Karen Davis

Chicken Wisdom

Annie Potts. *Chicken*. London: Reaktion Books — Animal, 2012. 216 pp. $19.95 pb.

Chickens are creatures of the earth who have been forced off the land. In Western countries billions of chickens are confined in industrialized buildings, and billions more are similarly confined in Africa, India, China, Russia and other parts of the world where poultry factory farming is rapidly supplanting, or has already supplanted, traditional farming. If there is such a thing as "earthrights," the right of a creature to experience the earth from which it derived and on which its happiness in life chiefly depends, then chickens have been stripped of theirs.

Chicken traces the history of chickens, from their earliest known ancestry dating to a "pre-chicken" fossil record of 50 million years ago, to the "post-chicken" of industrialized animal farming — "post-chicken" meaning that the worldwide chicken industry is doing everything possible, from genetics to advertising, to destroy the chicken intrinsically and in public perception as a living being and fellow creature. Author Annie Potts, a professor of English and Cultural Studies and Co-Director of the New Zealand Centre for Human-Animal Studies at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, does not view the human stranglehold on chickens lightly or approvingly. Growing up in a rural town surrounded by poultry farms, she says she stopped eating chickens at an early age and cherishes a "strong love for chickens." Her book is "dedicated to all chickens born to and killed for agribusiness, scientific research and entertainment, and to those special humans who educate, advocate and provide refuge for these birds."

Potts argues that the disparagement of chickens that dominates today's popular culture is relatively new. Chickens were the first farmed animals to be permanently confined, in vast numbers, in automated systems based on intensive genetic selection for food-production traits and reliance on antibiotics and drugs. In the 20th century, the poultry industry in the United States became the model for animal agribusiness throughout the world. Roosters and hens went from being admired across cultures and time for "their vigilance, courage and loyalty to family or flock" to being caricatured as cowards and anthropomorphized as dim-witted. Hens became "egg-laying machines." Chickens disappeared into "chicken."

The disappearance of chickens into rhetorical anonymity and featureless buildings crammed with thousands of unseen birds has made it easy for the poultry industry, through advertising, cartoons, and other means, to devalue chickens publicly, just as it is busy eviscerating chickens biologically through its worldwide experimental programs in universities, genetics, and pharmaceutical laboratories. Who knew or cared what happened to chickens as the flow of cheap chicken and eggs entered the market after World War II? A friend of mine said that when she was growing up in North Carolina in the 1940s and 1950s, every family kept a few chickens for eggs, but as soon as eggs started appearing in the grocery store, people stopped keeping chickens. Not having to tend them was labor-saving, and store-bought eggs were cheaper than feed and other supplies.

Chicken surveys the uses of chickens going back 8,000 years or so in folklore, popular culture, and art, from the "mythologies of ancient cultures to the mundane realities of the contemporary kitchen." Four stages in the domestication of chickens, who evolved in the tropical forests of Southeast Asia and the rugged foothills of the Himalayan mountains, are identified: religion, including ritual sacrifice of hens and roosters and worship of eggs as cosmic symbols; cockfighting; the 19th-century craze in Europe and America of breeding "fancy" chickens for exhibition, an enthusiasm sparked in gentleman farmers by the importation to the continent of Asian breeds of chickens; and the utility breeding of "egg-type" and "meat-type" birds which grew out of the fancy breeding frenzy to seal the fate of chickens in the 20th century.

Potts traces a persistent tension in the human relationship with chickens. On the one hand, chickens have been accurately and appreciatively portrayed in literature and the arts; on the other hand, chickens have been trapped in anthropomorphic symbolisms and superstitions that have nothing to do with chickens except in a distorted, speciesist way. In cockfighting and religious rituals, chickens are tortured, killed and characterized by practitioners as *wanting* to be sacrificed to human and deific desires. As bad as industrialization has been for chickens, people have been assaulting chickens for ages — in staged cockfights, blood fiestas, voodoo rituals, Hindu massacres, kaporos ceremonies, and more. Chickens deemed "sacred" disappear into symbolic, sacrificial designations and uses that are as obliterating of their actual selves, as grisly and demeaning to them, as their disappearance into meat is.

Fortunately, a counter strain of empathy and understanding runs through the record. In the chapter called "Chicken Wisdom," Potts quotes people in previous centuries who

delighted in the devotion of roosters and hens to their families and the ability of chickens to bond with other species. The Renaissance ornithologist Ulisse Aldrovandi wrote of a hen he raised "who would not go to sleep at night anywhere except near me and my books." The eighteenth-century natural historian Gilbert White wrote of the affection he observed between a hen and a horse whose mutual loneliness brought them together. The hen would approach the horse "with notes of complacency, rubbing herself gently against his legs, while the horse would look down with satisfaction, and move with the greatest caution and circumspection, lest he should trample on his diminutive companion."

This chapter provides important information about the intelligence, emotional sensitivities, social sophistication and sensory complexity of chickens, dispelling any notion that chickens are stupid or inferior beings. The idea that mammalian brains are superior to avian brains, or that "tiny things just can't be intelligent or aware," is discredited. Potts explains that while the neuroanatomy of mammals and birds diverged during evolution, the mental development of both "has actually been convergent." The cortical cells of mammals developed on the surface of the brain, while homologous cells in birds were retained "deeper within the cortex."

Chickens have excellent hearing, full-spectrum color vision, discriminating smell and taste receptors, and acutely sensitive skin. Their beaks, with which they explore their surroundings, forage for food, rake in nesting materials, preen their feathers, and defend themselves against predators, are endowed with special receptors enabling them to make "exact tactile judgments." Chickens love to sunbathe, dustbathe, and socialize together. Their daily activities include playful chases, occasional spats, and vigorous vocal announcements — crows, egg cackles, predator warnings, and "chook, Chook, CHOOK!" whenever food is found. Chickens have singing sounds of contentment that resonate through the flock intermittently during the day and often as they are settling down on their perches for the night. They use their voices not only to exchange information intimately and across distances, but to express joy and enthusiasm as well as boredom, weariness and woe. Having lived with chickens since 1985, I know that chickens are vibrant individuals, cheerful in all kinds of weather from sunshine to snow, and as Potts shows through stories she relates, chickens assert "their own forms of agency and self-determination."

The vitality of chickens is crushed, however, by the poultry and egg industries, which operate unchecked by conscience or accountability. In the chapter "Meat Chicks and Egg Machines," Potts shows the horror to which humans have condemned chickens for

products we do not need and should not be eating. She writes that in modern societies, chicken have become denatured, depersonalized and even "de-animalized." This summary is apt so long so we remember that the minds, consciousness, and sensitivities of billions of chickens, whose body parts are marketed disgustingly as "wholesome food," remain intact.

I personally have facilitated the recovery of hundreds of chickens rescued from poultry and egg operations. I have witnessed the revival of their personalities and self-confidence under the influence of sunshine, fresh air, loving care, and loss of fear. They have been traumatized, and as Potts writes, the suffering we inflict on chickens "seems set to intensify even further." Yet their proprioceptive awareness remains and will persist, I believe, in the form of phantom limbic ancestral memories, recalling who they are ontologically, before our punishing hands were laid upon them.

In her "Epilogue: Appreciating Chickens," Potts writes that alongside the terrible developments in poultry farming, there has been "a resurgence of interest in chickens as backyard helpers and cherished companions." This interest is attributed to nostalgia for nature and a desire for contact with other species along with the activism and increased visibility of animal advocacy groups in North America, Europe and Australia. In Britain in the early 1970s, Clare Druce and her mother Violet Spaulding launched Chickens' Lib, the first advocacy organization in the world dedicated specifically to exposing the atrocities of modern poultry and egg production. Clare Druce, together with a beloved hen I rescued in Maryland in 1985 named Viva, inspired me to establish United Poultry Concerns in 1990.

While the trend in urban backyard chicken-keeping has benefited chickens insofar as people who previously knew chickens only as food have discovered how delightful they are as living creatures, it has also attracted people who mistreat their birds and brag on the Internet about their slaughtering activities; it has also fostered a bustling hatchery business entailing the same kinds of factory-farm cruelties and callousness that small farm practitioners and locavores claim to reject. Sanctuaries such as United Poultry Concerns and Chicken Run Rescue in the United States, and The British Hen Welfare Trust in the United Kingdom, have taken in many "casualties of the urban chicken movement," but our ability to absorb even a fraction of these victims, of whom the majority are roosters, is limited.

Chicken is filled with exquisite photography and illuminating artwork from earliest times to the present. The visual art of Marc Chagall, Mary Britton Clouse, Sue Coe, and others puts chickens involved with humans hauntingly before us. *Chicken* concludes with the poignant story of Mr. Henry Joy, a small white rooster whose rescuer and friend Alisha Tomlinson, in North Carolina, arranged with area nursing homes and assisted living centers to visit residents as a "therapy chicken" to comfort and uplift their spirits. Until he died suddenly in 2009, leaving behind two grieving hens and his bereft human companion, Mr. Joy brought cheer to people while educating the public through media and community appearances "about chicken sentience and intelligence, factory farming and the truth behind nuggets."

The pictures of Mr. Joy being tenderly and gently held in the hands of nursing home residents contrast grievously with images of the bleak fate from which chickens will never escape, unless we change our relationship with chickens and the natural world, or disappear entirely from the vast scene of suffering we have created on this planet. Potts concludes her account with the therapeutic suggestion that "Maybe we would all benefit from an audience with Mr. Joy.