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Alessandro Boffa. *You're an Animal, Viskovitz!* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. viii + 176 pp. $12.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-375-70483-3; $18.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-375-40528-0.

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To Be or Not to Be an Animal

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Every biologist and animal behaviorist–not to mention every animal lover–dreams of actually becoming animals of other species, of experiencing life from other than human perspectives. Alessandro Boffa, a biologist born in Moscow and trained in Italy who now divides his time between Italy and Thailand, has done more than dream. In Boffa's first novel, *You're an Animal, Viskovitz!*, his protagonist shifts species with abandon. In the whirlpool of identities he experiences there are three constants: his name (Viskovitz), his sexual drive (though not his sex), and his pursuit of the equally metamorphic lady of his desire, Ljuba.

That Boffa is enamored of literature as well as life is clear, not only in his echoing of Ovid and Dante, the probable sources of his theme and lady-love, but also in the multitude of genres reflected in his short fables–everything from the western to the detective novel.[1] Each genre, as well as being fun, contributes to the reader's understanding of the species for whom it serves as setting, such as the scorpion with the fastest tail in the west. Instead of riding off into the sunset, this western hero, lassoed by fatherhood, ends up riding herd on his fast-tailed offspring. Similarly, a drug-sniffing police dog, true to his biology instead of the law, ends up burying instead of revealing his past.

David Walton points out in his review of this book that "What Boffa does … with zoology is akin to what Alan Lightman did with physics in *Einstein's Dreams*. Both books are small and light, written in short chapters, each one playing upon some aspect of its respective field of science."[2] Another reviewer, Frank Dillard, writes that "Boffa's knowledge of the natural world makes these stories almost as educational as they are entertaining. The delight is in the details, and it's easy to imagine a beginning biology student using this book to remember an animal's inherent traits."[3] A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* goes further, commenting on how "the precise physiological details [Boffa] provides for each embodiment of his protagonist ring with technical precision."[4]

Boffa explores twenty-one species in all, beginning with the prologue's Emperor Penguin, chosen I think because it is one of only a few examples of the male in charge of the creative process of birth (hatching), and ending at the beginning, so to speak, with the first multi-celled organism. This twenty-first-century fable seems like a coming of age by the time we come to the end of it, having gained a true understanding of what it means to be an animal. Indeed, Boffa's main theme is not metamorphosis itself, but the problem of bringing humans to an understanding, not just of what it means to be other animals, but that humans themselves are animals and, like all Earth's life forms, evolved from the same first multi-celled beings.

Although Viskovitz narrates each tale, he is at a remove from the usual first-person narrator. In the prologue a second character, adrift with the Emperor Penguin and his egg in the polar night, is asked by the Penguin to record their conversation ("his story"). In each tale, however, the recorder (biologist) retreats completely, leaving the animal to seemingly tell its own tale–exactly the fictional conceit generations of naturalist novelists have employed when turning the lives of studied creatures into fictions that invite the reader to not just read and learn about but to become the animals themselves. This empathy is here, as it is traditionally, enhanced by anthropomorphism: the animals' human-

like speech and thoughts encourage readers to identify with what the author guesses are the animal's own voice and thoughts.

Boffa's voice as well as genre shifts from tale to tale, as does the animal-shape Viskovitz assumes. Thus we move to the dormouse, reluctantly awakening from eight months of hibernation to help his mate store acorns, make babies, and store up "oneiric material" to enrich the dreams of his next hibernation. But this year brings a startling change to his usual activities as the tables are turned by an experience that suggests that, instead of being the dreamer dreaming Ljuba, he is a character in her dream! The conundrum is never solved nor is a solution really essential since she, too, is a dormouse, equally devoted to sleep and as eager to escape "the whole desolate world" in dream. As a snail in the second tale, Viskovitz's gender identity is itself the mystery, male or female as the occasion demands, the single prohibition being against having sex with yourself. So, of course, here Ljuba is Visko's own mirrored self, a snail Narcissus. When he gives birth to a mirror-image son, he again falls madly in love, giving the tale a veritable "fairy-tale" ending.

Each tale has a similar witty or ironic twist, whether Viskovitz literally loses his head over Ljuba as a mantis, is cuckolded as a cuckoo, loses her to another while, as a bull-elk, he guards females he doesn't desire, loses his self-esteem when, as a beetle, he discovers his true identity as a dung beetle, learns to dance as a pig and is forced to sacrifice swinishness for the life of a performer and ends up filthy rich instead of filthy and sharing the mud with Ljuba. As a genetically altered, super-intelligent lab rat, Visko learns his name itself is "an acronym for Very Intelligent Superior Kind of Very Intelligent and Talented Zootype" (p. 68). In this incarnation he is mated to another super-intelligent rat while Ljuba, bred for physical perfection, is matched to another. This is an obvious reference to man's claim of superior intelligence, the surprise being that, instead of intelligence being seen as positive, it is the cause of Visko's ostracism from the community of his kind–as ours seems to have become the cause of our ostracism from the rest of animal-kind.

When the rats escape from the lab, Visko's intelligence, the cause of his ostracism from the rat community, enables him to lead the others through the maze-like city into the fabled sewers they had dreamed of in captivity. Prepared for the violence of the indigenous sewer rats by "the systematic violence of man" they'd known in the laboratory, his comrades thrive, leaving Viskovitz again the outsider. Taking temporary harbor in the university library, devouring the great works of western civilization, eventually leads to his capture and return to the laboratory, this time not as super-rat but a breeder. His Ljuba is in the next cage!

As a parrot, he finds his Ljuba able only to parrot his words. He consults a parrot sage but finds him also able to respond only by echoing his questions. Life as a fish is a bit less frustrating since he is able to communicate by "alternating the rhythm of the strokes of his dorsal fin" (p. 81). But it is a confusing language. His stability comes when, after being introduced into an aquarium, Visko meets the perfect mate. With Ljuba communication is effortless. Sex with her is fantastic–until he discovers that she is a cardboard cut-out (a paper doll he can call his own!).

There are more, equally intriguing metamorphoses in *You're an Animal, Viskovitz!*–thirteen vertebrate and ten invertebrate, to be precise. While each has an ironic tone, I disagree with *The New Yorker*'s Leo Carey, who said that Boffa intends readers to see "metamorphosis as a cosmic bad joke."[5] If one abandons the usual anthropocentric view and sees the tales as being as much about the strange and fascinating forms of nonhuman life with which Earth abounds as about human foibles, the novel becomes, instead of a joke, a revelation of the endless similarities and differences to be found among the life forces of the planet. Boffa's emphasis on sex and the idealization of its object–Ljuba–can as easily be interpreted as the biologist's recognition of the powers of both the drive to reproduce and of the role played by imagination, not just in humans but in all species right down to that first single-celled miracle who dreamed itself into division and multiplication. As Boffa's species-specific tales suggest, it may well be that every species idealizes (and perhaps demonizes) the sexual other.

At any rate, this spare collection of tales succeeds both in satirizing human foibles (as fables presumably do traditionally) and in presenting nonhumans completely true to their nonhuman natures. Their shared foibles simply underscores Boffa's main point that *You're an Animal, Viskovitz!*

For readers of the English translation, the credit for much of the novel's success belongs to the translators. *Publishers Weekly* as well as other reviewers applaud the "loving translation" by John Casey (his cotranslator, Maria Sanminiatelli, is for the most part overlooked, but shouldn't be, since her experience as a translator probably contributed a great deal to Casey's). No reviewer I've read has mentioned cartoonist Roz Chast's arresting

cover art. This may be Casey's translation debut but it is hardly Chast's debut at interpreting works of fiction, as readers of *The New Yorker* know. Her strip about the afterlife of Kafka's Gregor and her depiction of Viskovitz's variety of selves suggests she is particularly drawn to the theme of metamorphosis. Her characteristic style makes the novel particularly appealing to the eye as well as to the mind.

Notes

[1]. Likely Boffa had both Ovid's and Kafka's *Metamorphoses* in mind since, although the cockroach is unfortunately not among the insects Viskovitz turns into (mantis, dung beetle, ant, and bee), Boffa gives as little explanation for his protagonist's shape-shifting as Kafka does. Viskovitz just wakes up in his first transformation as a dormouse dedicated to sleep and dream. Thus the device is neither of philosophical import, as in Ovid, nor of religious import, as in traditional Buddhist Jataka tales, which record the incarnations of Buddha (although Boffa's drug-sniffing police dog is, indeed, Buddhist). There is no controlling legend as in vampire and werewolf lore. Nor does metamorphosis serve the needs of an overriding plot here, as it does in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* or A. K. Applegate's *Animorphs* series. Metamorphosis is simply a fact of nature in Boffa's world.

[2]. Walton, David. Review of *You're an Animal, Viskovitz!*, by Alessandro Boffa. *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 16 June 2002.

[3]. Diller, Frank. Review of *You're an Animal, Viskovitz!*, by Alessandro Boffa. *Baltimore City Paper*, 2-9 July 2002.

[4]. Anonymous. Review of *You're an Animal, Viskovitz!*, by Alessandro Boffa. *Publishers Weekly*, 2002.

[5]. Carey, Leo. "Book Currents: Change Will Do You Good." *The New Yorker*, 16 September 2002, p. 24.

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