

## Book Review: *Filling the Ark: Animal Welfare in Disasters*

Irvine, Leslie (2021) *Filling the Ark: Animal Welfare in Disasters*. Rev. edn. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. x + 166pp. ISBN:978-1-59213-835-7

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### KEYWORDS

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When the Afghan government collapsed in the wake of the Taliban takeover in August 2021, a huge humanitarian evacuation got underway (Wadhwa 2021; Zalan 2021; Sabbagh et al. 2021). During this evacuation, UK and international news media reported widely on the actions of former Royal Marine Pen Farthing who, along with his animal rescue charity Nowzad, was engaged in an attempt to get around one hundred and forty dogs and sixty cats out of Kabul to the UK on a privately chartered plane (see for more information Kim 2021; Jackson 2021; Tanner 2021). Farthing complained that the UK Ministry of Defence had obstructed this rescue on the ground, despite the fact that Nowzad had arranged a flight paid for by donations and so did not represent either a financial cost to the Ministry and, as the animals would travel in the hold, didn't represent a 'waste' of space on evacuating flights either. There ensued something of a war of words between Farthing and the Secretary of State for Defence Ben Wallace MP, with Wallace eventually declaring 'I'm not prepared to prioritise pets over people' (BBC News 2021a). Several media commentators expressed disgust that Farthing seemed to be doing precisely that (see for example Downham 2021; Kirkup 2021; Hinsliff 2021). The (frequently vitriolic) debate went viral on social media, with opinion divided as to whether Farthing was a hero or a nuisance whose priorities were offensively misplaced. The foregrounding of this sensationalised, momentarily viral debate, this perceived direct competition of interests, in media of all types served to distract from other discussions about the situation in Afghanistan at the time, including whether or not the UK Government was really being honest with the public, and doing all it could to facilitate the evacuation in general. Farthing had dubbed his rescue attempt 'Operation Ark'.

Leslie Irvine's *Filling the Ark* doesn't deal directly with animal welfare in war, though she does note in conclusion that the principles of her research could usefully be extended to a discussion of if/how animals are considered in warfare. Rather, the book focuses on how animals tend to fare in natural disasters such as hurricanes, and in man-made disasters like oil spills. The point of interest here - and the reason why Irvine's book is, I suggest, of interest to anyone working at the intersection of animal studies, environmental humanities and media studies - is the role of the media in forming responses, and public attitudes, to animal welfare in disasters generally.

Wallace's outburst about the necessity of prioritising humans over animals unwittingly demonstrates the very maxim that Irvine problematises in *Filling the Ark*. The human supremacist objection, uncritically deployed, that we must always prioritise the human over the animal on pure principle is one which will be recognisable to many working in animal studies. Irvine contests the idea that the two things are radically separate - she emphasises, for example, that proper arrangements for pets in U.S. hurricane evacuation orders increase the likelihood of humans obeying them (2021, viii), that 'evacuating animals is part of caring for the needs of people' (2021, 38) and that the deaths of farm animals in hurricanes devastates impacts both the animals and the human farmers (2021, 15). In Irvine's own words, 'animal problems are people problems' (2021, x). Of course, there exists not only this undeniable entanglement of interests and welfare, but the moral and ethical duty humans owe to the animals they force into human service, placing them, as a result, at increased vulnerability to both natural and man-made disasters.

Irvine makes frequent observations that demonstrate the significant role of the media in perpetuating or disrupting inconsistencies in human-animal relations, through choice of language in reporting, extent of coverage, or indeed whether the media choose to report on an incident at all. Examples of media 'interventions' cited include the case of 'Oily Dog', where the recording of the shooting of a small, oil-covered dog after Hurricane Katrina was released on CNN (2021, 25), the negative publicity around animal rights advocates in the wake of disasters (2021, 108), and the way the sea otter became 'media star and metaphor' after the *Exxon Valdez* disaster (2021, 75). By comparison, Irvine points out that 'there is little public outcry or support for the rescue of farmed animals after disasters' (2021, 42) and that, consonant with Peter Singer's (1975) observations about the lack of media coverage of the welfare of farmed animals, after Katrina 'reports of farm animals injured and killed were slow to appear in the media' (2021, 45). Irvine also establishes that animals in research facilities receive 'virtually no media attention' (2021, 84). In both farming and animal research, the sheer scale of the numbers of animals involved is often concealed (2021, 85). Often, it is left to animal rights and welfare advocates to 'make a fuss' in order to ensure even minimal media coverage of the plight of farmed animals and those in laboratories - coverage which is regarded as 'bad press' for the facility owners and their powerful funders (2021, 49). These dissonant attitudes are, to a considerable extent, both shaped and reflected by the form taken by media on the subject, which has a role in both information and education (2021, 111).

This is a new revised edition of the original 2009 text, with a brief preface added by the author to address the relevance of the discussion to the COVID-19 pandemic. The need for a reconsideration of this content in 2021 will be clear to those working in critical animal studies, media and policy. However, as the reference to the COVID-19 pandemic begins and ends with the new preface, this relevance is not expanded upon at any length, which is a shame given the extent to which the pandemic has highlighted so many of the glaring injustices in human-animal relations.

The animals of *Filling the Ark* are divided into four groups - Companion Animals, Animals on Factory Farms, Birds and Marine Wildlife and Animals in Research Facilities. Thinking with mutually exclusive categories can invite oversight and simplification. In this case the posited

distinctions are both structurally necessary and analytically useful, helping the reader to a clear view of the dissonance in approaches to animal welfare in disasters. It demonstrates with great clarity that the human sense of care of, and obligation to, animals varies depending on our sociozoological categorisation of the animal concerned, and the nature of its perceived value (Arluke and Clinton 1996). It also helps to make visible the ways in which media voices (and silences) have the power to reify or reject these sociozoological biases.

Irvine's principal argument is that, far less than simply failing to prepare for or avoid massive loss of animal life in disasters, policy - the expansion of factory farming, riskier oil transport methods, the insistence on often unnecessary animal testing and so on - typically *creates* the circumstances that become disastrous. Irvine argues that, for many animals, the disaster happens long before the hurricane makes landfall, or before the oil spills. It occurs at the moment when the humans who control their fate choose to house them in farms and laboratories that are obviously prone to flooding or choose to engage in capitalist processes that risk the integrity of their wild habitats. The real disaster is the vulnerability before the 'disaster' strikes. Media perpetuations of sociozoological biases that arbitrarily declare which lives have value and which do not further extend the disaster. Irvine quotes the words of Gary Francione, who hopes for a day when 'we will no longer drag animals into the burning house, and then ask whether we should save the human or the animal' (Francione 2000). Ben Wallace M.P., in his response to Pen Farthing, appealed to a fallacy that *Filling the Ark* disproves eloquently. The question is more than whether we *should* rescue animals, be they Pen Farthing's cats and dogs in Kabul or farmed pigs after a hurricane in the U.S. It is whether we are doing what is needed to avoid the need for rescue in the first place.

Irvine's argument is not radical. But that's rather the point.

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