

Advanced Mammals: Stories

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This summer, I set out to write a collection of short stories exploring the relationships between human and non-human animals, how humans have categorized the world in such a way as to set themselves apart as the most important species. I wanted to explore, through the lens of creative short fiction, how we relate to other animals, either by distinguishing ourselves from them or by blurring the lines between human and non-human. My goal in writing this collection was to deconstruct these hierarchies and differences we impose between species and to explore what it means to be human animals. I planned to have six to eight drafts completed by the end of the summer, and these stories were to become part of my Creative Writing honors project, to be completed during the coming school year.

Over the course of my ten-week fellowship, I read extensively from my proposed bibliography, which featured not only works of fiction about animals but also inspiring works of short fiction, films concerning animals, and nonfiction texts on biology and posthumanist theory. When I originally envisioned how my summer writing would go, I planned to read during certain hours of the day, according to a nine-to-five schedule, so that my reading would offer a break from and inspiration for my writing. This schedule lasted perhaps a week. I learned that I am not a person who can sit down and write according to the clock, and I can't put down a good book just because the allocated reading time is over. Breaking from the schedule I tried to impose on myself was difficult but necessary: difficult because it made me worry that I wouldn't write enough and that I wasn't writing how I was "supposed to"; necessary because it allowed me to write when inspired (which was often at odd hours, rarely early in the morning) and seek inspiration when stuck. I feel more confident entering the school year and approaching my honors project knowing that I can be flexible with how I approach the project and that the project will benefit from that flexibility.

When I proposed my writing topic, I already had many stories ideas, mainly focused around animal-related anecdotes and news articles about strange animal behavior and genetic traits. I thought that I would be able to simply tick these stories off my list, one after the other, but I ended up writing few of these stories. As I read works from my bibliography, I found myself inspired to write new and different stories, and I wrote better and more consistently when pursuing these inspired pieces than trying to slog my way through some of the story plans I had previously developed. I still hope to come back to some of those story ideas that for now remain just ideas and notes, but I am pleased by how the stories I wrote are truer to the aim of my project. Moving away from stories that are about "interesting" non-human animals, I looked more towards how these non-humans bring out the animal in us, as well as how non-human animals inform our ideas of humanity and push us to extreme versions of ourselves. A few of the stories I developed this summer focus on the absurdity of human behavior when it comes to non-human animals, leading to a more satirical approach to the subject matter. The stories I wrote this summer (six in total, of varying lengths) concern ideas such as the instinctual culture of women's disordered eating; the inherent miscommunication between species, in the form of a break-up story; what it means when girls, not animals, are hunted; and the obligation we feel to care for animals even when we do not care for people.

I look forward to pursuing this topic for my honors project, and I feel better prepared for the challenges ahead. I am deeply grateful to have had this opportunity, the time and resources, to focus on my writing, to learn more about the craft and my own relationship to it.

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