

In Praise of Animals: Readers' Guide

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In Praise of Animals, edited by Edward Searl, is a quote collection that illuminates the relationship of human beings and animals. Inspiring poems, readings, and quotes touch a wide range of issues regarding humankind's place in the great scheme of Nature's interdependent web generally, and more specifically, humankind's relationships with animals.

Searl maintains:

“Our relationships with animals are varied. They inspire us and visit us with beauty. They do our work and provide us food. They live in our homes and dispel our loneliness. We grieve their deaths. The poems, quotations, and readings of this collection speak to some of the vital lives that make up the animal world to which we belong.

“Animals, including human beings, are part of a long and grand evolutionary scheme of branching diversity. From the intricate grasshopper to the majestic elephant, every creature has a unique destiny and gives particular meaning to the cosmos. Each species has its niche and exists for its own sake, bound together in Nature's interdependent web of existence. We rejoice in the richness and complexity of life on this earth and confess with shame our role in the extinction of species.

“We are just beginning to understand the inherent dignity and worth of other creatures beyond any utility they may have for us. Progressive thinkers—philosophers, theologians, ethicists, scientists, and naturalists—have begun to consider animal rights as a moral imperative.

“Dogs and cats in particular have special places in human imaginations and hearts. For millennia they have provided intimate links to life's larger meaning. They often awaken our love, as they give us companionship.

“This collection will stimulate a larger understanding of the relationships among animals and human beings. Such an understanding will promote a more ethical consciousness relative to our animal brothers and sisters. We are fellow sojourners in a great adventure—the chain of life—that is billions of years long.”

Questions for Study and Discussion

In Praise of Animals explores the relationship between human beings and animals through 5 sections:

I Teach Me of My Kin pp.1-38

II What Is a Grasshopper Good For? Pp.40-79

III At Least One Cat pp.81-99

IV Dogs Are a Yes pp. 103-124

V They Bless Us pp.127-165

Here are questions, highlighting carefully chosen selections in each section, to use for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

I Teach Me of My Kin

Alan Devoe p.8: “Anima is soul, breath of life, the indwelling self at the core of being.” Consider your anima. What glimmers of anima do you recognize in both wild and companion animals? How does your anima and an animal’s anima differ? How is it the same?

Annie Dillard pp. 8-9: What is the nature of the unexpected encounter between Dillard and a wild weasel? After the weasel disappeared, what was Dillard’s spirit pleading for?

Edward Abbey pp. 9-10: Abbey cautions us against attributing human motives to animals—what is known as anthropomorphizing. However, we also project our human ways onto animals, such as Farley Mowat, pp. 19-20, does with a pair of wolves. Rachel Carson p. 28 recommends that animals have a “physical” nature and humans have a “psychological” nature. Can we “know” the reality/physical nature of any animal?

Richard Dawkins pp. 25-26: In the historical/chronological narrative of the origins and evolution of Nature Dawkins contends that it makes no sense to focus on human beings. He offers a paradox of the backward perspective of Unity and the forward perspective of Diversity. What is the value of holding in dynamic tension this double vision of the Unity and Diversity of life?

Jamie Sams p.3: In the conclusion of her poem “Making Family” Sams speaks of the “mission of my Relations” with her animal kin. What is that mission?

II What Is a Grasshopper Good For?

Jeffrey Lockwood p. 41: Respond to Lockwood’s contention: A grasshopper isn’t good for anything. ... The grasshopper just is.” How does the reality of any creature justify its existence?

Elizabeth Tarbox pp. 47-48: Tarbox wrestles with the dilemma of her dominion over a companion animal and what that animal came to mean in her home and family. She makes a pledge to all animals in the form of a prayer. In a complex and sometimes conflicted relationships with animals, what are your boundaries and values?

Peter Singer pp. 68-69: Singer advocates “animal rights.” In the larger scheme of Nature and a natural ethic, what rights do animals have? How do those rights translate into the human realm—personally and collectively? (Refer to Jeremy Bentham p.70, his concluding inference regarding the suffering of animals.)

Kahlil Gibran p. 64: Since we must “kill and rob” animals to eat and sustain our lives, how do we offer recompense by making eating “an act of worship?”

III At Least One Cat

Thomas Hardy pp. 90-92: Have you ever mourned the death of a cat (or a dog)?

Konrad Lorenz p. 95: Lorenz argues that a cat, at least compared to a dog, maintains much wildness. In your experience are cats more “wild” than not? Do they maintain their independence to an extraordinary degree? Do these attributes attract you to cats?

Jean Cocteau p.99: How does a cat become the “visible soul” of a home?

IV Dogs Are a Yes

Roy Blount, Jr. p107: Do you agree with Blount’s contention that a dog is essentially “willing” to do whatever you want it to do? How is that quality appealing?

Loren Easley p.109: Do you agree with Easley that there is “a bond between man and beast” that takes humankind into ancient origins—our own primordial origins which we share with animals? (Compare Susan Fromberg Schaeffer pp. 111-112 regarding the bonds of love and wildness between dogs and humans.)

Jim Charanis p. 110: Charanis writes, “No one loves like a dog who is loved.” Can we say that dogs do, indeed, love? (Compare Polish Proverb p. 124.)

Margaret E. Bruner p. 120: Do dogs have an uncanny and unique means to know, even anticipate, human moods and needs

V They Bless Us

Victoria Safford p. 128: Safford describes an extraordinary imaginary world that is, in fact, our ordinary world. (Do we see it?) She then asks if such a world existed, and it does, how should we respond to it? (Are we filled with reverence?) Do you see; and are you filled with reverence?

Rachel Carson p. 136: Carson teases out the blessings of Nature: beauty, strength, continuity. What blessings do you take from Nature, specifically the blessings of animals?

Patrick Murfin p. 150: Murfin asks “Who blessed the land? Who kept it?” Do you have answers for these related questions. (See Joseph Wood Krutch pp. 152-153, Izumi Shikibu p. 154, and Meister Eckhart p.164.)

Wendell Berry p. 165: “I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.” Have you experienced such grace and freedom?

Edward Searl, a Unitarian Universalist minister since 1977, is author of *A Place of Your Own*, Berkley Books and *In Memoriam: A Guide to Modern Funeral and Memorial Services*, Skinner House Books. He is the editor of a series of quotation collections for Skinner House Books: *Bless This Child*, *Coming of Age*, *We Pledge Our Hearts*, *Beyond Absence*, and *In Praise of Animals*. He is minister emeritus of the Unitarian Church of Hinsdale, Illinois.