

MIT Open Access Articles

Review of Janick Auburger and Peter Keating. Histoire humaine des animaux de l'Antiquite a nos jours

The MIT Faculty has made this article openly available. **Please share** how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

Citation: Ritvo, Harriet. Review of: Histoire humaine des animaux, de l'Antiquite a nos jours by Janick Auburger; Peter Keating (277 pp., Paris: Ellipses, 2009) Isis 102.1 (March 2011), pp. 141-142.

As Published: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/660208>

Publisher: University of Chicago Press on behalf of The History of Science Society

Persistent URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/72395>

Version: Author's final manuscript: final author's manuscript post peer review, without publisher's formatting or copy editing

Terms of use: Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0



Janick Auberger; Peter Keating. Histoire humaine des animaux de l'Antiquité à nos jours. 277 pp., illus., bibl. Paris: Ellipses, 2009. EUR24 (paper).

One reason for the recent burgeoning of scholarly interest in other animals (that is, of interest outside disciplines like zoology and veterinary medicine where they have always held center stage) is their ubiquity. They are everywhere, as they have been since our beginnings. Once animals were recognized as legitimate research subjects in the humanities and social sciences, they inevitably inspired attempts to define a new multi-disciplinary field (often called “animal studies”) and then to package it in conferences, journals, and textbooks. But the expansiveness and variety that constitute much of the appeal of this incipient field also produce impediments to its institutionalization. The ambitious overview under review illustrates some of the inherent challenges, even when the attempt at comprehensiveness is limited to a more-or-less single discipline and a more-or-less single geographical area (the West, generously defined, with occasional nods to China, India, South America, and other places).

Histoire humaine des animaux is an attempt, envisaged as between “la publication scientifique et l’ouvrage de pure vulgarisation” (13) to distill the shared history of humans and other animals, beginning with human prehistory (and with occasional reference back to our primate ancestors, and once even to the origin of life). The book is not, however, structured chronologically. Implicitly acknowledging the difficulty of producing a unified narrative account of human-animal relations, even within Western culture, Auberger and Keating have chosen to organize their survey thematically. Each chapter treats a separate topic; within each chapter (or, occasionally, within the clearly labeled subchapters) chronology prevails. The chapter topics cover many of the major

ways in which people interact with other animals—starting with religion, then proceeding to philosophy and science, to domestication, to the manipulation of animals in agriculture (mostly) and in scientific research (only a few pages at the end of the chapter), to pets and show animals, and finally to animals in art and literature. On the whole, the authors summarize existing scholarship under these rubrics, offering only occasional interpretive interventions. For example, they argue that Descartes’ understanding of animals, which is routinely caricatured and disparaged, was nearly identical to the understanding that underlies the approved standard practices of modern scientists. In their discussion of current animal advocacy, they suggest that claims that non-human animals have rights should be paired with claims that they have corresponding obligations.

This structure produces some predictable problems. The period covered is not the same for all the chapters—none begins later than the medieval period, but some begin thousands of years earlier. The constant circling back over the same times and places inevitably results in overlap and repetition, as does the authors’ uncertainty about whether certain issues belong to religion or philosophy or science. Treating a particular period—ancient Greece or Enlightenment France—in several different chapters makes it difficult to extract a coherent sense of human-animal relations at a single time and place. Thought consistently receives more attention than action. At times Histoire humaine des animaux seems like a history of Western philosophy with special attention to non-humans. The shortest chapter has the most concrete topic—domestication—and even so, it is padded with accounts of plant domestication and of human origins.

The book is attractively produced, with numerous well chosen (though small) illustrations. As the authors themselves make clear, it is not intended for readers who

possess specialist knowledge of its subject; rather they hope that it will encourage readers new to the topic to explore further in the scholarly literature—both Francophone and Anglophone—that they list in the very useful bibliography.

Harriet Ritvo is the Arthur J. Conner Professor of History at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her books include The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age; The Platypus and the Mermaid, and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination; The Dawn of Green: Manchester, Thirlmere, and Modern Environmentalism; and Noble Cows and Hybrid Zebras: Essays on Animals and History.