

This dog

is not
a human
being ...
(right?)

Dressed-up pups and cosseted cats have long troubled **Charlotte Wood**. But for all her discomfort at the humanisation of pets, she can't help wondering if she's missing something. »



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EARLIER THIS YEAR, a bravery medal was awarded to one of the explosive-detection dogs used by Australian defence forces in Afghanistan. The dog, named Sarbi, disappeared during a battle with the Taliban in which nine Australian soldiers were injured. The dog was not seen again by her handler until more than a year later, when a US soldier saw the black Labrador-cross with an Afghan man, and returned Sarbi to the Australians.

I was deep in the writing of my new novel, *Animal People*, when a ceremony awarding Sarbi an RSPCA Purple Cross was reported, apparently without irony, by every major news outlet.

At the ceremony on the lawn of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, RSPCA president Lynne Bradshaw praised Sarbi's "incredible resilience and strength". Dressed for the occasion in a suit and pearls, Bradshaw knelt down, saying, "Congratulations, congratulations" and petting Sarbi as she hung the medal, on a purple satin ribbon, around the dog's neck.

Back at the lectern, Bradshaw said Sarbi won the Purple Cross "for the courage she has shown while serving her country during her time in Afghanistan". The RSPCA wished to raise awareness of this and other animals' "unquestioning and unwavering service to man", she said. Afterwards, Sarbi posed for media photographs with military dignitaries and schoolchildren.

I watched this coverage with a bewilderment clearly not shared by anyone at the ceremony, or it seemed, by the journalists or television presenters who reported the event with complete seriousness – without, even, the indulgent smiles usually reserved for heart-warming animal stories at the end of bulletins.

Was I alone in my bafflement? Surely the language here was strange, at best; at worst, indicative of a case of complete denial. It hardly needs stating that neither Sarbi nor any other animal (including Simpson's donkeys, one of which was the only previous military recipient of the Purple Cross) had any choice in being sent to war. Not only that, but bomb-detection dogs are so highly and rigidly trained that the idea that they could "question" or "waver" from instructions is absurd. As Paul McGreevy, professor of animal behaviour at the University of Sydney, has written, "creative responses are inappropriate in animals going into battle. Flexibility in the responses of animals used in warfare can threaten human lives and so cannot be encouraged."

Another darker but obvious thought arises: apart from their extraordinary sense of smell, surely one of the reasons dogs are used in bomb



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detection is that their lives are deemed more expendable than those of soldiers – an idea so repellent we seem completely unable to face it. In fact, it seems that the truth is so abhorrent – that we have forced Sarbi into servitude, terrifying her, endangering her life – that instead we pretend the complete opposite: Sarbi is a noble, brave, patriotic soul who chooses to risk her life “serving her country”.

Sarbi is the subject of a new book, *Saving Private Sarbi: The True Story of Australia's Canine War Hero*, released next month, and has her own Facebook page, full of loving messages praising her for her heroism and bravery: “Proud of you Sarbi”; “You look beautiful Sarbi, congrats to you and all the other dogs working in the Defence Forces. You are my precious hero, well done lovely one”; “Congratulations Sarbi, you can see how proud you are in your eyes. The Amazing Aussie Trooper ... Great job girl ... you are a Legend xxx” and so on and so on.

I transferred my mystification about this episode to Stephen, the main character of my novel. Like me, Stephen most definitely does not see himself as an “animal person”. Like me, he's allergic to animal hair and dander, has always been puzzled at the way some people coo and goo over their pets, and is slightly ashamed of his own discomfort about it.

Sometimes I have wondered if it was growing up in the country, although not on a farm, that somehow stunted my “cute response” when it comes to animals. Is it possible for a meat eater to say they respect animals? Probably not, yet I feel that I do. I don't kill spiders, I only cook “ethically raised” meat, I love camping among creatures and have been truly moved by seeing animals in the wild, such as koalas sleeping in their trees as

I passed by in the bush. But I feel that animals and I occupy separate realms.

Despite having pets throughout my early childhood, I have always felt awkward when faced with high emotion about animals. When I was growing up, the delineation between us and animals was clear: human needs came first, animals lived outside and nobody gave their cat a birthday present. The animals on my school friends' farms were either for work or for food. I recall feeling that I loved my pet black rabbit, whose name was Monty, with his long, satiny ears. But when Monty got sick and died, I don't remember experiencing real grief. I may have gone through the motions, understanding that girls were required to weep over dead pets, but I doubt it lasted long.

Is it a mark of my callousness that my entire life I have been perplexed by sentimentality towards animals? When people let their dogs “kiss” them, or carry pictures of their cats' fluffy faces in their wallets, or coo about the inner lives of their pets with as much saccharine indulgence as any parent about a new baby, my overwhelming response is embarrassment.

THE SARBI EPISODE SHOULD NOT HAVE SURPRISED me as much as it did, for by then I had been reading and exploring in fiction the vastly contradictory nature of human-animal relationships for some time. Books such as anthro-zoologist Hal Herzog's *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard to Think Straight About Animals*; John Berger's *Why Look at Animals?* and the brilliant Australian tome *The Finlay Lloyd Book About Animals* explore these contradictions in riveting detail.

My favourite TV show became *Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan*, in which the Mexican-American trainer spends much of each episode gently explaining to his clients that their dog is not a human being, and to treat it as such is damaging to the animal's psychological and physical health. I recall one woman firmly telling him that her dog's problem was “he thinks he's a human”. Millan smiled kindly, said, “No, he doesn't”, and waited in silence as the realisation slowly passed over the woman's face. “Oh ...,” she said. “We think he's a human.” It had never occurred to her before.

Our culture is drenched in anthropomorphic slush. Zoos depend on it almost entirely, if their marketing is any guide. Visiting Adelaide Zoo, I was intrigued to see little signs – like online dating profiles – explaining the “personalities” of the pandas. Wang Wang, apparently, is “quite laid-back and enjoys spending time with his keepers”, while Funi “can be very playful and adventurous”. Both pandas were given a birthday party a few weeks ago, with zoo visitors invited to watch the bears “receive birthday presents, including ice cakes and treat-filled papier mâché balloons”.

Of course, all this might be completely harmless. The zoos (Adelaide is by no means alone) could claim their cutesy personification is aimed mainly at children, although I'm not so sure that's true. And perhaps there's nothing really wrong with anthropomorphism, anyway – it is, after all, a pathway to empathy, and prevention of animal cruelty surely relies upon it.

But I find most of it troubling because it seems so disrespectful. Denying the creature's essential nature – its very animality – is surely an act not of admiration, but subjugation. To downplay the differences between species is to promote the assumption that “humans will only accept what is like themselves”, as American scholar Shelly R. Scott puts it.

But that's not all. The flip side of our culture's grossly sentimental failure to embrace the “otherness” of animals – the failure to imagine them as anything but approximations of ourselves – is a deep ugliness in our treatment of them. We force a dichotomy in which animals are either so like us that we cannot separate their needs from our own, or so unlike us as to be aliens, undeserving of any rights at all. The more we sentimentalise, the more we also brutalise.

In this way, then, it is possible for most self-declared animal lovers to happily consume the flesh of intensively farmed chickens, pigs and other creatures who have experienced nothing but unspeakable suffering from birth to death. As a society, we may turn to mush at a kitten in a tissue box on YouTube, but Australians also kill their dogs and cats in staggering numbers. *The Sydney Morning Herald* earlier this year reported that we euthanise about 250,000 dogs and cats each year. While a proportion of those are no doubt “put down” due to illness, it's unsettling to discover that in Britain, a nation with a human population three times ours, only 25,000 are killed. Since we settled this country we have also repeatedly introduced species that we have then declared to be vermin, thus justifying methods of extermination so sadistic they would be illegal in any other context.

AS I WROTE MY NOVEL, I TRIED TO WORK out what it is that Sarbi's fans find rewarding in writing her messages she will never see or understand. Is it as simple as playfulness? Does this kind of baby talk allow adults to express some part of ourselves that is otherwise prohibited? Or might there be some deeper need, to invest animals with a purity and innocence we cannot ascribe to any human?

I have been aware, as I read and thought and wrote about “animal people”, that the deficiency in understanding here is mine. Watching the peaceable companionship between my friend Vicki and her Jack Russell, Gus, for example, a friendship that endured for the whole 15 years of his life, I knew something rich and deep was going on.

But when I asked many other pet owners what sharing their home with an animal brought to their lives, I was intrigued that even people used to articulating complex thoughts and emotions in other matters were often unable to elucidate what their pet's presence gave them.

It leads me to wonder if animals might bring to human lives another plane of existence, one almost impossible to articulate using language. Which, perhaps, is why we fall back on cutesy gush and clichés about unconditional love. We seem to have no adult language for expressing what is for many a seriously meaningful bond.

As with most things that confuse me, I suspect simply paying closer attention might unlock the puzzling nature of human-animal bonds. As Vicki pointed out, for one species to trust another enough to lie down together and sleep – not because of their similarity but despite their difference – is, when you think about it, awe-inspiring. And perhaps it's in this quiet space that things might be revealed.

The writer Michelle de Kretser has spoken of the way animals can help dissolve the rigid barrier between mind and body our culture otherwise insists upon. And John Berger wrote of the sudden revelation, in “the half-light of glimpses”, of another order of existence that “intersects with ours and has nothing to do with it”. It is here, he says, in the interstitial space between two worlds occupied by animals, that the profound may be discovered.



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Dog days: (above) Sarbi with RSPCA president Lynne Bradshaw and dog handler Corporal Adam Exelby at Sarbi's Purple Cross award ceremony in Canberra in April.



For the first time, I begin to understand the potential depth in human-animal relationships. That despite the brutality and sentimentality, there is also the possibility – one I have missed out on – of bonds that transcend language, that open up another dimension of human living and the possibility of profound, enduring love. **GW**

Animal People by Charlotte Wood is published by Allen & Unwin on October 3.

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