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Stephen Tatum, and much more.

Love Me, Love My Dogs

Man and Beast by J. R. Helton. (Austin: Abiqua Press, 2001. 219 pp. \$13.95 paper)

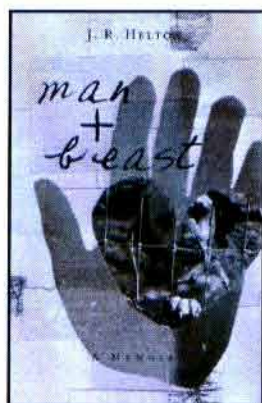
M*an and Beast* is author J. R. Helton's often harrowing nonfiction account of his and his wife Tracy Frank's experiences and involvement with the Southern Animal Rescue Association (SARA), described in liner notes as "one of the largest truly no-kill sanctuaries in the South." As co-founder of the sanctuary (located near Seguin, Texas), Helton found himself a somewhat reluctant and ambivalent participant in an endeavor that grew rapidly in size and scope, and as it did so, embroiled Helton both in increasing conflicts at home and within the community. The subsequent story is sobering in the questions it raises about our relationships with our pets and animals and in the implicit statement the book makes about our overall "animal" nature.

After a couple of short narrative chapters detailing his childhood experiences with dogs (mostly negative), Helton describes his meeting with and subsequent marriage to Frank, an animal devotee who comes across in the book as part idealist, part saint, and someone sincerely and almost recklessly dedicated to the task of saving and caring for unwanted animals. The couple's operation began small, then moved to a large 500-plus-acre farm (belonging to Frank's family), where their animal-saving operation rapidly grew in size, ambition, and in community stature (and subsequently in political controversy, as an "animal rights" sanctuary—a dirty term in Texas). Along the way, Helton describes the couple's various kooky neighbors, who, themselves, in their offbeat and eccentric behavior, come to mirror the behavioral varieties in the growing numbers of dogs on the couple's land. With a deft fiction-writer's technique, Helton (who received an MFA in fiction-writing from SWT) dramatizes the immensely stressful conditions of living on the farm without indoor bathroom or electricity, scrambling to pay the huge vet and food bills, and of trying to maintain a fairly normal married life in the face of such enormous pressures. Helton is frank and unrelenting in his description of life amid dozens and eventually hundreds of dogs (many of whose names are listed), whose fighting, illnesses, relentless barking, personalities, and often sad fates come to serve as a backdrop for Helton's own inner and outer struggles.

One of the best features of this account is Helton's depiction of his marital relationship, which boils down to a struggle between Frank's idealism and altruism and Helton's own bleak and brutally honest realism. While Frank is depicted as selfless and energetically invested in the lives and fates of the animals, Helton describes his

own chronic battles to find money for vet bills and simple living expenses and to come to terms psychically with the sheer enormity of the undertaking. Helton is deeply contemptuous of many of the various persons whose "disposable" dogs end up on the sanctuary. At one point Helton writes:

There were so many dogs in the world. They were everywhere. They were our objects of entertainment and, of course, since they didn't talk, they couldn't complain.... If you had a dog for thirteen years and you dumped him off on the side of the road, what was he going to say about it? Nothing. The little idiot would sit there wagging his tail waiting for you to come back, or he might chase you down the road for a few miles, like a collie I'd seen do one day, running after a truck that had just thrown him out near the ranch. I can remember just sitting there, watching this white and brown collie cut across a pasture trying to head the speeding truck off, watching him get smaller and smaller as he ran through the field until he was barely visible, and I let him disappear, not wanting him at my home with so many others who would have met the same fate had Tracy not happened by.



The climax of the book comes when Frank and several other representatives of animal sanctuaries and groups in the region stage a "rescue" of hundreds of seriously abused animals from a negligent local compound operator—an action that ultimately results in a multi-million dollar lawsuit by the operator against everyone involved. Helton's account of this fiasco (and of the almost comical subsequent scrambling by various affiliated parties to cover their legal bottoms) underscores the obsolescence and utter inadequacy of Texas' animal laws, the stupidity of regional anthropocentric attitudes towards animals, and the legal liability and powerlessness of concerned outsiders to intrude on what was clearly (in this instance) a case of serious cruelty.

As this is a memoir, however, the ultimate crux of the narrative is Helton's story about coming to terms with himself and his own negative, animalistic feelings and behaviors. He applies the book's prevailing trope—the vicious, Darwinistic nature of all animal life and behavior (including that of humans)—to himself and his own feelings. While other nature writers might view "wildness" as positive and energizing, Helton sees wildness in terms of chaos and violence. Surrounded by ever-growing numbers of dogs and a few cats, Helton holds up a mirror and views similar territorial and animalistic

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behavior (perhaps in even more vicious terms) among the people themselves:

Like most Americans, I liked the “idea” of country, the scenery, the backdrops, the lack of other people, but the reality of Nature was just one big mess, a mass of teeming life with everything eating and biting and tearing and shitting out everything else.

Despite such a grim perspective, Helton leavens his narrative with anecdotes depicting his occasional connection to the land, his peaceful moments of married life, and his occasional glimpses of the genuine moral value of the job he and Frank had undertaken. Along the way, he raises some important questions: what should be our correct relationship with our pets? Where is the line

between “human” and “animal” behavior? What is the best approach to a country full of unwanted animals? Is euthanasia or the “no-kill” approach the best one towards the exploding domestic animal population? How does one balance altruism with reality, and the necessities of living itself? Is idealism virtuous or foolish?

In the end, *Man and Beast* is a compelling, thought-provoking work, and one which challenges much of the prevailing wisdom of the current attitudes about pet ownership and nature itself. Though this book is full of bleak, sometimes violent description, the issues it raises and the implicit points it makes are important and provide a highly worthy investment of one’s reading time.

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