

Animal Husbandry: And Other Fictions

Jeff Fleischer

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Capturing the imagination with a welcome dark tone, Animal Husbandry is a satisfying short story collection.

The short stories in Jeff Fleischer's collection *Animal Husbandry* range from fun and bizarre to thought-provoking and emotional. From a short romp about a cunning fox looking for an easy meal to a longer tale made up of musings over a life gone by, it has plenty of variety.

The book opens with a brief tale about farmers being forced to deal with a freak occurrence in which one of their cows gives birth to a mutant offspring. This short proves to be a perfect start to the collection, injecting humor and horror. The introduction sets the scene of an "unimportant Tuesday in June" for Herm and his endearing friends, who soon realize the importance of their unimportant Tuesday. These everyday people have little notion of how to handle their new "calf," and so they seek out guidance from logical but funny sources: the town's local veterinarian and a convenient book on folklore. However, the story ends with a tense and gruesome bang right as it gets going.

The prose embodies the characters and events well, whether through a note about a past prize won at a fair or the feeling a character gets when looking into the eyes of the potential monstrosity. There's a sense of life here that's engaging, and it's complemented by absurdity. And while several engrossing tales do have abrupt endings, most are just the right length.

One standout tale chronicles a man's strange encounters with cats on Christmas Eve. Its settings are emphasized, and not a lot happens; the story follows the man's night at the bar and the trip home, resulting in cozy simplicity. A twisting tinge of eeriness is added with the notes of death bestowed on him by his furry visitors. Another strong entry follows a man as he racks up debt after being told he doesn't have long to live; there's a dark humor to the tale, coupled with hard-hitting introspection that sparks consideration of how best to go about daily life. And in another winner that has full-length-title potential, the Pied Piper is transformed into a city-dwelling hermit, tasked with a mayor's dirty work when he'd rather be left alone. Such entries are ripe with depth.

Covering everyday quirks and old family ties that affect the present, the short story collection *Animal Husbandry* makes clever use of old myths.

BRANDON PAWLICKI (August 28, 2024)

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