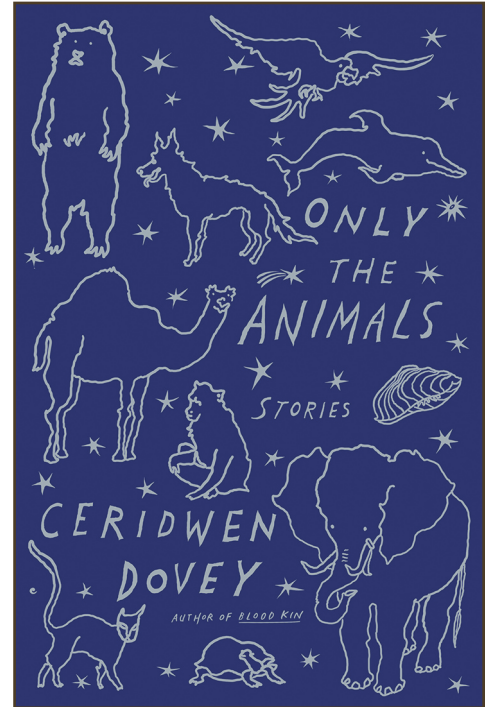


FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

Reading Group Gold

Only the Animals Stories

by Ceridwen Dovey



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Inventive and illuminating, *Only the Animals* traces a century of human history from the perspective of ten animals caught up in human conflicts. Connected to both famous and little-known writers in surprising ways, each animal tells an astonishing story of life and death, exploring provocative questions about the experiences that make life more than a quest for mere survival. From a beast of burden on an excruciating mission in Australia, accompanied by a poet drifter who was raised on Dickens and Poe, to Colette's impeccably wise cat, stranded in a trench on the Western Front, this collection weaves vignettes of beloved literary figures with intricate dilemmas for reader and narrator alike. A dolphin sent to Iraq by the U.S. Navy writes a letter to Sylvia Plath. A turtle is passed from Tolstoy's daughter to Virginia Woolf and then on to George Orwell, ultimately becoming enlisted in U.S.S.R.'s space program. At every turn, we absorb new levels of insight (particularly about longing and fulfillment) that only the animals can impart.

Ultimately raising the question of what separates human nature from the nature of our fellow creatures—and invoking the power of storytellers to enhance our understanding of our interconnected world—these intricately woven, exquisitely written stories form a beautiful meditation on life and literature. We hope that the following discussion topics will enrich your reading group's experience.

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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Which of the book's epigraphs resonated with you the most? How do these fictional stories, showcasing fiction writers as characters (often in stories within stories), give voice to reality?
2. In the opening story, what does the camel have in common with the Aboriginal cargo? What do Mister Mitchell's memories illustrate about profit and power?
3. How do Colette and Kiki echo and influence each other? Are Kiki's feelings of superiority well deserved? (Is she indeed superior to the other creatures in the story?)
4. Discuss the reference to Kafka's "A Hunger Artist," featuring a public performance of starvation, that appears in Red Peter's story. What do Red Peter, Evelyn, and Hazel hunger for besides food?
5. Is karma proved or disproved by the wolf-dog's life story, winding from a vegetarian master who seeks enlightenment (from a master who compares Hitler to Krishna) to the execution of the pragmatic pig, culminating in the narrator's assignment as a soldier?
6. As the passionate mussels fulfill their battleship dream (with the U.S. Navy at Pearl Harbor, no less), what do they tell us about the urge to become a hero? What does *Only the Animals* teach us about the forces that propel humans into war?
7. What accounts for the turtle's astonishing longevity, from the Russian Revolution to the Space Age? If you were to become someone's pet, would you be better off in the hands of a literary luminary?
8. In "I, the Elephant, Wrote This," how do the narrator's beautiful descriptions of motherhood compare with her beliefs about a glorious death? How did each of the stories in *Only the Animals* affect your beliefs about mortality—and immortality?
9. Can the tales of the brown bear and Irena be read as fables? If so, what is the lesson? What does the presence of the supernatural witch in this chapter indicate about the presence of evil in the world?
10. What makes the life and literature of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes an appropriate backdrop for the dolphin's autobiography?
11. How did you react to the closing scene, where Barnes the parrot is forced to live alone? Would you have made the same choice if you had owned Barnes under similar circumstances?
12. In each of the book's story lines, what remains consistent across time, regardless of place?

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13. Red Peter asserts that masochism is what separates humans from other animals; Evelyn rejects this, saying that romance is the defining trait. What do you believe is the key feature that distinguishes humans from other animals? Has the book changed the way you perceive animals?
14. How did the book's illustrations affect your experience of the characters' soulful journeys?
15. How does *Only the Animals* further develop the perspectives on tragedy, destiny, and power presented in Ceridwen Dovey's previous book, *Blood Kin*?

PRAISE FOR *ONLY THE ANIMALS*

"The life stories related by these very civilized animals are in some cases touching (the elephant), in others amusing (the mussel), but all are absorbing. They are transmitted to us with a light touch and no trace of sentimentality." —J. M. Coetzee

"By appropriating history, mythology, folklore, and even astrology, Dovey finds impressive depth and complexity in the souls of an array of animals . . . Dovey finds humanity in her diverse protagonists, and the stories are full of surprises, warmth, and insight." —*Publishers Weekly*

"Dovey succeeds in providing original bittersweet tales with the hard-edged truths of history. An essential collection, enthusiastically recommended." —*Library Journal* (starred review)

"Wonderfully weird and profoundly witty . . . Dovey's stories, at once charming and haunting, are something else altogether. 'Absorbing' is not quite the right word for them—their poetic oddness keep them at arm's length—but they are intoxicating nonetheless. As unsettling as they are beautiful, these quietly wise stories wedge themselves into your mind—and stay there." —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ceridwen Dovey's debut novel, *Blood Kin*, was published in fifteen countries, short-listed for the Dylan Thomas Award, and selected for the U.S. National Book Foundation's prestigious 5 Under 35 honors list. *The Wall Street Journal* named her one of their "artists to watch." Born in South Africa, she studied social anthropology at Harvard and New York University and now lives with her husband and son in Sydney. *Only the Animals* recently won the 2014 Readings New Australian Writing Award. For more information, visit <http://www.ceridwendovey.com/>.

Guide written by Amy Clements