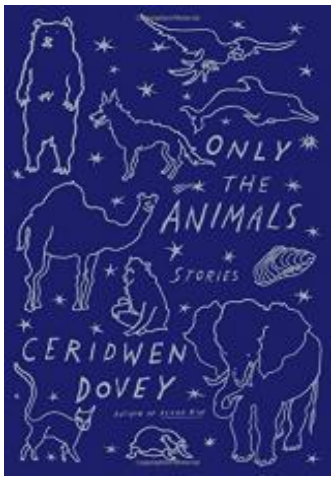
Only the Animals: Stories

by Ceridwen Dovey



About the Book

Perhaps only the animals can tell us what it is to be human

The souls of 10 animals caught up in human conflicts over the last century and connected to both famous and little-known writers in surprising ways tell their astonishing stories of life and death. In a trench on the Western Front, a cat recalls her owner Colette's theatrical antics in Paris. In Nazi Germany, a dog seeks enlightenment. A Russian tortoise once owned by the Tolstoys drifts in space during the Cold War. During the Siege of Sarajevo, a starving bear tells a fairy tale. And a dolphin sent to Iraq by the U.S. Navy writes a letter to Sylvia Plath.

Exquisitely written, playful and poignant, Ceridwen Dovey's ONLY THE ANIMALS is a remarkable literary achievement by one of our brightest young writers. An animal's-eye-view of humans at our brutal, violent worst and our creative, imaginative best, it asks us to find our way back to empathy not only for animals but for other people, and to believe again in the redemptive power of reading and writing fiction.

Discussion Guide

1. Which of the book?s epigraphs resonated with you the most? How do these fictional stories, showcasing fiction writers as characters (often in stories within stories), give voice to reality?

2. In the opening story, what does the camel have in common with the Aboriginal cargo? What do Mister Mitchell?s memories illustrate about profit and power?

3. How do Colette and Kiki echo and influence each other? Are Kiki?s feelings of superiority well deserved? (Is she indeed superior to the other creatures in the story?)

4. Discuss the reference to Kafka?s ?A Hunger Artist,? featuring a public performance of starvation, that appears in Red

Peter?s story. What do Red Peter, Evelyn and Hazel hunger for besides food?

5. Is karma proved or disproved by the wolf-dog?s life story, winding from a vegetarian master who seeks enlightenment (from a master who compares Hitler to Krishna) to the execution of the pragmatic pig, culminating in the narrator?s assignment as a soldier?

6. As the passionate mussels fulfill their battleship dream (with the U.S. Navy at Pearl Harbor, no less), what do they tell us about the urge to become a hero? What does ONLY THE ANIMALSteach us about the forces that propel humans into war?

7. What accounts for the turtle?s astonishing longevity, from the Russian Revolution to the Space Age? If you were to become someone?s pet, would you be better off in the hands of a literary luminary?

8. In ?I, the Elephant, Wrote This,? how do the narrator?s beautiful descriptions of motherhood compare with her beliefs about a glorious death? How did each of the stories in ONLY THE ANIMALSaffect your beliefs about mortality --- and immortality?

9. Can the tales of the brown bear and Irena be read as fables? If so, what is the lesson? What does the presence of the supernatural witch in this chapter indicate about the presence of evil in the world?

10. What makes the life and literature of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes an appropriate backdrop for the dolphin?s autobiography?

11. How did you react to the closing scene, where Barnes the parrot is forced to live alone? Would you have made the same choice if you had owned Barnes under similar circumstances?

12. In each of the book?s story lines, what remains consistent across time, regardless of place?

13. Red Peter asserts that masochism is what separates humans from other animals; Evelyn rejects this, saying that romance is the defining trait. What do you believe is the key feature that distinguishes humans from other animals? Has the book changed the way you perceive animals?

14. How did the book?s illustrations affect your experience of the characters? soulful journeys?

15. How does ONLY THE ANIMALSfurther develop the perspectives on tragedy, destiny and power presented in Ceridwen Dovey?s previous book, BLOOD KIN?

Author Bio

Ceridwen Dovey?s debut novel, BLOOD KIN, was published in 15 countries, short-listed for the Dylan Thomas Award, and selected for the U.S. National Book Foundation?s prestigious 5 Under 35 honors list. *The Wall Street Journal* named her one of their ?artists to watch.? Born in South Africa, she studied social anthropology at Harvard and New York University and now lives with her husband and son in Sydney. ONLY THE ANIMALS recently won the 2014 Readings New Australian Writing Award. For more information, visit www.ceridwendovey.com.

Critical Praise

?The life stories related by these very civilized animals are in some cases touching (the elephant), in others amusing (the mussel), but all are absorbing. They are transmitted to us with a light touch and no trace of sentimentality.?

Only the Animals: Stories

by Ceridwen Dovey

Publication Date: September 15, 2015
Genres: Fiction, Literary Fiction, Short Stories
Hardcover: 256 pages
Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux
ISBN-10: 0374226636
ISBN-13: 9780374226633