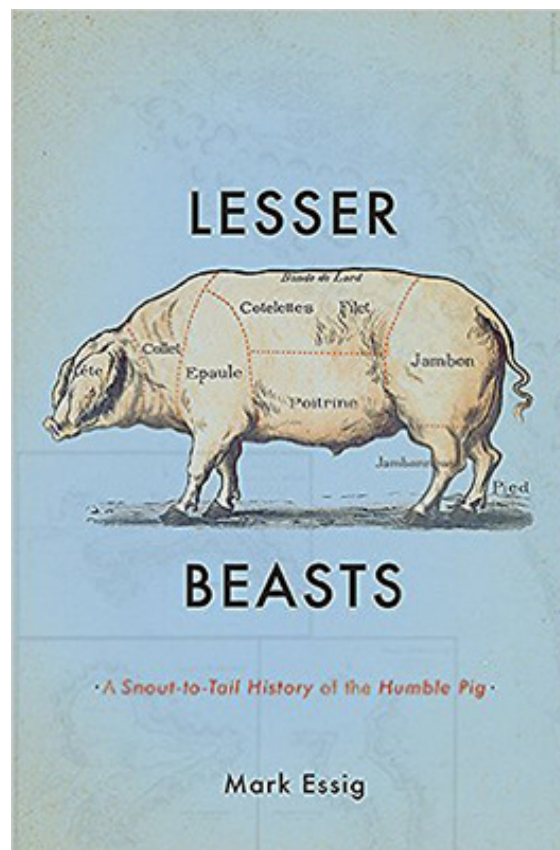


Reviews

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High on the Hog

Mark Essig. *Lesser Beasts: A Snout-to-Tail History of the Humble Pig*. New York: Basic Books, 2015. xxvii + 320 pp. \$27.50 hc.



In Lewis Carroll’s “The Walrus and the Carpenter,” the imperial Walrus insists on chatting with native oysters before gobbling them up. He hopes for pre-dinner dialogue as wide ranging as Victorian colonial power — from lists of material objects like “shoes — and ships — and sealing wax” to abstract scientific inquiries like “why the sea is boiling hot” and “whether pigs have wings.” Mark Essig’s *Lesser Beasts* attempts a similarly broad conversation. And though his pig lacks literal wings, its influence spans global history, starting back when the seas were indeed quite hot.

Essig takes off roughly 65 million years ago after a meteor jolted Earth's axis, killing the dinosaurs and making room for mammals. He then glides smoothly through the evolution of hooved creatures (10 million years ago) and humanoid bipeds (4 million years ago) to land near 8,000 BCE when Neolithic boars domesticated themselves by scavenging garbage from *Homo sapiens* villages. Though domestication occurred independently in what's now China, India, and the Near East, *Lesser Beasts* focuses on the symbiotic relationship between pigs and people in the West. Along this trail, we encounter swine of many sorts — from fatted white Roman hogs, to lean and dark medieval forests dwellers, to modern industrialized hybrids. Our shared history is a tale, as Essig puts it, of “love and loathing,” with an urgent message for our current historical moment, when the mere thought of “buying a pork chop raises thorny questions about the environment, public health, workers' rights, and animal welfare” (4).

The effect of positioning the most humble of beasts within such an expansive temporal framework is to make pigs seem exceptionally important, as if all of civilization would be vastly different had they been left out. As Essig synthesizes knowledge from across disciplines — archeology, biology, economics, philosophy, literature (to name just a few) — his voice emerges as authoritative, and his book should appeal to consumer activists as well as to anyone curious about culture. *Lesser Beasts* will find additional fans among scholars in intersectional fields like Food Studies and Anthrozoology, as well as any scientists or social scientists interested in the coevolution of human and non-human animals throughout the Anthropocene. Essig's fellow historians might likewise admire his deft and witty locating of material “objects” and “subjects” within the vast webs of power in which they find questionable agency.

A similar tactic has been tried by journalists like Mark Kurlansky in *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* (1997), *Salt: A World History* (2002), and *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* (2006); Marjorie Shaffer in *Pepper: A History of the World's Most Influential Spice* (2014); Dan Koeppel in *Banana: The Fate of the Fruit That Changed the World* (2008); and Andrew Lawler in *Why Did the Chicken Cross the World?: The Epic Saga of the Bird that Powers Civilization* (2016). Within this survival-of-the-fittest competition, *Lesser Beasts* clearly aspires to top place. As Essig himself proclaims, “no food has played a bigger role than pork in shaping cultural identities” (11).

What gives *Lesser Beasts* an advantage is the historically contentious status of swine. At once reviled and celebrated, their meat both banned and barbecued, they've maintained a fraught relationship to humans into the present day, and their borderline position has

granted them the unique ability at once to unify and to divide. As Essig observes, “for those linked by blood, religion, class, or nation, sharing a meal forges bonds but also draws boundaries; we use food to stigmatize foreigners, exclude nonbelievers, climb the social ladder, and kick others down a few rungs.” Pigs, it turns out, have always been on the edge. Even in populations who consumed huge quantities of pork — like the ancient Romans — pigs got disparaged. Christians condemned them as “lazy, filthy, and gluttonous”; Jews and Muslims forbade them entirely, and the English ranked them “the least desirable of all meats” even as they ate more pig than cow (10-11).

Paradoxically, the major reasons for the pig’s popularity — versatile diet and low cost — also provoke the most disgust. Like humans, pigs are omnivores, and they’ve been known to eat almost anything from garbage to human flesh (which, if we’re to believe Essig’s research, tastes a lot like pork). In the millennia before modern sanitation, pigs had a job beyond providing meat: transforming human waste and excrement into food, and this “alchemical power” helps explain the taboo. As Essig cannily remarks, “If you are what you eat ... then what’s eaten by the animals you eat becomes a cause for concern” (11). Pigs also became associated with poverty because they could provide such a cheap source of protein — whether scavenging streets, chained in a back-yard sty, or packed for purchase in plastic. The pattern of the poor eating pigs has persisted across eras and cultures, with elites intermittently needing to distinguish themselves by feasting on more expensive animals.

Without taking sides on the disputed origins of Jewish pork prohibitions, Essig describes how this scriptural ban became key to the Israelites’ cultural identity, distinguishing them from both neighboring tribes and imperial rulers. He also digs into the roots of European anti-Semitism, showing how the pig — that shit-eating, child-killing, corpse-scavenging most despised of animals — got connected to the most despised of human groups who, in an ironic reversal, “became most closely identified with the animal they refused to eat” (98). We learn, for instance, how after Spanish monasteries protected pigs during the Muslim occupation, Inquisitors used pork aversion to sniff out both sorts of infidels. Somehow the uncleanness of pigs stayed connected with sin and evil, in opposition to the purity and innocence of the lamb. Thus the Jewish rejection of pork was at the same time preserved and transformed within Christianity.

Essig links some of the paradox surrounding human-hog relations to our shared biology. As clever omnivores with similar digestive tracts, dietary needs, and general-purpose teeth, “pigs and people threw their lots together, and that proved a wise

evolutionary strategy for both species” (25). This tight bond, which continues into the present day, partly explains the blend of attraction and revulsion. When “we look back at the pig,” Essig reflects, “we see quite a bit of ourselves. And then, more often than not, we eat him” (14).

According to Essig, the most influential talent pigs and people share is their knack for colonizing. As swine have spread easily into ecological and market niches, so have humans hogged up the planet, and neither expansion could have happened without the other. Not only did cured pork fuel the age of exploration, but living swine adapted to and rapidly multiplied in nearly all settlement conditions. Pigs also fed soldiers as they slaughtered native populations. “An army travels on its stomach,” Essig tells us, and the Spanish armies “filled their bellies with pork” (120). As a bonus, pigs packed an unexpected weapon: disease to which natives had no immunity. Within half a century of Cortez’s invasion of Mexico, we learn, they’d helped wipe out the Indian population by 90%. In addition, they carried out the work of clearing the land for European farming by devouring wild foods and disrupting the subtle agriculture practices cultivated by natives. Finally, pigs were quick to supply meat for export by English colonists eager to take part in the growing network of global trade. As Essig puts it in one of his many crisp clauses: “pigs became agents of empire in their own right” (132).

Not surprisingly, swine were equally instrumental in carving continental inroads. Though cows became the “iconic animal” of the Wild West, pigs got there first, destroying native habitat while feeding pioneers and, later, Gold Rush miners headed to the Pacific. In a sad twist for the Indians, the very grain colonists destroyed became settlers’ most sustainable crop once the land was tamed. As Essig declares: “Corn, paired with pigs, fueled the rapid settlement of the United States” (154). Those who put down roots in the Midwest stuck with both, creating the first hog farms. Between the abundant food supply and the new potential for hybrid swine from around the globe, business boomed, and “pigs — the freewheeling self-sufficient creatures that had helped conquer the continent — took their first steps into a rigid, industrialized future” (165).

That future included both more pork and more suffering, which Essig vividly describes. As he recounts, in Upton Sinclair’s description of a slaughterhouse in *The Jungle*, pigs shriek while hoisted by chains “each dangling by a foot and kicking in frenzy,” before workers known as “stickers” bleed them to death in a disassembly process that inspired the advent of the modern assembly line (195). But the suffering wasn’t contained to the slaughterhouse. New technologies gave rise to factory farms in which pigs began living their entire lives in horrific conditions: forced to lie in their own excrement on a diet

containing drugs and the remains of other pigs, most never see daylight between birth and slaughter. Among the most appalling details Essig shares is the plight of sows who exist in cramped metal gestation crates, freed only to labor in farrowing cages in which they are immobilized so as not to crush their own piglets.

Though traditional raising practices were hardly cruelty-free, Essig shows how the advent of modern techniques created exponential suffering, and not just for pigs. In our own century's vertically-integrated processing systems, single corporations own every aspect of the production process — from feed mills to breeding barns to slaughterhouses to packaging and distributing sites. In this new arrangement formerly independent farmers raise animals on contract at reduced price to meet consumer demands for cheap meat from companies like Walmart.

In spite of its growing affordability, however, pork has retained its historical stigma as unclean and unhealthy. The increased wealth of mid-twentieth-century Americans led the majority to choose beef over pork for the first time; trichinosis outbreaks and dire medical warnings about animal fat didn't help. To counter this latest revulsion, pork producers made the valiant but failed attempt to rebrand their product as "The Other White Meat," removing pork from competition with beef and placing it in a new contest against chicken. This makeover, Essig recounts, relied on "all the brainpower and ingenuity of the American government, universities, advertising firms, and pharmaceutical companies" (206). It also led to even greater suffering, with breeding and production practices that further restricted movement so as not to darken the meat. Still, in spite of such combined effort, the Other White Meat didn't fly, mainly, Essig speculates, because it tasted bland. As it turns out, under these newly horrific conditions, pigs became neurotic, "super-nervous and high-strung," as one scientist described them, and the stress damaged their meat" (219).

These reactions should have been predictable considering the innate needs of swine, which Essig explains in delightful detail. From studies of domestic hogs left to their own devices, we learn that pigs are active morning and evening, resting around noon and, like humans, forming complex social bonds within and among families. Somehow, in spite of our 10,000 years of symbiotic history, we have neglected to see the basic nature of our fellow beings. And so, the animal that has historically thrived in almost any condition has "failed to adapt to tiny crates, crowded pens, slatted floors, and ammonia-saturated air" (231). The pigs, however, do not forget, and when they're given the chance "a few million years of evolutionary history easily override a few thousand years of domestication" (239).

Though pig intelligence has been appreciated since ancient times, Essig points out that “the contrast between the animal’s intelligence and its living conditions has become harder to ignore” (248). In fact, it’s spurred activists like Gail Eisnitz who, in her influential 2009 book *Slaughterhouse: The Shocking Story of Greed, Neglect, and Inhumane Treatment Inside the U.S. Meat Industry*, finds herself most horrified by hog barns. Video footage from one of these barns was released in 2012 by Mercy for Animals. Narrated by James Cromwell, the human star of the beloved film *Babe*, it features “runt piglets being grabbed by their back feet, slammed onto the concrete floor, and tossed into an overflowing bin of dead and dying piglets” (248). Such modern muckraking has raised awareness and led to some minor improvements, including a gradual shift away from gestation crates and more stringent enforcement of anti-cruelty regulations. Still, Essig admits, we’re a far cry from what’s been popularly been dubbed “happy meat.”

Essig entertains the notion that the animal suffering at the heart of all farming might be a reason to give up meat altogether, a choice urged by animal liberation activists like Jonathan Safran Foer who, in his philosophically reflective investigation *Eating Animals*, comes to the decision to raise his son vegetarian, or conservative vegan Matthew Scully’s surprising *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy*. In the end, though, Essig supports a middle path for pigs as well as people and remains persuaded by less extreme efforts to minimize suffering through improved conditions. He thus follows in the tracks of Michael Pollan’s popular *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and celebrity chefs like Hugh Fearnley-Wittingstall, David Chang, and Tom Colicchio. He also supports calls to curb the human and environmental damages caused by factory farms, by journalists like Orville Shell (*Modern Meat: Antibiotics, Hormones, and the Pharmaceutical Farm*), and Eric Schlosser (*Fast Food Nation*). Still, animal liberation devotees of Peter Singer might not find a lot to their liking on Essig’s menu, nor will theorists who take a hard line against anthropocentrism or speciesism.

Ideally, for Essig, pigs should get to be pigs before they become dinner. A carnivore who, while a college professor tended swine on a sustainable farm and learned to cure meat, he knows how to create both content and delicious hogs. His solution: return to animal husbandry practices that respect instinctive behaviors like rooting, roaming, mothering, and foraging for food. Because a pig’s flesh expresses its fare more directly than the meat of ruminants, its flavor potential is enhanced by varied consumption, so a diverse diet of “grasses, seeds, nuts, legumes, fruits” paired with sides of “insects, larva, crayfish, lizards, medicinal plants and roots”(245) promise both happier and tastier meat. Old-fashioned husbandry can also maintain more flavorful heritage and traditional breeds instead of the tasteless industrialized hybrids modified to survive

factory conditions. As in pre-modern cultures, sustainably raised pigs help everyone involved: farmers, grocers, restaurateurs, and consumers.

Essig's epilogue "Virtuous Carnivores" calls a new breed of consumer to consider what's "good for the land, the animal, and the soul" (255). In so doing they just might exert enough market pressure to influence industry. Still, he warns, the trek will be uphill, especially considering the spectacular success of industrialized farming in providing cheap meat. Right now only a fraction of Americans is ready to place values over cost. Factory-farmed pork tastes good enough for the price here, as it does in China, Brazil, and other emerging meat-focused economies. Given the "trade offs between price, ethics, and taste" traditionally farmed niche meat occupies a very small niche indeed (246).

Ironically, in spite of industrial farming methods increasing world-wide, the pig is in much the same paradoxical position as it was 3000 years ago. Its meat continues to provoke debate around intersecting borderlines — and, as usual, the language wavers between adoration and disgust. Now, though, these emotions are less about swine and more about their swineherds. No longer focused on pigs as gluttonous, filthy, garbage eaters, the controversies center around the quality of their lives as well as their flesh. As Essig notes, "big corporations run by wealthy executives sell bacon for \$3 a pound at Walmart, while struggling farmers offer it at farmers' markets for four times the price. We see, once again, *the pig's ability to divide* [italics mine]" (246). The personal decision around consuming pork continues to forge identity — and it's still dependent upon values, money, status, and taste — but Essig believes the choice now stands to have a more conscious collective impact. Given the versatility of pigs and people, he feels consumers should have the option of "meat that tastes good, doesn't pollute, doesn't make us sick, and comes from an animal that was treated well — from a pig that lived like a pig" (258). By choosing wisely, Essig concludes, we have some hope of effecting change.

Lesser Beasts promises to change a few minds, create some happier pigs, and increase consumer options, but after digesting the book, I'm left with little personal hope of making a dent in the superstructure. Indeed the vast scope of the book reinforces, perhaps inadvertently, the inevitability of economic and political forces operating beyond yet shaping the lives of both pigs and people — and Essig's last sentence undermines the seemingly optimistic potential of his epilogue. To support the goals of changing industry for the better, he concludes, "all we have to do is abandon the idea — the millennia-old idea — that pork should be cheap" (258).

In the end, I'm reminded of the late Poet Laureate Philip Levine, who once tried to teach me to write poetry in college. His efforts didn't take, but his poem "Animals Are Passing Out of Our Lives" stayed with me. It's written from a pig's perspective as he's walked, fully aware, to the slaughterhouse. This pig decides to keep his dignity no matter what roles await him in the killing machine. Levine's pig calls us humans to take the same stance: to look directly into our oppressive structures and stand up straight. Along our paths we might exercise a bit of choice, if only when deciding what pork chop to buy. We exist, to return to Lewis Carroll, somewhere between resources and power, "cabbages—and kings." *Lesser Beasts* encourages us to engage, like the Walrus, in some pre-dinner reflection before we dig in.

Works Cited

Carroll, Lewis. "The Walrus and the Carpenter." *Through the Looking Glass*. Macmillan, 1871.

Levine, Philip. *Not This Pig: Poems*. Wesleyan UP, 1968.

Animals Are Passing Out of Our Lives

It's wonderful how I jog
on four honed-down ivory toes
my massive buttocks slipping
like oiled parts with each light step.

I'm to market. I can smell
the sour, grooved block, I can smell
the blade that opens the hole
and the pudgy white fingers

that shake out the intestines
like a hankie. In my dreams
the snouts drool on the marble,
suffering children, suffering flies,

suffering the consumers
who won't meet their steady eyes
for fear they could see. The boy
who drives me along believes

that any moment I'll fall
on my side and drum my toes
like a typewriter or squeal
and shit like a new housewife

discovering television,
or that I'll turn like a beast
cleverly to hook his teeth
with my teeth. No. Not this pig.