

Alyce Miller

## Hogritude

**Brett Mizelle. *Pig*. London: Reaktion Books – Animal, 2011. 224 pages, \$19.95 pb.**

I open with a confession to my addiction to the Reaktion Animal books, a wonderfully quirky series focusing in each gorgeously illustrated volume on a particular non-human animal: the dog, the horse, the snail, the frog, the bear, and so on. Part natural history and part cultural studies, and readily accessible to any curious reader, these small, elegant books are single-authored by a panoply of writers representing numerous fields of interest, all of whom bring a unique passion to bear on the subject.

Brett Mizelle's *Pig* is no exception. The only surprise here is that it took so long for the series to get around to "pig," an animal that makes my own top ten list, and which Mizelle, a professor of history and American studies, describes as being "good to think with" (26) and "structurally and symbolically significant in the making of human society and culture across the globe" (7). Throughout the fast-paced eight chapters that compose this engaging book he does just that, opening with the challenges even of trying to define a pig, given the variety within the species around the globe, tracing the role of pigs as "associate," food, and symbol, and ending with a call for appreciation of "hogritude: the practical condition and mythical essence of just being a pig" (181). Put another way, what does thinking about pigs tell us about ourselves?

*Pig* is a beautiful book, rich in surprising facts and details that illuminate the contradictions of a shared history "not always marked by alienation" (26). According to Mizelle, the human-pig connection is historically bound, starting with "domestication" about 9,000 years ago, in both Eastern Turkey and China, though DNA studies suggest "multiple local domestication of pigs" (18). The arrival of pigs in the New World, important for both food and trade, eventually led to both the more modern development of the pork industry (Chicago and Cincinnati were the main sites) as well as the conception of the pig as a nuisance animal, dirty, destructive, and vilified.

Accruing from numerous details of historical and cultural interactions with pigs is a prismatic portrait of an animal who still tends to elicit two main responses: "utilitarian--they are tasty to eat — and ambivalent, if not negative" (116). The influence of religious views of "the pig" are as complex as they are deep. From Muslim and Jewish prohibitions to Christian ambivalence, the pig became a vector of both otherness (the

pig as dirty and disgusting) and a way of identifying otherness (Christians eat pork; Jews don't). Mizelle even entertains the possibility that the evolutions of religious animosities toward the pig stems, in part, from the fact that pigs eat the same food humans do, and therefore provided stiff competition for resources. Mizelle offers up evidence of the pig as a kind of mirror held up to our very human-ness, citing similarities humans share with pigs (anatomically and physiologically, which ironically also make them prize subjects in medical experimentation), and the resulting shame felt over our kinship or identification (120). In the chapter "Good Pigs and Bad Pigs" Mizelle explores how human associations with pigs carry tremendous symbolic weight: "pigs provided a useful way for an emergent middle class to distinguish themselves from the masses .... Pigs increasingly became objects of hatred and abuse as they were herded into cities and appeared in slums" (117).

Class differences are also illustrated in particular choices of pig meat: salt pork for the poor, bacon and ham for the elite. Mizelle devotes an entire chapter, "Meat," to the production and modern changes in the breeding, farming, and consumption of pigs. "Pork is the most widely eaten meat in the world," he writes (65). "the average American still eats 51 pounds of pork per year, the majority of it processed as bacon, lunch meats, hot dogs, sausage and ham" (65). Within the history, Mizelle carves out some room for exploring the moral and ethical critiques of current confined animal-feeding operations and factory farming. Noting the sharp decrease of family farmers and the globalization of the pork market, he cites problems with genetic modifications like PSE pork, and the stress levels of animals living monotonous, confined lives. "It turns out that if workers physically touch pigs, let them out of their crates for walks, and give them things to play with, their stress levels go down.... But this degree of interaction is no longer possible in large-scale hog farming" (83). Mizelle ends the chapter lamenting the fact that most of us will not "encounter living pigs in the future, much less has a direct relationship with these remarkable animals" (93).

And what make pigs so remarkable? For one, they are highly intelligent, social, and "enthusiastic," with an exceptional sense of smell. In "Human-Pig Partnerships," truffle-hunting, mine-detecting, and pigs in entertainment are cited as examples of cross-species interactions. In addition, pigs have influenced our language (the slang "pig" for "police," "hog heaven" for paradise, pigs as metaphors for happiness, as well as gluttony, etc.). One detail, which caught my eye, was an alleged mistranslation of the Middle English word "pygg" that Mizelle claims refers to a special clay used for making jars that yielded the linguistic shift to "piggy bank." While this is apparently

true, the OED also demonstrates that some early uses of the word “pygg” refer to the animal as well. Our literature has both revered and condemned the pig; children’s literature has brought us the beloved, anthropomorphized protagonist Wilbur from *Charlotte’s Web* and the poignant sidekick Piglet from *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Cute, humanlike pigs are staples of children’s cartoons. Mizelle skims quickly over the keeping of pigs as companion animals, a surprising oversight in an otherwise thorough account of the human-pig connection. In addition, his brief, awkward tipping of the hat to gender (men as “chauvinist pigs” and the conflation of women’s bodies with those of “animals”) struck this reader as ambiguous and under-examined.

The strength of Mizelle’s otherwise charming and provocative book lies not only in the care with which he condenses a great deal of material into a compact, and fast-paced read, but the implicit understanding that if we are to write and talk about non-human animals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we cannot do so without examining our own conflicted relationships with them. The story that Mizelle tells about the pig turns into many stories and, not unlike our relationships to other animals we consume, these multiple narratives put us face to face with our own moral schizophrenia regarding animals we both anthropomorphize and consume.