

# Four Legs Good, Two Legs Bad

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Literature and film have long anthropomorphised animals for one purpose or another, whether in the socialist allegory of George Orwell's [Animal Farm](#) or the heart-warming fable of E.B. White's [Charlotte's Web](#), in the CGI cuteness of [Babe](#) or the satire of...well, of just about every Warner Brothers or Disney cartoon of the past seventy or eighty years. Most of these works have used animals to illuminate the human condition, but not many focus specifically on the *animal* condition.

In the last decade, however, some graphic novels have tried to take the animals' view. The artist [Sue Coe](#), long an activist protesting cruelty to animals, has published several books that expose the horrors of factory farms, slaughterhouses, vivisection, and other instances of man's inhumanity to beast. Books like [Dead Meat](#) and [Sheep of Fools](#) are powerful polemics, focusing primarily on art alone to depict the revolting conditions we provide for the animals we choose to eat. In 2000, Coe published [Pit's Letter](#), more a storybook, perhaps, than a graphic novel, which relates the story of a pit bull from his rescue as a pup, through happy days with a young boy named Pat, to his abandonment, his confinement in a shelter, and his final days in an animal testing lab.

Coe's wrenching, nightmarish scenes use familiar iconography: a test-animal [Calvary](#) or an even-more-dystopian [Hieronymus Bosch](#) landscape, in which no animal finds mercy. Near the end of the story, a test monkey scratches Pat, who has become a scientist at Eden Technologies, the very lab that bought Pit from the shelter. Pat's scratch leads to an infection that causes him to be studied and experimented on by his former colleagues, just as once he'd experimented on Pit's fellow animals.

In a similar vein, superhero superstars Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely teamed up in 2005 for [WE3](#), the story of a top-secret Air Force program to create "biorgs," rescue animals implanted in weaponized cyborg bodies and trained for missions too dangerous for humans. In the process, the three main protagonists--a dog, a cat, and a rabbit--develop a crude language that allows us a window into their thought processes and emotional states. We learn that those states are pretty much what we might expect: the dog is trying to figure out how to please his masters, the cat is cranky, and the rabbit is mostly just hungry. When the program is decommissioned by a squeamish senator after a mission gone horribly wrong, we see, in six remarkable pages of small, nearly wordless panels, the [Temple Grandin](#)-like lead scientist surreptitiously releasing her three star creatures. The monochrome palette of most of these symmetrical panels is interrupted by a vibrant red reserved for images of the animals themselves, the ruddy color of the energy that pulses through their systems, both organic and electronic.

Quintely is endlessly inventive in his page layout, using overlays and insets to convey simultaneous action. This complexity demands close attention from the reader, who must interpret and complete the panels to construct the story--even more than comics usually require. The occasional splash page, rendering the animals in what feels almost like life size, draws the reader in to share the animals' suffering, which in many ways worsens as they try to feed themselves and create a defense against the troops sent to destroy them. The lab's ultimate weapon, a terrifying biorg mastiff, is deployed, and takes out the rabbit, but things don't go well with the deployment ("Damn thing almost ate a police officer") and the mastiff is destroyed. In the confusion, snipers inadvertently take out the scientist, and the dog and cat limp off together. Having been designed to work as a team, they devise a method to get rid of their armor, and then care for each other until, finally, they are taken in by a homeless man: rejects of society, living together and offering the only comfort each is likely to find.

Coe's work was what was most closely associated in my mind with the animal rights/animal welfare movement. *WE3*, which I learned of through the ever-trusty recommendation of my ComiXology colleague, [Tucker Stone](#), only gradually revealed itself to me as a related work. The reason the topic is of interest to me is because of a required freshman course here in Columbia University's Core Curriculum: known as [University Writing](#), it serves as a kind of combination Freshman Composition and Intro to Research Skills. The students choose a "seed text" from a list of several dozen essays, then read it critically in order to pull out a research topic. Each semester, there are between 70 and 80 sections of University Writing, and a good two-thirds or more of those sections meet once during the semester in the library for a research skills session. My division--the Humanities and History librarians--has traditionally led these sessions, working with the instructor and the students to demonstrate how to find scholarly resources to turn their seed text-inspired questions into a research paper.

A popular essay on the list is "An Animal's Place" (*New York Times Magazine*, 11/10/02), by [Michael Pollan](#), perhaps better known for books such as [The Omnivore's Dilemma: a Natural History of Four Meals](#) and [In Defense of Food: an Eater's Manifesto](#) (in the latter of which he introduced the laudable formula: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants."). In his *New York Times* essay, Pollan examines the animal rights movement spearheaded by Princeton University ethicist [Peter Singer](#), inspired in great part by *his* seminal 1975 animal rights book, [Animal Liberation](#). Pollan challenges Singer's premise that if the intellectual construct of morality does not allow one human to mistreat another for his or her own ends, then how can it allow humans to exploit animals for our own ends? Pollan maintains that "humans differ from animals in morally significant ways," but eventually finds this a difficult position to defend. The article develops into a Socratic dialogue that Pollan holds with himself, and which finally focuses on the issue of pain. If animals must suffer pain in order to satisfy human desires for meat and leather and medicine and the like, is that morally defensible? Out of such questions, many fine research papers may grow.

I had started showing the Coe books to my classes when they chose the Pollan article as their seed text (it hadn't occurred to me until recently to use *WE3*), but I hadn't come across much else that dealt with animal rights, until this year's daily double: not one but two--count 'em: two!--graphic novels dealing with suddenly sentient animals and the consequent societal debate over

their status as intellectual entities. [Duncan the Wonder Dog](#), by heretofore-unknown *wunderkind* Adam Hines, is a massive, artistically-innovative work that won both the inaugural [Lynd Ward Graphic Novel Prize](#) from the Pennsylvania Center for the Book at the Pennsylvania State University Libraries and a [glowing review](#) in the *New York Times*. Also released in 2010 was [Elmer](#), a smaller, briefer, exquisitely-drawn book by Filipino artist and puckish [YouTube raconteur](#) Gerry Alanguilan, which had its American release literally the same week and has just been nominated for an [Eisner Award](#).

Hines doesn't necessarily make it easy to read his book, although he makes it very easy to admire it. His panels range from dense and closely-packed on a page, to expansive, seemingly gratuitous full-page lithographs or collages. His drawing can be simple and child-like or complex and realistic--sometimes on the same page, as in his depiction of Euclid the chimp and Mercodonius the tiger. Hines scars several pages with obliterating snow, forcing the reader to discern the narrative through his visual static. He sets a mood--heavy, dark, slightly treacherous, but with flashes of light--that continues throughout the book. The story-telling sometimes feels oblique (both the art and the writing tend towards the collage; like a visual rendition of jazz...or a tone poem...or James Joyce): the tale begins *in medias res* and, near the beginning, Hines juxtaposes a prizefight--humans behaving brutally to one another, as if, perhaps, that is our nature--with Euclid the circus chimp reading Pythagoras' Metaphysics and discussing [dharma](#) with the Hindu tiger.

The scenes change rapidly: a fisherman changes the terms of his agreement with his water-bird employee midway through their contract; is he faithless because his employee's an animal, or because it's his nature to be faithless? Regulations forbid a farmer to put a wounded cow out of her misery until after an inspector arrives. The new dispensation has muddied waters for the animals, as well; a dog questions what--or who--is in the beef stew on the table. Euclid and a weasel (otter? lizard?) named Polybius discuss a possibly mythical creature: a dog known as [Antaeus](#) who walks on two legs and has human hands. These vignettes accrue until the story becomes a mosaic of the consequences and ramifications of animal sentience.

This goes on for over one hundred pages until finally: a crisis. A radical animal rights group sets off a bomb at a California university, destroying the library (*hey HEY!*). It's over 160 pages in before you meet the baboon Pompeii, the leader of the terrorist band known as ORAPOST (short for *Organosi Apostasia*, or "organized apostasy"). She is a philosopher and a sociopath, a true believer, but no fool. Or maybe it's Hines who's no fool, as he puts a discussion of Cain and Abel in her mouth, two equals but one more favored by their father. It is a parable like the many other parables scattered throughout the book, as if in commentary on the entire story's role as a parable.

*Duncan the Wonder Dog* ends with no easy answers, not least because it is but the first of a projected nine-volume series. The second novel to come out this year--or, at least, to come out in America; it was released in the Phillipines several years ago--is perhaps more approachable in format, but no less challenging in the questions it raises.

Rather than the entire animal world becoming sentient, in *Elmer* only chickens have crossed over. Not all birds--not even all edible birds, as Elmer's family's favorite dinner is roast duck.

The story begins simply; Jake Gallo, a fine upstanding rooster, is finding fowl discrimination in the workplace ("It's because I'm a CHICKEN, isn't it?"--this panel, on the fourth page, is actually the first the reader learns that the narrator isn't actually human). As he limps home from his confrontation, Alanguilan slyly reveals the changes the world has faced: chicken-free fast food menus, a poster for a film starring chicken actor Francis Gallant, and the ominous-sounding Gallus Rex, whose motto is "Our Time Has Come."

Jake learns that his father, Elmer, has had a stroke, and he heads back to the family home, where he's joined by his sister, May, a nurse with a human fiancé, and his brother Freddie, an actor whose stage name is the Francis Gallant we saw earlier. After his father's death, Jake discovers a journal he recalls having seen his father writing in for years. It reveals the father's own experiences with the changes in his species and, initially, casts a harsh light on Farmer Ben, a longtime friend of the family. Jake confronts Ben, who describes the moment when one of his chickens first came to him, talking, and then attacked him: Ben beat the bird to death with a rock. Twelve years pass before another chicken speaks, but then the change is widespread and immediate, and Ben awakens one morning to see his neighbors burning down their chicken coops, incinerating the birds. The one bird that escapes, and that begs Ben for help, is Elmer. Ben hides Elmer, his brother Joseph, and their friend Helen--the only survivors.

Elmer and Ben become fast friends, but Joseph is suspicious and resentful. Bred as a fighting cock, his instinct to kill keeps coming to the fore, until finally he goes to his death fighting humans. Elmer's journal goes on to describe the momentous day, July 20, 1979, when the United Nations' special Joint International Emergency Commission on Human Rights officially declares *Gallus gallus* members of the human race--and he tells of the riots that break out in the wake of that decision.

When I began reading *Elmer*, it felt like a clever allegory of the civil rights movement--the resolutions of equality, the new laws, the racist backlash, the radical groups, the hate crimes and schoolyard bullying. And, yes, it can be read that way. But the farther in I got, the less it felt like an allegory for something else, and the more it seemed a manifesto for exactly what it portrayed: the vicious way we treat the animals on whom we depend for food, as Sue Coe documents so graphically and effectively, and the moral dilemma that we face between self-indulgence and human decency.

Alanguilan has worked as an inker for DC and Marvel Comics for over fifteen years, and his talent shines through: this is a beautifully, beautifully drawn book. Each chicken is fully as distinctive and recognizable on the pages as the humans are. The elegant lines run counter, at times, to the inevitable absurdity of a full-frontal chicken face. The story is serious, but isn't afraid to be funny, either, and it's endlessly captivating.

None of these books--except, possibly, Sue Coe's *Dead Meat*--are the kind of research resource that University Writing students would cite. But what they all do is help focus the areas of inquiry that Pollan's article raises; they serve as exhibits for the questions students might ask.

We love and cherish our pets, for example, while we cheerfully tuck into steaks made from animals raised in foul conditions and killed in worse ones. We mostly don't think about that

inconvenient paradox. We cuddle and indulge and coo at our pets, but would we still be able to do that if they were thinking, reasoning creatures? Isn't part of the charm of pets that we can project on to them whatever we want or need? If they could really talk back, could they--would they--still be our pets?

The questions the books raise are worth pondering by anyone, not least a student at a university whose core curriculum is devoted to the thinking that shaped western civilization. Such as--what do we owe our fellow creatures? In this great chain of being, what are our commonalities, and what are the moral ramifications of those commonalities? My best friend, at one point, was living a Zen Buddhist, macrobiotic existence. Then, a disruption in his building sent a wave--a torrent--of cockroaches through a vent into his apartment. For several hours, possible even more than a day, he held strong to his convictions to kill no living thing. But then he had to sleep with cockroaches wandering across his bed--and he snapped. He bombed the hell out of those bugs. Most people mean well towards animals until they reach their breaking point--and everyone's point is different. I suppose one could say the same of our attitude towards our fellow humans, as well.

In the lifetimes of ourselves and our parents we've seen great fights--for the rights of women, for the rights of African-Americans, for the rights of homosexuals. Is animal rights the next big fight? Is it a fight that only highly-industrialized nations have the luxury of indulging? (Here's a nice serendipity: the Columbia professor known for his work on the role of domesticated animals in society, [Richard Bulliet](#), is also the professor who was the first advocate for Columbia's graphic novels collection.) Is it only highly-industrialized nations that create the horrors of factory farms in the first place? Do nature films, that show nature red in tooth and claw, reveal a cruelty that is inherent in any species that preys on others?

I don't hold much of a moral high ground on this one myself. My own stance can be summed up in a bumper sticker I once saw: "If God didn't want us to eat animals, then why did he make them out of meat?" But I do try to avoid the product of factory farms, at the very least. Does this give me the right to look a cow in the eye with a clear conscience? Do any of us have that right?

And, in other news, this weekend is [MoCCA Fest](#)! Come on down to the Lexington Armory, on Lexington Ave between 25th and 26th Streets, April 9th and 10th, from 11 AM to 6 PM. I'll be moderating a [panel](#) Saturday at 11:30: "Teaching Comics," with [Jessica Abel](#), [Tom Hart](#), and [Bill Kartolopoulos](#). See you there!

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