
Charlotte Wood is one of Australia’s most skilful contemporary authors. Since her 1999 debut, *Pieces of a Girl*, Wood has become known and celebrated for her complex and convincing characters, her observant eye, and her ability to examine the domestic and the commonplace and offer striking insights. Her second novel, the Miles Franklin shortlisted *The Submerged Cathedral* (2004), was a poetic exploration of romantic love and the familial ties that bind, and the bestselling *The Children* (2007) followed a family of adult siblings who return to their home town after their father has an accident. Wood’s precise representation of the children’s prickly rivalry, and the ways in which grief, trauma and bearing witness to suffering impact upon their relationships, marked her as an outstanding Australian writer of the literary family drama.

Her fourth and latest novel will undoubtedly cement this reputation. *Animal People* is a sequel to *The Children* (taking place four years later), with Stephen Connolly, the drifting, often-absent middle-child from *The Children* as its protagonist. Described as ‘an urban love story’, the character-driven narrative takes place over a day in the life of the now 39 year old Stephen – the day he has decided to dump his girlfriend Fiona – and considers the conflict between desire for, and fear of intimacy, family and freedom.

When the novel opens Stephen is still as quietly dissatisfied with life as he was in *The Children*. Determined to break up with the supportive Fiona for reasons he is barely aware of, Stephen is caught between surrendering to his own propensity for passivity, and persisting in a relationship that makes him happy, but limits his freedom. His continued ambivalence towards his family is similarly indicative of his conflicted nature. An inane early morning phone call from his mother leaves Stephen feeling guilty, panicked and mutinous. ‘He hated this obnoxious need of his mother’s for him to be improved, her years of cautious hinting that he could be better if he only tried’ (18). It’s a foreboding start to what proves to be a disastrous day for Stephen. As he attempts to make his way to his dead-end job in a zoo kiosk, avoids his family’s judgement, suffers the macho aggression of Fiona’s ex-husband and endures her daughter’s calamitous birthday party, Stephen is met with one obstacle after another. Nothing, it seems, can possibly go right for him, and somehow he is to blame. He is a character horribly aware of ‘all the various arenas of his failure’ (20) and his profound ability to disappoint others. It is his ambiguous response to this knowledge which drives the narrative.

Wood is a writer of astonishing acuity, and she invests Stephen’s mundane interactions with the urban world around him with revelatory humour. It is this which enables the reader to grow fond of Stephen, for all his disaffection. Stephen ponders whether the ‘healthy and well-kept’ *Big Issue* vendor is actually homeless, capitulates to the donation-seeking animal-welfare worker in the mall only to horrify her with his admission that he works at the zoo, and notes the ‘shimmer of anxiety’ that fills a bus when a drunk gets on. His encounter with his neighbours and their German shepherd, Balzac, who promptly lodges his snout between Stephen’s buttocks, is hilarious, but also facilitates deeper consideration of how and why others perceive him as a loser: ‘Stephen knew he demonstrated some lack of humanity by not being a Dog Person.'
This seemed unfair. … Not to be musical or intellectual was unremarkable and provoked no suspicion. But not to be an animal person somehow meant he wasn’t fully human’ (28). The novel is littered with such sharply drawn observations.

Animals, too, are ever-present throughout Animal People. At times the book seems oversaturated with references to pet shops, circuses, butchers, crazy cat ladies and even My Little Pony, as much as they provide the subtext to Stephen’s grapple with what it means to be free. Stephen, too, continuously meditates on human-animal relationships, commenting at one point that ‘he found the zoo depressing. It was not the cages so much as the people – their need to possess, their disappointment, the way they wanted the animals to notice them’ (28-9). He cannot comprehend the possibility of reciprocal affection between pets and their owners – ‘What was this love? Was it like love between people? He felt this to be impossible’ (29) – and the reader comes to understand that the possibility for change and fulfilment in Stephen’s life hinges on whether he will be able to better comprehend the nature of this love.

By turns humorous, intelligent, playful and melancholy, Animal People is deceptive in its apparent simplicity. Wood is at the height of her powers, and her ability to wrest startling truths from the ordinary and the familiar is astonishing. For those who have read The Children, there is enormous satisfaction in learning more about what plagues Stephen, and Wood’s own transition from examining the darker side of family life to a more comical consideration will delight many. This is a tender portrayal of a man struggling to discover what it is that he yearns for.

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