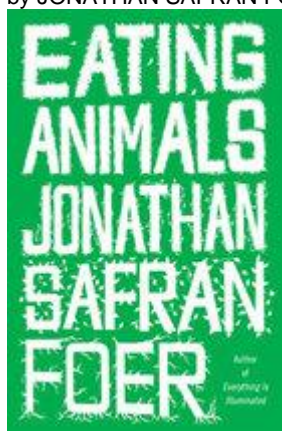


Excerpt: 'Eating Animals'

by JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER



Eating Animals

By Jonathan Safran Foer

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George

I spent the first twenty-six years of my life disliking animals. I thought of them as bothersome, dirty, unapproachably foreign, frighteningly unpredictable, and plain old unnecessary. I had a particular lack of enthusiasm for dogs—inspired, in large part, by a related fear that I inherited from my mother, which she inherited from my grandmother. As a child I would agree to go over to friends' houses only if they confined their dogs in some other room. If a dog approached in the park, I'd become hysterical until my father hoisted me onto his shoulders. I didn't like watching television shows that featured dogs. I didn't understand — I disliked — people who got excited about dogs. It's possible that I even developed a subtle prejudice against the blind.

And then one day I became a person who loved dogs. I became a dog person.

George came very much out of the blue. My wife and I hadn't broached the subject of getting a dog, much less set about looking for one. (Why would we? I disliked dogs.) In this case, the first day of the rest of my life was a Saturday. Strolling down Seventh Avenue in our Brooklyn neighborhood, we came upon a tiny black puppy, asleep on the curb, curled into its ADOPT ME vest like a question mark. I don't believe in love at first sight or fate, but I loved that damned dog and it was meant to be. Even if I wouldn't touch it.

Suggesting we adopt the puppy might have been the most unpredictable thing I'd ever done, but here was a beautiful little animal, the sort that even a hard-hearted dog skeptic would find irresistible. Of

course, people find beauty in things without wet noses, too. But there is something unique about the ways in which we fall in love with animals. Unwieldy dogs and minuscule dogs and long-haired and sleek dogs, snoring Saint Bernards, asthmatic pugs, unfolding shar-peis, and depressed-looking basset hounds — each with devoted fans. Bird-watchers spend frigid mornings scanning skies and scrub for the feathered objects of their fascination. Cat lovers display an intensity lacking — thank goodness — in most human relationships. Children's books are constellated with rabbits and mice and bears and caterpillars, not to mention spiders, crickets, and alligators. Nobody ever had a plush toy shaped like a rock, and when the most enthusiastic stamp collector refers to loving stamps, it is an altogether different kind of affection.

We took the puppy home. I hugged it—her—from across the room. Then, because it—she—gave me reason to think I wouldn't lose digits in the process, I graduated to feeding her from my palm. Then I let her lick my hand. And then I let her lick my face. And then I licked her face. And now I love all dogs and will live happily ever after.

Sixty-three percent of American households have at least one pet. This prevalence is most impressive because of its newness. Keeping companion animals became common only with the rise of the middle class and urbanization, perhaps because of the deprivation of other contact with animals, or simply because pets cost money and are therefore a signifier of extravagance (Americans spend \$34 billion on their companion animals every year). Oxford historian Sir Keith Thomas, whose encyclopedic work *Man and the Natural World* is now considered a classic, argues that

the spread of pet-keeping among the urban middle classes in the early modern period is ... a development of genuine social, psychological, and indeed commercial importance. ... It also had intellectual implications. It encouraged the middle classes to form optimistic conclusions about animal intelligence; it gave rise to innumerable anecdotes about animal sagacity; it stimulated the notion that animals could have character and individual personality; and it created the psychological foundation for the view that some animals at least were entitled to moral consideration.

It wouldn't be right to say that my relationship with George has revealed to me the "sagacity" of animals. Beyond her most basic desires, I don't have the faintest clue what's going on in her head. (Although I have become convinced that much, beyond basic desires, is going on.) I'm surprised by her lack of intelligence as often as I'm surprised by her intelligence. The differences between us are always more present than the similarities.

And George isn't a kumbaya being who wants only to give and receive affection. As it turns out, she is a major pain in the ass an awful lot of the time. She compulsively pleasures herself in front of guests, eats my shoes and my son's toys, is monomaniacally obsessed with squirrel genocide, has the savant-like ability to find her way between the camera lens and the subject of every photo taken in her vicinity, lunges at skateboarders and Hasids, humiliates menstruating women (and is the worst nightmare of menstruating Hasids), backs her flatulent ass into the least interested person in the room digs up the freshly planted, scratches the newly bought, licks the about-to-be- served, and occasionally exacts revenge (for *what?*) by shitting in the house.

Our various struggles — to communicate, to recognize and accommodate each other's desires, simply to coexist — force me to encounter and interact with something, or rather someone, entirely other. George can respond to a handful of words (and choose to ignore a slightly larger handful), but our relationship takes place almost entirely outside of language. She seems to have thoughts and emotions. Sometimes I think I understand them, but often I don't.

Like a photograph, she cannot say what she lets me see. She is an embodied secret. And I must be a photograph to her. Just last night, I looked up from my reading to find George staring at me from across the room. "When did you come in here?" I asked. She lowered her eyes and lumbered away from me, down the hall — not a silhouette so much as a kind of negative space, a form cut out of the domesticity. Despite our patterns, which are more regular than anything I share with another person, she still feels unpredictable to me. And despite our closeness, I am occasionally thrilled, and even a bit scared, by the foreignness of her. Having a child greatly exacerbated this, as there was absolutely no guarantee — beyond the one I felt absolutely — that she wouldn't maul the baby.

The list of our differences could fill a book, but like me, George fears pain, seeks pleasure, and craves not just food and play, but companionship. I don't need to know the details of her moods and preferences to know that she has them. Our psychologies are not the same or similar, but each of us has a perspective, a way of processing and experiencing the world that is intrinsic and unique. I wouldn't eat George, because she's mine. But why wouldn't I eat a dog I'd never met? Or more to the point, what justification might I have for sparing dogs but eating other animals?

A Case for Eating Dogs

Despite the fact that it's perfectly legal in forty-four states, eating "man's best friend" is as taboo as a man eating his best friend. Even the most enthusiastic carnivores won't eat dogs. TV guy and sometimes cooker Gordon Ramsay can get pretty macho with baby animals when doing publicity for something he's selling, but you'll never see a puppy peeking out of one of his pots. And though he once said he'd electrocute his children if they became vegetarian, I wonder what his response would be if they poached the family pooch.

Dogs are wonderful, and in many ways unique. But they are remarkably unremarkable in their intellectual and experiential

capacities. Pigs are every bit as intelligent and feeling, by any sensible definition of the words. They can't hop into the back of a Volvo, but they can fetch, run and play, be mischievous, and reciprocate affection. So why don't they get to curl up by the fire? Why can't they at least be spared being tossed on the fire?

Our taboo against dog eating says something about dogs and a great deal about us.

The French, who love their dogs, sometimes eat their horses.

The Spanish, who love their horses, sometimes eat their cows.

The Indians, who love their cows, sometimes eat their dogs.

While written in a much different context, George Orwell's words (from *Animal Farm*) apply here: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." The protective emphasis is not a law of nature; it comes from the stories we tell about nature.

So who's right? What might be the reasons to exclude canine from the menu? The selective carnivore suggests:

Don't eat companion animals. But dogs aren't kept as companions in all of the places they are eaten. And what about our petless neighbors? Would we have any right to object if they had dog for dinner?

OK, then:

Don't eat animals with significant mental capacities. If by "significant mental capacities" we mean what a dog has, then good for the dog. But such a definition would also include the pig, cow, chicken, and many species of sea animals. And it would exclude severely impaired humans.

Then:

It's for good reason that the eternal taboos — don't fiddle with your shit, kiss your sister, or eat your companions — are taboo. Evolutionarily speaking, those things are bad for us. But dog eating hasn't been and isn't a taboo in many places, and it isn't in any way bad for us. Properly cooked, dog meat poses no greater health risks than any other meat, nor does such a nutritious meal foster much objection from the physical component of our selfish genes.

And dog eating has a proud pedigree. Fourth-century tombs contain depictions of dogs being slaughtered along with other food animals. It was a fundamental enough habit to have informed language itself: the Sino-Korean character for "fair and proper" (*yeon*) literally translates into "as cooked dog meat is delicious."

Hippocrates praised dog meat as a source of strength. The Romans ate "suckling puppy," Dakota Indians enjoyed dog liver, and not so long ago Hawaiians ate dog brains and blood. The Mexican hairless dog was the *principal food species* of the Aztecs. Captain Cook ate dog. Roald Amundsen famously ate his sled dogs. (Granted, he was really hungry.)

And dogs are still eaten to overcome bad luck in the Philippines; as medicine in China and Korea; to enhance libido in Nigeria; and in numerous places, on every continent, because they taste good. For centuries, the Chinese have raised special breeds of dogs, like the black-tongued chow, for chow, and many European countries still have laws on the books regarding postmortem examination of dogs intended for human consumption.

Of course, something having been done just about everywhere just about always is no kind of justification for doing it now. But unlike all farmed meat, which requires the creation and maintenance of animals, dogs are practically begging to be eaten. Three to four million dogs and cats are euthanized annually. This amounts to millions of pounds of meat now being thrown away every year. The simple disposal of these euthanized dogs is an enormous ecological and economic problem. It would be demented to yank pets from homes. But eating those strays, those runaways, those not-quite-cute-enough-to-take and not-quite-well-behaved-enough-to-keep dogs would be killing a flock of birds with one stone and eating it, too.

In a sense it's what we're doing already. Rendering—the conversion of animal protein unfit for human consumption into food for livestock and pets—allows processing plants to transform useless dead dogs into productive members of the food chain. In America, millions of dogs and cats euthanized in animal shelters every year become the food for our food. (Almost twice as many dogs and cats are euthanized as are adopted.) So let's just eliminate this inefficient and bizarre middle step.

This need not challenge our civility. We won't make them suffer any more than necessary. While it's widely believed that adrenaline makes dog meat taste better — hence the traditional methods of slaughter: hanging, boiling alive, beating to death — we can all agree that if we're going to eat them, we should kill them quickly and painlessly, right? For example, the traditional Hawaiian means of holding the dog's nose shut — in order to conserve blood — must be regarded (socially if not legally) as a no-no. Perhaps we could include dogs under the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act. That doesn't say anything about how they're treated during their lives, and isn't subject to any meaningful oversight or enforcement, but surely we can rely on the industry to "self-regulate," as we do with other eaten animals.

Few people sufficiently appreciate the colossal task of feeding a world of billions of omnivores who demand meat with their potatoes. The inefficient use of dogs — conveniently already in areas of high human population (take note, local-food advocates) — should make any good ecologist blush. One could argue that various "humane" groups are the worst hypocrites, spending enormous amounts of money and energy in a futile attempt to *reduce* the number of unwanted dogs while at the very same time propagating the irresponsible no-dog-for-dinner taboo. If we let dogs be dogs, and breed without interference, we would create a sustainable, local meat supply with low energy inputs that would put even the most efficient grass-based farming to shame. For the ecologically minded it's time to admit that dog is realistic food for realistic environmentalists.

Can't we get over our sentimentality? Dogs are plentiful, good for you, easy to cook, and tasty, and eating them is vastly more reasonable than going through all the trouble of processing them into protein bits to become the food for the other species that become our food.

For those already convinced, here's a classic Filipino recipe. I haven't tried it myself, but sometimes you can read a recipe and just know.

Stewed Dog, Wedding Style

First, kill a medium-sized dog, then burn off the fur over a hot fire. Carefully remove the skin while still warm and set aside for later (may be used in other recipes). Cut meat into 1" cubes. Marinate meat in mixture of vinegar, peppercorn, salt, and garlic for 2 hours. Fry meat in oil using a large wok over an open fire, then add onions and chopped pineapple and saute until tender. Pour in tomato sauce and boiling water, add green pepper, bay leaf, and Tabasco. Cover and simmer over warm coals until meat is tender. Blend in puree of dog's liver and cook for additional 5 — 7 minutes.

A simple trick from the backyard astronomer: if you are having trouble seeing something, look slightly away from it. The most light-sensitive parts of our eyes (those we need to see dim objects) are on the edges of the region we normally use for focusing. Eating animals has an invisible quality. Thinking about dogs, and their relationship to the animals we eat, is one way of looking askance and making something invisible visible.

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