

**[Review] Hayley Singer, *Abandon Every Hope: Essays for the Dead*.
Upwell, 2023, 168pp.**

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Most of the ever-growing body of creative and critical literature that explores human and nonhuman animal relationships addresses the various ways that humans think about and connect to living beings. Scholars focus on the lives of kin and the ways that humans have exploited or preserved our interdependencies with both domestic and wild nonhuman beings. The discipline of animal studies over decades has emboldened discussions about and activism towards the rights of nonhuman animals, working incrementally towards nonhuman animal rights to habitat, shelter, food, voice and a life and death with dignity. For nonhuman animals to someday enjoy the same rights as homo sapiens remains at the forefront of scholarly and activist efforts. Few writers enter the territory of how humans and nonhumans share death. Hayley Singer's collection of 'essays for the dead' opens hearts, minds and souls to this important junction by drawing attention to the scourge of industrial-scaled deaths in abattoirs and slaughterhouses.

Readers fall into the book, unguided by a table of contents, no index to direct us to possible areas of interest, no prologue. The first section title is a date, 'February 2022.' The reader is lanced to a current moment. We enter an urgently contemporary and darkened world. On the first page we are asked to look into the face of a pig. Soon we are 'smashed against concrete,' invited to 'descend' to grim and horrific places. Well might we cling to the title, *Abandon Every Hope*, taken from Dante Alighieri's work *Inferno* about a journey into hell. Readers have had their warning; this will be a difficult read. No pastoral romanticising of agricultural lives, no sweet bucolic days humming with bees. Singer musters all her skills as a writer and a scholar to unveil the violent deaths that humans prevail upon nonhuman animals in massively scaled death factories. She asks, 'What if we all opened a door to our brains and let horrors flow in?' (105). Multiple examples of disregarded animal death are exposed, from roadkill, factory farms and abattoirs to the growing extinctions of insects, birds, reptiles and mammals. She questions the reader and other writers, 'Have they considered how much literature is founded on the assumption of human supremacy?' (105). Through looking death in the eye, Singer demands that human beings become accountable for nonhuman animal deaths they are causing.

Thirty-two essays/poems braid together a montage of images; we see red, we smell blood, we feel fear. Each essay/poem is an artful inducement to take a journey to a hellish place. Nausea slows me down, I put the book down regularly. I am often swimming in blood and gore. Images of industrialised deaths of millions of pigs, cattle, chooks, sheep are

scorched to the page. Reading the book was for me like being propelled from stone to stone across a raging torrent. I could at any moment be washed away by the strength and vitality of the language, the horror of the death images. The trajectory between each of the thirty-two essay/poems is not at first obvious. I did not know on to what stone I would next land. Through a consideration of death Singer inveigles the reader to consider responsibilities for the barbarism and to shuck impunity for industrial-scaled death. She asks, 'How many acts of injury can a body withstand?' (112).

Thanatology is defined in the *Macquarie Dictionary* as a branch of psychiatry which studies the traumatic effects of death and dying. Thanatology addresses 'ways in which people who are dying can come to terms with their death and ways in which the survivors of the dead person can adjust to their loss' (*Macquarie Dictionary*). Singer 'composts' this concept into a literary form she calls a 'thanatography,' a 'form that works to invoke the unnamed dead' (168). She composes collages of images, asking readers to 'remember the dead in a world that would have us forget' (168). The invisibility of abattoirs, the occlusion and shadowing of cruelty and mass-slaughter is under the spotlight. Readers may be blinded by the harsh glare, the horror of killing floor realities. Singer takes us by the hand into the pain of dying animals. It is not a silent pain, we hear the roars and shrieks of resistance. Animals protest. Humans are ultimately asked to take responsibility for murderous behaviours.

The book is about writing death, as much as knowing about it. It has a gesture towards a manifesto, the title of the short, eighth essay. Singer makes a proclamation of dark and silent conversations, not secrets, but 'disregarded depth[s]' (128). In a key poem titled 'Snuff,' Singer explores 'how close can writing come to death?' (122). She laments that there are no monuments, no obituaries, no eulogies for the dead at factory farms or abattoirs (123). *Abandon Every Hope* provides more than a eulogy. Singer models writing not just for, but with the dead.

Many of the essays could be read as prose poetry, at times enmeshed with snatches of memoir. Each piece floats independently. A liminal blurring of writing forms emerges, somewhere in the vicinity of creative nonfiction, lyric essays, prose poetry. Hybridity is too clinical a word to describe the fluidity of form and the transgressive ways that boundaries are crossed. Singer achieves her distinctive potency of prose through fragments of images, ideas and experiences. She makes perilous leaps between paragraphs. The reader clings on tight. In the vein of Jenny Offill's novella, *Weather*, Singer utilises disjointed fragments and paragraphs that jettison conventions and thrust the reader from the personal to the political, from abhorrent lives to undignified deaths. Bloodied hands hold the page.

Singer opens the door to a remarkably wide range of literatures. The book is grounded in the work of many outstanding authors who have laid foundations to Singer's considerations. The referencing may be unorthodox (works cited are listed for each chapter at the end of the book) but readers enjoy a smooth ride through philosophy and cultural studies giants. We are assured that Singer has done her homework. From the words of Gertrude Stein, Simone Weil, Susan Sontag, Virginia Wolfe, Val Plumwood and numerous literary luminaries, Singer builds a well-credentialed inventory of the many ways that humans write about experiences of dying and death.

Scattered shellfire in a first-person narration displays Singer's courageous voice and commitment to her project, which builds from her PhD dissertation and further research. When she steps back from her own experiences, a firm but aesthetic approach to her analysis of scholarly inspirations is impressively handled. Singer's courageous endurance of endless horror scenes, we are told, took their toll on her. The book is as much about the horror of industrial-scaled slaughter of animals as it is about the author's visceral responses to such practices. Readers are privy to Singer's drinking, sleeplessness, her depression and smouldering rage at all she was experiencing about human treatment of animal bodies. The tenth poem/essay titled 'Big Curse Energy' reveals Singer's personal responses to the atrocities she was embroiled in. These sections are in my mind weaker sections of prose, where a tone of anxious self-revelation rather than reflection prevails. I didn't need to be told that the deplorable treatment of factory farming and animal slaughter is enough to turn a person to drink—the quality of Singer's prose implies this possibility. The debilitating effects on the author of working with words and descriptions of gruesome animal deaths and deplorable human behaviours is commonly experienced when writing the numerous atrocities of the Anthropocene. Rachel Hennessy and peers (2022) invite a consideration of collaborative peer support when engaging with depressing anthropogenic disasters. I wonder if Singer is seeking succour from her grief in delving into the world of death. Scholars and writers are indirectly urged to join Singer in this otherwise solitary investigation of thanatography. The deplorable treatment of non-human animals as they die in the millions needs many more voices speaking in their defence.

Her descriptions of the difficulties of teaching eco-critical ideas in classes at university dissipate the thanatological line of argument. The quantities of alcohol, sleeplessness and late-night research involved in the work towards this book show Singer's empathetic engagement. This is not only an idea in her head. Singer shows us she lives these horrors. The bodily responses, the emotions shown by the author act as a counter point to the otherwise cerebral and darkly aesthetic examination of societal blindness to the crimes of animal slaughter at massive scales.

Abandon Every Hope is an important book because its examination of animal slaughter challenges a predominantly unexamined social acceptance of a global meat fetish. While it

is predominantly an Australian take on the problems of abattoirs, barbaric animal deaths occur worldwide. With faith in the author's sense of purpose, the book as a whole makes a powerful contribution to a globally important subject. We know by the end that Singer's courage in witnessing and collating untold barbaric murders is intentional. The taste of flesh is sour on the page. Singer demands we eat the words. This book forges new terrain in content and in its form. Writers, scholars and community readers are urged to look into the unexamined deaths of nonhuman animals, to hold their hands up and say it must stop.

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