This is the author’s radio script of this article.
Eva Hornung has the most astonishing imagination. She has already stunned readers, writing as Eva Sallis, with novels like *Fire, Fire* and *The Marsh Birds* where she shows the world through the eyes of damaged and maltreated children. Now, with *Dogboy*, she has coolly dismantled the barricades around what it means to be human.

Romochka is four when his small world dissolves. He has been living with his mother and ‘uncle’ in a Moscow apartment. His, we understand, is a rackety world where boys have mothers and uncles rather than mothers and fathers. Nevertheless, his mother, however irregular her life, has been a watchful mother and instilled in him the importance of staying safely in the apartment – ‘if you ever set foot outside, both Uncle and I will kill you, first me, then him’ – and not speaking to strangers. So when his mother disappears, followed by the services, the furniture, and his ‘uncle’, he is puzzled: ‘In his short life his uncle and the phone had in general been less reliable than his mother, the heating and the furniture.’ Exploring boldly beyond the flat when the food runs out, he realises that the whole building has been abandoned. Since he has been instilled with a fear of human strangers, he doesn’t seek help with people he recognises outside, and is taken under the wing of a friendly dog, who he calls Mamochka, or little mother, matriarch of a feral pack with a den in the cellar of an abandoned church.

Here Romochka learns to be a dog, although he has occasional moments of disillusion when he realises that he is not really a very good dog, with his short teeth, small ears and weak sense of smell. He quickly takes on an identity within the pack and learns their language, a language of the body rather than the voice. He sees that his new mother is just as protective as his first had been, and understands that the rest of the world is divided into enemies, including all humans and other dogs, and prey.

Hornung doesn’t hold back from describing any aspect of Romochka’s life, however confronting. He is young enough when he joins the pack to take on their set of values, though a residue of his mother’s training stays with him, reinforced by Mamochka’s deference to humans, which makes him resolve never to eat humans, dogs or cats. But what he eats is otherwise dictated entirely by what he and the other
dogs can hunt, scavenge or steal, a diet many readers will find quite appalling and, well, indigestible.

Given that J.M. Coetzee is equally concerned with questions of human and animal being, there is an interesting parallel with his *Life & Times of Michael K* in the last part of *Dogboy*. The perspective changes, and a pair of humans are introduced – a paediatrician and a behavioural scientist – who aim to help Romochka by rehabilitating him into the human world. They find Romochka’s smell overpowering, as do most other people – and to him they are ‘soap-stinky’. However, they are intelligent and well-intentioned and their failure to understand him completely is mitigated by their genuine concern for him, though they are less considerate of his dog family. It is a jolt to move back to the point of view of the human world, but Hornung resists the temptation to vilify the human and romanticise the dog world. Everyone in *Dogboy* is engaged in a struggle for something – survival, food, love, acceptance.

*Dogboy* is an imaginative feat, but must also have taken a huge amount of background work: ‘Lots of reading, lots of experimental writing, lots of Russian – and then a trip to Moscow. Then lots of writing, more Russian, more reading. And dog watching,’ Hornung told Jo Case.¹ The research has obviously been done thoroughly, but it has been thoroughly digested and transformed, and the result is densely textured, shocking and absorbing. Read *Dogboy* to be disturbed, to be prodded into thinking about the differences between human and animal nature, and to be immersed in a world you would never have thought a human was capable of experiencing.