



Essay Review

We're All Animals

By

David P. Barash

A review of *You're an Animal, Viskovitz!* By Alessandro Boffa.
176 pp, Knopf (2002)

A quick perusal of previous articles in *Human Nature Review* shows that so far, all the books under review have been nonfiction (or at least, intended as such by their authors!). And yet, reflection suggests that fiction, too, has much to teach us about human nature; indeed, it can be maintained that all literature concerns, in one way or another, what it means to be human, with the greatest and most enduring works being those that yield – and reflect – the greatest such insights. Literature, after all, is not like abstract expressionist painting, composed of “pure creativity” and devoid of objective content. Nearly always, it reflects people behaving in a world (whether real or imagined) that is embedded in physical and biological realities, revealing comprehensible patterns of sex, competition, communication, survival, and so forth.

Insofar as this is true, then all such works – fiction or nonfiction, accounts of family strife, sexual striving, efforts at self-realization, cheap romance novels, adventure stories, war reporting, streams of consciousness, biographies, autobiographies, epic fanta-

sies and quiet reminiscences - should be grist for the “human nature” mill. It may nonetheless be easiest to begin with Alessandro Boffa’s *You’re an Animal, Viskovitz!*, which deals explicitly with the biology-human interface ... and which is also wildly inventive and just plain hilarious.

Boffa’s offering is short, sweet, and simply a gem. It consists of 20 brief vignettes, each of them starring “Viskovitz,” who appears as a shark, a parrot, a dung-beetle, an intestinal worm, a snail, etc., ever seeking his soul-mate, the infinitely desirable but often unattainable “Ljuba.” Throughout, various other characters (Zucotic, Petrovic, Lopez, Lara, and Jana), keep showing up in different incarnations, sometimes as competitors, sometimes as friends, the latter two as less than satisfactory lovers). Just as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* introduced the theme of bodies changing into different creatures, Boffa’s *Viskovitz* pops up as the centerpiece in a comedic bestiary, with zoological sophistication replacing classic mythology. Like that of Kafka’s Gregor Samsa, I advise that we simply

accept Viskovitz's frequent metamorphoses, and let them carry us to new insights or – as in Boffa's case – new levels of merriment.

Among my favorites:

I asked my mother, "What was Daddy like?"

"Crunchy, a bit salty, rich in fiber." [Viskovitz as mantis]

It began as indefinable itches, little hormonal disturbances that made my gaze linger on the folds of some mantles, trying the guess their shape under the shell, admiring the undulations of their feet. ... I began to secrete mucus for no reason. [Viskovitz as snail]

"Ljuba, why don't you love me?" I asked.

"Because you're a worm, you're vile, you don't have a spine, you don't have any guts."

"And?"

"Because you're insipid. Because you have no head, no character, no sensitivity." ...

"And?"

"You have a tiny penis." [Viskovitz as parasitic worm]

Other delights include a stickleback fish with an unrequited love for a cardboard cut-out

(shades of "releasers," à la Niko Tinbergen), a chameleon trying to find itself (more challenging than one might think, given the change-artistry of chameleons!), a hermaphroditic snail who keeps referring to his/her parents as "mommydaddy" and "daddymommy" and who scandalizes the neighbors by self-fertilizing, a retired police dog with a penchant for Buddhist enlightenment as well as a serious heroine habit, and so forth.

Aside from being great fun, what is the lesson from Boffa's boffo biological buffoonery? Maybe just this: sensations, thoughts, emotions, anatomy, physiology ... everything is relative. To what? To what we are, biologically. Of course, scorpions don't marvel at their reflexive capacity for lethal violence, but if they could, they'd probably do so pretty much as Boffa imagines. And as human beings, we have the privilege of marveling at, as well as unraveling, what it means to be ourselves. We are each born with the capacity to live many different lives, yet we die having lived just one. Limited – unlike the protean Viskovitz – to a single species, we nonetheless are capable of great diversity in our personal trajectories, and yet it appears that even our potential is not unlimited. We, too, are animals, although in the case of *Homo sapiens*, exactly what that means remains to be discovered.

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