Book Review of *Animals* by Don LePan. Esplanade Books, Montréal, Quebec, 2009.

Amanda Graveline

In 1975, Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* catalyzed the conversation about animal cruelty; almost thirty years later the meat industry is still rampantly stockpiling grocery stores in North America, Asia, and Europe with meat product. Even more disturbing are the stories that remain willfully locked behind the high walls of animal pens, slaughterhouses, and kept from the media. Persuaded by Singer's book to become more conscious about animal rights, Don LePan's debut novel *Animals* powerfully reminds us that rib-eye, bacon, and veal are simple names that hide the stories and subjectivity of real animals. Blending fiction with the reality of our current meat industry, LePan urges us to finally rinse the Bulls-Eye BBQ sauce and sticky honey glaze from the animals we continue to disguise as the centerpieces of our Sunday dinners and summer barbeques.

Set in North America sometime in the not-so-distant twenty-first century, *Animals* depicts a world where meat and money are scarce, proper childcare has depleted, health problems are on the rise, birth defects are more common than ever, and "abnormal" human children are reclassified as pet mongrels. Addicted to the taste of protein sources, the human population confronts the near-extinction of all domestic animals by horrifyingly re-training their palettes to crave the taste of yurn, a delicacy made from slaughtered mongrels at Canfield farms. Concerned that her daughter is spending *too* much time with their new mongrel Sam (a human who is mistakenly reclassified as a pet, his deafness being misread as a nonhuman-like cognitive disability) Naomi's mother finds Sam a new home; Sam, however, eventually ends up in the hands of chattel farmers. In the end, Naomi's parents realize that they have made a terrible mistake in thinking that Sam is really that much different than their own loving, thinking and feeling daughter; the climax of the story culminates as they race to locate Sam among the millions of mongrels destined to be slaughtered.

The relationship that grows between Naomi and Sam is especially moving. From the moment she meets Sam, Naomi separates herself from the adults in the story by referencing the

creature as a “him” or a “he,” instead of an “it,” even at such a young age, Naomi understands that language, naming and subjectivity are inextricably linked. What we *call* each other largely determines how we will be treated, and how we will treat others. Even though she realizes that Sam is different from her, Naomi understands that they are both creatures of difference from the perspective of the other and their loving friendship grows as they work to find a way to communicate and bridge these very differences. One of the biggest strengths of the book is the way LePan uses the figure of a child to question these arbitrary lines separating pets from farm animals, humans from non-humans, and consumers from those consumed. Meat-eating is predicated on illogic; why do humans eat some animals yet choose to love and live alongside others? And why does it take a child to remind us of the importance of treating all others the way we ourselves would like to be treated? Relying on a child makes it possible for LePan to execute these points using a language that is simple and graspable, yet no less complex.

To say, however, that *Animals* is about the struggles of Sam, a fictional human pet, would not tell the whole story, nor would I be illuminating what I feel is one of the most engaging and truly emotional features of *Animals*. While half of the novel is about the beautiful relationship that flourishes when human and non-human learn to emotionally identify with one another, the other half is narrated by Sam’s brother, Broderick, who tells the side of the (animal) story that many people choose to ignore. Presenting factual details about the yarn industry and mongrel cruelty, the historical context that Broderick provides about Sam’s world, very closely parallels our own current treatment of animals to sustain the meat economy. Most interesting about these “Broderick” chapters is the way they are structured to mimic how we have structured our own societies; the stories of animals have been pushed to the margins. When Broderick explicitly references animals from the 1950’s and the 2000’s the reader has to turn their eyes from the main narrative and instead focus on footnotes if they want to learn about the gruesome lives of factory-farmed chickens, cows, and pigs. Since footnotes are often isolated from the main text for readers who wish to learn more about a specific topic, there is a constant temptation to either skim or skip these sections entirely. Even more tempting is Broderick’s invitation at the start of these chapters to “skip past these next few pages” often apologizing for his “intrusions” into the Naomi/Sam story.

While these sections cajole the reader to return to the meat of the text, so to speak, these chapters mostly put a lot of pressure on the reader to educate themselves on the lives of animals; even if this knowledge *does* intrude on the luxury of enjoying a meat product without guilt, LePan seems to be saying, “tough.” Though I was significantly bothered by the “fictional” details of Sam’s

gory slaughterhouse, I was most disturbed when Broderick/LePan forced me to confront my own ignorance about animals and focus my attention on stories I often pretend do not exist. At first I was tempted (shamefully tempted) to rush these footnoted sections and return instead to Naomi and Sam's blooming companionship, but I chose instead to venture out of my comfort zone, confront text (and stories) I am not accustomed to, and doing so added to the richness of LePan's novel and my overall experience. Once I realized that these paratextual narratives were not only pivotal to Sam's story, but also to the historical narrative beyond the pages of *Animals* I found myself looking forward to Broderick's unyielding "interruptions" as they reminded me of the delicate line dividing fiction from reality; we can choose to ignore the stories on the margins and stick with the more popular stories circulated (ie. meat is good), but to do so does not change the reality on the other side of that fictional space.

LePan, however, seems to understand why people are so tempted to remain with animals in fictional worlds and he counterbalances his more critical tone with a sympathetic one. Like Sam and Naomi who have grown up learning about animals in books about Winnie the Pooh and Piglet, I too received my first impression of animals from story books that represented animals as happy-go-lucky creatures living in lush forests with family and friends all their own; this of course is not the reality. Yet, it is these cheerful stories that have been substituted in our minds (often from a very young age) in place of the true stories, and LePan is not blind to the deep roots that support the density of our unawareness. In my mind, *Animals* is an original attempt to restructure the relationship between animals and fiction and put together instead a narrative that blends the fictional worlds we crave with the stark realities we prefer to stay in the dark about. While there is nothing wrong with being content to emotionally connect with a character in a book, it is necessary to be critical of these fictional constructions; Piglet, for example, has nothing to do with the fate of real pigs whereas Sam's experience is a more effective representation.

Compared to other authors writing fictional works about the meat industry (J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and Ruth L. Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*), LePan shocks and surprises with how far he is willing to go to gauge a sympathetic reaction for both his animal characters and the real-world/non-fictional ones we blindly ignore; while Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello controversially links the meat market to the Holocaust, and the willful ignorance that both of the catastrophic events encourage, LePan takes his narrative a step further and produces a world where humans are not only slaughtered but are also slaughtered and *eaten* like animals as well. Since many of us continue to buy meat products without considering the type of life the cellophane-wrapped chicken had before

making it to our freezers, LePan has written a violently emotional story foreshadowing where our desensitization and ignorance to *their* stories may one day lead us. For anyone who has thought about becoming a vegetarian, or simply wants to make healthier, and more humane reading and dietary choices, Don LePan's *Animals* is an accessible book for all readers who wish to imagine the possibility (and importance) of such change. While no animals were harmed in the making of this book, hopefully *Animals* will encourage individuals to save other animals from future harm.