

OTHER

The Inner Life of Animals: Love, Grief and Compassion – Surprising Observations of a Hidden World

By Peter Wohlleben. Translated from the German by Jane Billingshurst. 2017. Greystone Books. 277 pages, 24.95 CAD, Cloth.

The book has not one but two subtitles: “Love, Grief and Compassion – Surprising Observations of a Hidden World”. In general, subtitles give me negative feelings, but as everything has them nowadays I have given up caring. Of the three versions of the title, I think the third is the least appropriate. For most naturalists there is not a lot here that is likely to surprise them. The book is a collection of anecdotes and observations, some commonplace, some very astute, about animal behaviour. They derive in part from the author’s own observations on a farm and woodlot in Germany and in part from an eclectic selection of readings in the press, on the web, and—to a lesser extent—in the popular and peer-reviewed scientific literature. Only 23 of 101 references are to original scientific papers. A foreword by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson gets big billing on the cover but consists of only four pages.

The author begins with a few tart comments on the sins of ‘scientists’. He is seconded in these opinions by the aforementioned Masson. Like many other writers, they want us to believe that science is obscuring the truth about animal intelligence, not through malice, but through blind adherence to antiquated ‘science-think’. This is certainly a widespread belief and one that contributes to the general distaste for ‘expert’ opinion. It is unfortunate, because I think many of the author’s criticisms are aimed at straw wo/man thinking characteristic of the 20th, rather than the 21st century. His avowed intent is to “help you see the animal world... not as mindless automatons driven by an inflexible genetic code [apparently his idea of science-think], but as stalwart souls and lovable rascals”. Does he succeed?

Overall, if anyone did believe in the ‘mindless automatons’ interpretation of animal behaviour, then I think this book will certainly help to disabuse them: spending any substantial amount of time observing animals in the wild or even pets in our homes will do the same. Ani-

mals undoubtedly have the capacity to love and hate, to cheat and act remorseful, to show fear, bravery and indecision, to be selfish and selfless and everything in between. If you are looking for examples of such behaviours, then this book is a good place to start. I certainly gleaned many tidbits of Natural History that I was not aware of.

Among the different animals covered, bees, chickens, goats, dogs, and horses get plenty of coverage, as they belong to the author’s household. He gives a good shout-out for pigs, which I was glad to see because I always feel they don’t get their dues as truly intelligent and sensitive animals, a fact that forced me to renounce bacon in later life. The author also writes a good deal about ravens and crows, which he posits as “the apes among birds”. I particularly liked his description of a crow being evasive about caching an acorn while being watched. I have had an identical experience trying to watch ravens caching seabird eggs: they won’t do it as long as anyone else, human or raven, is watching.

Sy Montgomery, author of *The Soul of an Octopus* (Atria Books 2015), says on Amazon that *The Inner Life of Animals* “will rock your world”. If you are an experienced naturalist, that is unlikely to be true, but if you know someone who likes kitten videos on YouTube (and there are millions of them, both viewers and videos), but does not know a lot about animals otherwise, then this book might make the perfect gift. The book was published in collaboration with the David Suzuki Institute and supported by the Canadian and British Columbian governments, as well as, more obscurely, by the Canada Council and British Columbia Arts Council, and printed in Canada on ancient-forest-friendly paper.

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