

Through a Vegan Studies Lens

Textual Ethics and Lived Activism

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CHAPTER 2

The New Environmental Literature: Perspectives of a Vegan Publisher

John Yunker

If you were to walk into a bookstore and ask for the “vegan literature” section, you would probably be met with a blank expression, or, after some degree of confusion, directed to the vegan cookbooks section. That doesn’t mean that vegan literature doesn’t exist, just that it’s not easy to find. This degree of obscurity has proven a challenge not only to those who write vegan literature but to the publishers who produce such books for bookstore sections that don’t yet exist. As one such publisher, we’ve learned a lot over the past six years about this emerging field, and in this article share our perspective on vegan studies, where we think vegan literature is headed, and how it is already influencing environmental literature.

VEGAN STUDIES IS ABOUT MUCH MORE THAN COOKBOOKS

Based purely on what one sees in a bookstore, it can be easy to assume that the vegan movement is largely centered around cooking plant-based meals. For example, a December 2017 query of Amazon’s book catalog using the word “vegan” returned 9,466 results (out of a catalog that includes more than three million books). Approximately 90 percent of these books are cookbooks, with the rest comprised of nonfiction advocacy and how-to books.

Where are the fiction titles? They do exist, but not within any formally defined category, which is why vegan studies programs are essential—to helping bring clarity and definition where none exists. Vegan studies, by looking across genres and disciplines, identifies the emerging and

established artistic works that are pushing veganism into mainstream culture around the world. As a publisher, we work to play a role in not just publishing books *for* vegans, but publishing books to expand the vegan audience, an audience that is still relatively small. A 2016 Harris Poll commissioned by the Vegetarian Resource Group found that 3.7 million US adults (less than two percent) are vegan (“How Many Adults”).

VEGAN STUDIES IS ABOUT THE EMERGENCE OF A WORLDVIEW, NOT JUST A DIET

Though the number of vegans is vastly outweighed by the number of carnivores, that number is multiplying. As one indicator, the Veganuary movement (in which one commits to going vegan during the month of January) has grown from 3,300 participants in 2014 to an estimated 150,000 participants in 2018. Culturally, it appears that vegans are beginning to enjoy some time in the spotlight, as reflected in a recent BBC News headline: “Veganism: How a Maligned Movement Went Mainstream” (Lowbridge).

But like so many social movements, veganism is not emerging wholly formed nor singular. There are “ethical” vegans who do so for the animals while there are those who embrace veganism as a healthier way of life. There are those who are vegan periodically, such as on “Meatless Mondays.” There are *pescatarians* and *flexitarians* and there are those who resist the vegan label entirely, opting instead for “plant-based.”

As authors and publishers, we are sensitive to how these labels are used and how they are evolving in society. Our prime focus is on redefining the “environmental literature” label to be more inclusive of vegan literature. And we’re only just getting started.

THE ORIGINS OF A VEGAN PRESS

In 2008, I wrote a novel, *The Tourist Trail*, which tells the story of a vegan penguin researcher and her love affair with an anti-whaling activist (also vegan) who is on the run from the law. I found an agent to pitch the book to mainstream publishers, yet she was ultimately unable to find a home for the book. While the animal rights themes in the book made it a challenging sell, the larger challenge was one of categorization, or lack thereof. The feedback we received was, essentially, “We don’t know how to market this.”

Publishers typically acquire books that fall within clearly defined categories: such as literary fiction, women's fiction, romance, thriller, mystery. There is no "vegan fiction" category, nor one for the "environmental novel," and the lack of category, to large publishers, often implies a lack of a built-in audience. That's not to say that novels with vegan themes haven't been published over the past few years. *Elizabeth Costello* by J. M. Coetzee was published by a major press in 2003; however, this book was marketed as "literary fiction," and Coetzee had at that point already won the Booker Prize (twice) and was on the verge of winning the Nobel Prize.

My partner Midge Raymond and I both spent many years working in publishing, so we decided to publish *The Tourist Trail* ourselves. And by the end of the process we realized there might be other authors out there who have similarly struggled to find homes for their novels or short story collections. We founded Ashland Creek Press in 2011 with the goal of seeking out these manuscripts, and since then have published more than twenty novels and short story collections that have been variously labeled as "ecofiction" or "animal literature." And while labels such as these can be helpful, they can also be limiting, which is why we've pushed to expand the definition of *environmental literature* to include books with not only vegan characters but vegan worldviews.

REDEFINING ENVIRONMENTAL LITERATURE TO INCLUDE VEGAN LITERATURE

Pioneers of American environmental writing such as Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold fished and hunted the land even while doing their very best to help protect it. And this belief system, wherein writers "get close" to nature by extracting from it or by doing battle with it, remains largely intact today. While a hundred years ago, hunting and fishing were generally undertaken as a matter of survival, today, there are too many alternatives to justify these acts. And yet this "survival" myth endures, even when justification for hunting and fishing has less to do with physical survival than emotional or creative survival. As contemporary environmental author Rick Bass wrote in the *Sierra*, the Sierra Club's Magazine, "I don't think I would be able to sustain myself as a dreamer in this strange landscape if I did not take off three months each year to wander the mountains in search of game; to

hunt, stretching and exercising not just my imagination, but my spirit.”

But there is a growing chorus of writers who believe that animals have suffered long enough at the hands of human civilization, and that all animals, including those labeled “game” and “livestock,” deserve equal protection. And it is these writers who are helping to redefine environmental writing. For example, in the first volume of our short story anthology *Among Animals*, Charlotte Malerich’s story “Meat” portrays a family that has brought home an animal to raise for food, with the belief this will lessen their guilt over eating meat from factory farms. The animal remains species-less, which adds to the power of the narrative. The little girl in the family asks her parents if the animal is part of their family. “Of course she is,’ Dad told me. ‘We love her and take care of her, don’t we?’” The mother remains silent and, later, after the animal is butchered, the girl finds her mother in the kill room holding the animal’s lifeless body: “She was holding her against her chest, like the way sometimes she still held me even though I was too big for it” (Malerich 64).

Writers are also challenging the ethics of meat production and consumption in an age of climate change—not just in the United States but globally. *The Green and the Red*, written by French author Armand Chauvel and translated by American Elisabeth Lyman, tells the story of a French meat company executive who is on a mission to shut down the local vegetarian restaurant in order to take it over for a pork museum. When Mathieu first enters the restaurant, he plays the role of vegan:

To be on the safe side, Mathieu ordered pumpkin wonton soup as a starter, mushroom and polenta mousseline as his main dish, and flourless chocolate cake for dessert. He kept his menu to study while he waited. He noticed that certain dishes were labeled vegan—containing neither dairy nor eggs, according to the fine print at the bottom of the page—and figured that vegetarians must accept these two sources of animal protein in their diet. What a bunch of hypocrites! Where were animal rights in that equation? Vegans were at least consistent. Although if you looked closely enough, you would probably find larvae, termites, and other insects in a sack of grain. No, it was virtually fraudulent, just like these recycled-fiber napkins and those salt-and-pepper shakers made from old light bulbs. Ever since a girlfriend had

dumped him because he had “the carbon footprint of a midsize airplane,” he had hated anything and everything to do with the environment. (Chauvel 48)

What Mathieu doesn’t bargain on is falling in love with the proprietor of this café and becoming a convert along the way, and throughout the novel, the dueling perspectives, along with light humor and a very real look into how meat gets to one’s plate, offer up a romantic comedy that ultimately speaks to vegans and non-vegans alike.

At the far end of the animal rights spectrum are those insects that most of us would rather stay far away from. In the short story “Vivarium” by Claire Ibarra, in our collection *Among Animals 2*, a woman living alone in a Florida apartment captures a cockroach under a glass. Although initially terrified of it, finds herself bonding with this creature. She feeds it and introduces it to her friend as a companion animal:

Eva tried to imagine how it would look to someone else, the tiny foil dish of water, the crust of bread, and the disgusting cockroach in her homemade insectarium. She began a rant: “There was this cockroach loose in my apartment, and I didn’t know how to catch it, and the pillow didn’t work, and the dustpan has a short handle—not a long, standing one like my mom’s—and then it fell onto its back and couldn’t roll back over, and it can survive one week without water, but I learned that cockroach fossils date back two hundred and eighty million years, and they have a heart and brain, and they make group-based decisions, which means they are social, like humans, but this one is alone, like me—” Eva paused for a breath.

“Okay, hold on.” Victoria knelt and peered more intently into the cage. “Relax for a minute. Look, it’s eating the bread.” Victoria pointed at the bug.

Eva knelt next to Victoria, and both watched intently as the cockroach sat on the piece of crust, moving its head from side to side. (Ibarra 152)

THE BIRTH OF A PLANT-BASED VAMPIRE

One of the early novels we published was *Out of Breath*, the first of a young adult trilogy by Blair Richmond. In this series, readers witness not only the evolution of what constitutes environmental writing, but the evolution of the vegan vampire character.

The vampire has come a long way since the publication of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in 1897. For many years, vampires preyed exclusively on humans, sometimes in installments so as to draw out the life of their victims. But over the past two decades writers have reimagined the vampire in striking ways. Anne Rice gave us a vampire with movie-star looks and little difficulty in assimilating into human society. The Sookie Stackhouse series by Charlaine Harris depicts vampires who exist on synthetic blood, albeit not without the occasional tragic lapse.

The *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer introduced the concept of "vegetarian" vampires—though this term referred to vampires who feed on non-human animals. As Laura Wright notes in *The Vegan Studies Project*, "in Meyer's creation of so-called vegetarian vampires that are actually carnivores, the natures of both vampirism and vegetarianism become muddled and contradictory to the point that neither signifier actually means what it means. Not being a cannibal does not make one a 'vegetarian,' just as simply being pale and cold should not make one a 'vampire'" (55–56).

Collectively, these books introduced vampires who were in constant state of evolving. In *Out of Breath*, Kat, a young woman on the run from a violent home, finds herself in a small Pacific Northwest town with an entirely new species of vampire, living right alongside the remaining traditional, bloodthirsty vampires, including the handsome and mysterious Roman. One day Kat discovers her friend Alex's secret—not that he's a vampire, but how he survives as one:

"As I told you, we're adaptable," Alex says.

"You eat only from plants?"

"Exactly." He smiles. "So you see why I could never hurt you."

"A vegan vampire," I say, amazed to hear these words coming from my own mouth. Amazed that such a thing exists. Mostly, I'm relieved. My instincts have been right, maybe not about Roman, but about Alex. I am safe with him.

"Yes, a vegan vampire," Alex says.

"I've heard about vegetarian vampires," I say, "the ones that eat animals, not humans."

"Anyone who eats an animal, human or vampire, is not a vegetarian," Alex says. "To be vegetarian is to spare all mammals, all birds, all fish. But then, you know that already."

"Are you the only one?"

“There are others, but only a few. We have to keep a low profile, which is why I’ve waited so long to tell you. Many—vampires like Roman—believe it’s okay, even admirable, to kill a vegan vampire. We are lesser creatures in their eyes. And we threaten their existence.” (86)

Out of Breath, as well as the subsequent two books, known as The Lithia Trilogy, took vampire evolution to its supernatural conclusion. On a higher level, these books posed the crucial question: *If vampires can change their diets for the greater good, why can’t humans?*

“ACCIDENTALLY” VEGAN LITERATURE: FROM CHARLOTTE’S WEB TO MOBY-DICK

Just as we have “accidentally” vegan foods—foods, like Oreo cookies, that weren’t created with veganism in mind but happen to qualify as vegan—we also have literature that appeals to vegans. Such books might begin when an author had an affinity for a particular animal species and then crafted an amazing novel about this species. For example, the novel *Love and Ordinary Creatures* by Gwyn Hyman Rubio tells the story of a captured cockatoo who has fallen in love with its owner (a common behavior pattern among the species). Readers spend the entire novel inside the head of this bird and, by the end of the book, they understand the tragedy that is the life of a caged bird and, by extension, all wild animals that must endure lives imprisoned.

As a man who raised and slaughtered pigs, E. B. White likely didn’t set out to urge his readers to give up pork when he wrote *Charlotte’s Web*—and yet this book has subtly and powerfully inspired countless readers to rethink their relationships with animals. Similar statements have been made about animal testing by fans of *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* by Robert C. O’Brien, or *We Are Completely Beside Ourselves* by Karen Joy Fowler. Sometimes a singular work of fiction can, intentionally or not, result in positive change.

I believe that *Moby-Dick* is in itself an animal rights novel, though not in the way we might define this type of novel today. I can’t say with any degree of certainty that Herman Melville felt remorse for the whales he played a role in killing during his days on a whaling ship. But several times during the reading of the novel I got the feeling he was struggling with this issue through the narrator Ishmael. On occasion, Ishmael imagined the oceans from the whale’s perspective, and

was often amazed by the great intelligence, empathy, and bravery the species displayed through their actions:

The more I consider this mighty tail, the more do I deplore my inability to express it. At times there are gestures in it, which, though they would well grace the hand of man, remain wholly inexplicable. In an extensive herd, so remarkable, occasionally, are these mystic gestures, that I have heard hunters who have declared them akin to Free-Mason signs and symbols; that the whale, indeed, by these methods intelligently conversed with the world. Nor are there wanting other motions of the whale in his general body, full of strangeness, and unaccountable to his most experienced assailant. Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep. I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen. But I cannot completely make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face, I say again he has no face. (Melville 351)

In one passage in particular Ishmael calls out not only whale hunters specifically but carnivores in general:

It is not, perhaps, entirely because the whale is so excessively unctuous that landsmen seem to regard the eating of him with abhorrence; that appears to result, in some way, from the consideration before mentioned: i.e. that a man should eat a newly murdered thing of the sea, and eat it too by its own light. But no doubt the first man that ever murdered an ox was regarded as a murderer; perhaps he was hung; and if he had been put on his trial by oxen, he certainly would have been; and he certainly deserved it if any murderer does. Go to the meat-market of a Saturday night and see the crowds of live bipeds staring up at the long rows of dead quadrupeds. Does not that sight take a tooth out of the cannibal's jaw? Cannibals? who is not a cannibal? I tell you it will be more tolerable for the Fejee that salted down a lean missionary in his cellar against a coming famine; it will be more tolerable for that provident Fejee, I say, in the day of judgment, than for thee, civilized and enlightened gourmand, who nailest geese to the ground and featest on their bloated livers in thy pate-de-foie-gras.

But Stubb, he eats the whale by its own light, does he? and that is adding insult to injury, is it? Look at your knife-handle, there, my civilized and enlightened gourmand, dining off that roast beef, what is that handle made of?—what but the bones of the brother of the very ox you are eating? And what do you pick your teeth with, after devouring that fat goose? With a feather of the same fowl. And with what quill did the Secretary of the Society for the Suppression of Cruelty of Ganders formally indite his circulars? It is only within the last month or two that the society passed a resolution to patronize nothing but steel pens. (Melville 282).

I suspect, based on Melville's earlier writings, that he initially set out to write another epic adventure—the type of book that always sells—but at some point found himself writing something quite different, far more ambiguous, far more ambitious. While one could argue that the book glorifies whaling, I get the sense that Melville was playing more the role of the documentary filmmaker, displaying the gruesomeness of it all to show its cruelty. I'm not sure he was trying to turn people against whaling—the industry was already seeing its days numbered at this point in history—but I think he was deeply conflicted about the industry and America's role in leading it.

PUBLISHING INTENTIONALLY VEGAN LITERATURE

For the past three years we've sponsored the Siskiyou Prize for New Environmental Literature. The prize specifies “*new* environmental literature” to draw attention to the fact that we don't wish to publish books that glorify hunting and fishing as a means to humans' connection to nature, and this stance has raised awareness of the goals of our press. Today, we receive significantly more manuscripts from vegan authors than we did when we started, a sign that this chorus is growing not just in pitch but in numbers.

When looking at the vegan-centric books we have published over the years, we can loosely categorize them along a spectrum. On one side of the spectrum are books that raise awareness for one particular species, such as *The Dragon Keeper* by Mindy Mejia, which focuses on the Komodo dragon. On the other side are books that speak to *all* species, even species that may get very little love from any human; this would include our two *Among Animals* anthologies.

TODAY'S NICHE IS TOMORROW'S MAINSTREAM

It's one thing to find vegan literature, accidental or intentional, to publish. It's quite another challenge to find readers. While it can be difficult to remain optimistic in the face of such massive animal slaughter and abuse, as well as progressive environmental degradation, every day it seems there are more people interested in vegan literature. And the fact that veganism is, with each passing day, becoming a more familiar word in popular culture, more and more publishers are open to seeing manuscripts with vegan characters. For example, Midge recently published her novel *My Last Continent* through a major publisher (Scribner), and this novel had not one but two vegan protagonists as well as a strong environmental theme. As much as we love our press and the work we do, our greatest hope is that more books like this make it into the mainstream with the full force of the Big Five publishers behind them.

I believe this new era of writing will be best defined by the questions it poses, questions that were not commonly asked a generation or even a few years ago—like the question Alan Weisman asks in *The World Without Us*: “wipe us out and see what's left. How would the rest of nature respond if it were suddenly relieved of the relentless pressures we heap on it and our fellow organisms?” (5). So even though “vegan literature” sections may not yet exist in most bookstores (or online), we'll continue to contribute to them and, by patience and persistence, eventually see them into being.

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