and fragmented what's left, it is that they are "overpopulated" and need to be "managed".

Chapter six moves further into considerations of ecological stewardship by addressing Australia's management of the Great Barrier Reef, an immense "multitude of interlinked ecological communities" (212) that has immense cultural and economic value for Australians. Given the threat that climate change poses to the Reef — a threat that is rendered visible by mass coral bleaching events — it offers us a sobering example of how changing our relationships with animals cannot happen in isolation. We must also change our relationship to the environments which sustain us all.

Mummery and Rodan draw together the threads of the preceding five chapters in the book's final chapter, which provides an account of how anthropocentric narratives can be challenged and, perhaps eventually, replaced. The directives that the book offers are ostensibly simple: we must *share* our spaces and facilities with other animals; we must *care* about other animals beyond their usefulness to us; we must develop *interspecies solidarity* as a commitment to making political change for animals; and we must cultivate *understanding* of the needs and preferences of other animals, and how they communicate these things to us. In this way, we might be able to reshape the social imaginaries that we live in, and therefore shift

the norms that guide our relationships with animals. Simple directives yes, but they are by no means easy to implement.

This is where the backdrop of multispecies community design that the authors also propose is crucial. While it may be difficult for many of us as individuals to maintain attitudes of sharing, caring, solidarity and understanding — especially those of us without particular commitments to animals — if we are encouraged as a community to change our attitudes in these way via policies that foreground animals' interests, then this may, in turn, promote the desired attitudes. Say we commit to a policy of actively sharing our spaces with, and making structural accommodations for, kangaroos and currawongs, blue heeler dogs and blue-tongued lizards, great white sharks and white-tailed spiders; with multispecies spaces the norm, it becomes easier for us to care about, understand, and feel solidarity with, other animals as we see and interact with them every day.

It is a shame that more couldn't have been said in this chapter, however, about the ways that this kind of proactive design work could be used to remind us of the lives of animals in the factory farming industry. While companion animals and wild animals of various kinds are discussed, industrially farmed animals are conspicuous here in their absence. The idea to include "ethical warning labels" on animal products could be one way to start to do this,[2] though a range of other social "nudges" are needed.

Another, more general, limitation of the book is its treatment of the concept of anthropocentrism. While challenging anthropocentrism is surely an integral part of addressing our relationships with animals, more should have been done to motivate this challenge. In chapter one, the origins of anthropocentrism are not fleshed out as they could be. The concept is not situated as arising within a Judeo-Christian worldview that situates Man within a great chain of being between God and the angels on one side, and all other animals on the other.[3] This means

2 Thomas Wells, "The Case for Ethical Warning Labels on Animal Products", *ABC Religion & Ethics* (7 January 2014), https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-case-for-ethical-warning-labels-on-animal-products/10099440.

3 See Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis", *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–07. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203.

that the particular breed of Western anthropocentrism that is of concern here is somewhat obscured. In turn, this leads to statements about *our* culture being anthropocentric, without acknowledgement of whose culture, in particular, this refers to. Furthermore, that anthropocentrism is troubling is not a position that is defended in much detail. Part of this seems to be because (alongside speciesism) the concept is defined as entailing the view that "only humans and human interests matter" (25). This, however, is only one, maximally restrictive, interpretation of anthropocentrism. The book therefore risks alienating or overlooking those who have anthropocentric and speciesist views, but who do not think *only* humans, in *all* instances, have moral worth.

The book similarly assumes a restrictively dichotomous distinction between welfare and rights. While important for earlier debates in animal ethics,[4] where the question of whether animals could have rights at all was still up for grabs, this is a debate from which the animal rights literature has largely moved away.[5] Instead, more recent scholarship has focused on how we might grant animals rights in the context of an interconnected and imperfect society, where humans still — for better or worse — rely on the labour and services of animals (and they rely on ours).

Without getting lost too deeply in these conceptual weeds, the broader picture that the book presents is a sound one. The anthropocentric assumption that animals are, first and foremost, for us — and that their happiness is only, if at all, to be promoted to the extent that this does not conflict with our uses of them — desperately needs to be overturned. As the book suggests, it is not only the promotion of ethical relationships with individual animals that hangs in the balance here, but our capacity to maintain a habitable planet for ourselves and other animals. *Imagining New Human–Animal Futures in Australia* is therefore a useful and cross-culturally relevant reminder of the various ways that human and animal lives intersect, and the alternative ways that we can choose to frame these relationships.

4 See, for example, Gary Francione and Robert Garner, *The Animal Rights Debate: Abolition or Regulation?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

5 See, for example: Alasdair Cochrane, *Animal Rights without Liberation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).