“With a hope to change things”: an exploration of the craft of writing about animals with the founders of *Zoomorphic* magazine

In his new book *The War Against Animals*, Dinesh Wadiwel suggests our primarily exploitative relationship with animals will change only when we create spaces of “truce” in society where we can relate differently to those with whom we share this planet. The thrust of Wadiwel’s argument is that as humans we have, in regards to animals, overwhelmingly created institutions and spaces of violence, rather than of kindness and truce, and that we don’t even realize this. The way we organize our ways of living generally doesn’t allow for us to see violence against animals as violence—and certainly not as a war.

A space of truce is, says Wadiwel, a place where different species can come together and create new connections, and perhaps friendships, even relations of love and care. To create such alternative spaces for truce between human and nonhuman species calls, however, for a radical change in the practices and system of we humans, who have colonized the majority of Earth’s spaces for our own benefit. Part of this process is to create spaces for current ways of knowing animals to be challenged, and “new forms of connection” to be proposed and shared.

*Zoomorphic* magazine is one of these spaces. Launched in 2015, it was first an online and is now also a print magazine of writing “in celebration and defence of wild animals”. It was established by two writers, Susan Richardson and James Roberts, who have dedicated their practices, and much of their personal lives as well, to championing the creation of “spaces of truce” in which writers from around the world can share attempts to reconfigure how we perceive nonhuman animals and our entanglements with them; indeed, with animals’ own entanglements with the world and with each other, outside of the human-centred view.

I interviewed Susan and James after the launch of Issue 1, sitting in a public park in the city of Cardiff, capital of Wales, on a blustery but warm summer’s day after the two of them had conducted a Zoomorphic editorial meeting. They were both enthused by the reaction people had toward their venture, and keen to see it grow and shape the writing landscape for animals in Britain, and across the world. I have followed *Zoomorphic* since through a number of issues, having published over 150 writers, with its first print anthology, *Driftfish*, focusing on marine life, having come out in December 2016. The sense of a community of practice able to write, read and share in the craft of writing about animals in more animal- and less anthropo- centric ways has been critical to the way in which the project has developed since its inception.

I caught up again with Susan and James to see how the project has shifted and changed shape—a natural development for a publication interested and involved with the zoopoetics of wild animals. In both conversations we explored both the “macro” work of establishing an animal-centric space of truce for new writing, and at the “micro” work of the individual acts of writing craft, technique and imaginative leaps that shapes and expands the animal-centric ethos of such a space. This essay is drawn from these interviews, as well as from follow-up conversations, the study of their books, and writing published in *Zoomorphic*.

There are two key themes that emerged during our discussions. The first is of the importance and value of a “macro” space such as *Zoomorphic* as a “space of truce” between species able to foster new ways of thinking about species relations.

The second is an insight into the “micro” practices of the writers’ themselves, exploring the craft skills, techniques and imaginative ideas of why we write about nonhuman animals, and how we can better write of their extinctions and losses, as well as the celebration of animal-centric poetry and literature.

Susan Richardson is a poet and the author of three collections, her most recent being *skindancing* (Cinnamon Press), infused with myth, animal voice and shapeshifting. She has worked with a number of environmental and animal organisations, including hosting bee-writing workshops for Friends of the Earth, as Poet in Residence for the World Animal Day action, and as Poet in Residence for the Marine Conservation Society (MCS), for whom she is writing a new collection *Thirty Threatened Species*. James Roberts is an essayist, writer and graphic designer, and author of the children’s book *The Man in the Mountain* (Sea Campion), a story that combines old Welsh myth with the themes of contemporary species loss, especially of the decline in bird life as witnessed by James around his home in the Welsh Brecon Beacons.

**AL: One of the main inspirations for the creation of *Zoomorphic* is a place to publish animal-centric poetry, essays and fiction. Did this come out of dissatisfaction with the ways in which established mainstream journals have resisted the publication of such work?**

JR: Yes. I’m familiar with a lot of the place writing publications, and there’s some animal writing in those publications, but there seems to be a stigma about animal writing in the main poetry journals. I know a lot of writers who do write about animals, so I wanted to create space for nature poetry—and the essays too, as a way to balance the two. *Zoomorphic* was about setting something up that focused on the actual creatures—not with animals as metaphors, or ciphers—and their relationships with them, specifically with wild animals.

SR: I think a lot of people who have submitted work to us expressed that mainstream journals are not so much in favor of animal focused work, and people were hungry for an alternative outlet. There’s a society for wildlife artists, for example, which is quite ghettoized. We didn’t want that. We wanted an open space, somewhere that people felt part of a community of practice writing about animals. What’s delighted me is the vast range of approaches, but most of all the fact that the animal is at the centre of the work. The response has been very positive, a sense of a community building around the project, on social media for example; a sense of goodwill around the magazine.

**AL: Have their been many surprises in terms of who has submitted work?**

JR: One of our aims with *Zoomorphic* is to bring together scientists and writers, so that the wealth of scientific data being gathered on wildlife and biodiversity can be shared more easily. The story that has been shared most [from Issue One] was by Katey Duffey, a story entitled ‘In Search of the Mountain Ghost’. She’s a conservationist who works in Mongolia with snow leopards, and she wasn’t sure how to write about it, but really wanted to share what she knew. I worked with her, added some guidance, maybe ten per cent, to make it a wider experience for people who aren’t scientists. I pointed weak spots out; did a final edit. The culture of writing she came from wants data, rather than story, and she wanted to write about the experience, how the Mongolian tribesmen were wonderfully welcoming, and she wanted to share that too. We worked on it for over a month, and the response has been great. The lead scientist on snow leopard conversation got in touch with Katey. He was really pleased with the piece and shared it around, so the outcome of that has been wonderful. I really love how poets and scientists can work together, and I really want that to be the focus of our magazine.

SR: The two worlds [arts and science] are so far apart, usually. I’ve found that with the work I do for the Marine Conservation Society, it’s lovely to bring the two together. Poetry and prose can be very effective tools in creating new patterns of thoughts, ultimately engendering behaviour change. And I know scientists are craving ways to put their work across. There’s quite a lot of stuff around climate change on this. During the Tipping Point project [that took artists and scientists to the Arctic Circle to witness climate change], there were lots of the scientists I came across who were saying: ‘We’ve got all this information, how can we get it across to the public in a more creative, accessible way?’ They’re keen to get it across.

JR: That’s because poetry creates a feeling, a deeper connection, a space around poetry you’re sucked into, but at the same time the more scientific writing can bring you to the world, the worldview of other people. The scientific knowledge comes from people who know those things are happening on the ground, which poets aren’t necessarily going to know about.

**AL: You both see *Zoomorphic* as not only “animal shaped” as the name would suggest, but also “shaped by animals”—would this be a fair comment?**

SR: We have to see what people are interested in, who approaches us, what we can do, we’ll have to see, but we have ambitions for events, printed publications, readings, performances, exhibitions, workshops, and mentoring.

**AL: *Zoomorphic* is a new institution of literary writing, one that privileges animal-centric narrative, imagery and rhythm, as a way to challenge anthropocentric writing practices and rhythms. is this how you envisioned it when it began?**

**SR**: Aboutsix years ago I chose to forego all writing and teaching opportunities that did not directly respond to what I felt at the time were urgent questions of environmental destruction and especially species loss. I was writing more widely, and teaching widely, but I’d made a conscious decision what with the state the world was in I could not justify writing that didn’t have an ecological impulse behind it. It was a scary decision, as I was giving up quite a lot of regular teaching work, and I didn’t know if there would be enough work focusing only on the ecological.

JR: That’s the decision I also effectively made. I’d got to the point where I couldn’t write about anything else except animals and the environment, because it upsets me all of the time. I’ve got animals around me everywhere I go, and all my life, and I’ve got young children and I want them to have the same experiences I’ve had.

**AL: So how do writers produce work that is animal-centric, in dialogue with animal experience, and that render the representations of animals more authentically, perhaps even more ethically?**

SR: From my own point of view as a writer, writing about animals, getting out and spending long periods of time in a place where a particular animal might be, is essential. I spent a lot of my time in my 20s and 30s travelling the world, but really just scratching the surface. Now I’m keen to be rooted and to get to know a small place intimately, and that’s really helped my writing about animals. If I know an ecosystem or environment intimately then that leads to depths in the writing I could not access before. I also feel—because I don’t have a scientific background myself—that it’s important to try to get up to speed with the science as much as possible. Whether that involves doing an animal behaviour online course through the University of Melbourne, or if it means doing a wild boar tracking day, or an otter ecology day, or a week counting seal pups, then I will do that. I feel uncomfortable about not having the scientific background.

**AL: Susan, your new collection, *skindancing*, shapes itself around the ideas and imagery of transformation, of a new way of looking at animal–human relations. Your poems are about physical transmutation between creatures, from girl to seal, woman to doe, a mother growing a beak, and transplants of body parts between species. Can you tell me a bit more about your engagement with myths and indigenous creation stories, and how integral they are as a part of your practice of writing about animals?**

SR: The whole mythical side of things is very important to me. The Selkie [half seal, half human woman] has that sense of transformation and shapeshifting that is very much a part of my writing. And the more research and reading I’ve done around that, the more it becomes evident that in our Western story tradition, there are very few positive representations of human–animal shapeshifting stories; that whole process of transformation is usually a curse or punishment. Whereas in a lot of indigenous stories, that process of transformation is something to be embraced and celebrated. It is how a character gets herself out of a difficult situation, such as women who transform into bears, etc., and I’ve not come across that as something negative in indigenous cultures. It sums up so much that is dysfunctional in Western cultures with our relationships not only with animals but also with the animal in us, and the wider animal world.

**AL: So how do you get closer to these positive experiences, in attempting to access the rhythms and experiences of animals?**

SR: In terms of technique, if I’m writing from the animal perspective, or trying to, then I’ll think a lot about pronouns: not having a single, solitary *I*, but maybe have a *we*, or an *us*, if you’re writing about a flock for example. This helps me to think about language as quite malleable and fluid. I have nouns acting as verbs, verbs as nouns, which is all about being open to language being fluid. I also think about the form of the poem, allowing it to shift and change from poetry to prose and back again… If we’re writing from an animal’s perspective it’s going to be a construct anyway, but I do like experimenting with different forms of language and structure, to give my flavour of animal-ness where possible.

AL: And has this challenged yours own ideas of how we perceive what we know about animals; that is, how we ‘discursively’ represent them, to others but, in this context, also to ourselves as writers?

SR: Yes, definitely. As well as trying to up my scientific knowledge, at the same time I’m doing the more intuitive stuff such as engaging with shamanism, trance, shamanic trance dance, and animal communication, which is really, far, far away from the scientific. I do a little bit of work with an animal communicator in West Wales. She works with horses, and she says it’s not about body language, but it’s about telepathy. A lot of scientists have no truck with that, but it helps me find a more intuitive way into writing. It also helps me looking at things like animal totems—that has quite a significant impact on my practice, as far as writing goes. Some of the first shamanic work that I did was based around finding your animal spirit guide. The first one that came up for me was the Atlantic Grey Seal and I’ve written a lot about that animal now. My relationship with Seal has developed quite a lot, and in shamanism when we’re encouraged to find our own power animals, if you open yourself up to that animal it will appear to you more and more as time goes on, in lots of different ways. I am now aware of Seal being there.

**AL: James, like Susan, you’ve also written extensively on seals. But it seems your work comes at the creature from a different angle?**

JR: I know the myths. Diving animals like seals, which could delve into the dark, were seen in myth and old story as creatures of the imagination. They were seen as superior to humans. Humans were limited—only poets were allowed to dive into the dark with the animals. But what I really love reading are reports, a lot of science. What amazed me recently was a seal report done on the island of Skomer. They thought the seal colony there was about 80 or 90 seals, and the scientists thought they were resident, but found some of the seals were travelling to Cornwall and back in 24 hours. They found a pup that had swum all the way around the UK coast and ended up in the Shetland Isles. So young too! I get a lot of the sense of wonder about the natural world from these facts. And this goes into my writing. Knowledge like this can really bring out more wonder, not less.

SR: It is bringing together the poetic and the mythological and the scientific and the transformative, and that is really important work to do in these times.

**AL: And the emotional, it seems? This is especially true in your writing, James?**

JR: I’m a miserable bugger [said with a wry smile]. The things I feel mostly, and the main reason for starting *Zoomorphic*, were these horrible statistics about animals. My favorite animals. I live in the Brecon Beacons, and when I first moved there, there were huge flocks of lapwings, and I heard curlews from February to October, constantly. But in the last 12 months I haven’t heard a curlew, I haven’t seen a lapwing for six or seven years… This was the main motivation for me to try and do something as a writer that could connect more than a few people together—with a hope to change things. It’s important to my craft to draw connections between human understandings of loss experienced in culture, and the losses of nature caused by human culture.

**AL: That sounds like an example of how Richard Mabey describes culture: “Culture isn’t the opposite or contrary of nature. It’s the interface between us and the non-human world, our species’ semi-permeable membrane.”**

JR: I’ve always written about loss, It emerges from the community I came from, and I have used this in my writing about animals… it comes from my family history of factory workers, miners, grandparents, who lived desperately poor lives. I hear their stories: the accidents, the way they had to live, the coal face that collapsed on my grandfather and broke his back, and a family brought up with no income, my grandmother going out to work at night, and then how they were brought into the cities to do that work… And I ask: What is it we lost? Where do I, my children, come from? We don’t know. Not from coal mines, not these depressing mining towns… Then in my teens I experienced the miner’s strike, how the mines were shut down and everyone lost their jobs. This loss has transferred to my writing about nature, as I moved from cities into nature. Mind you, even before that, animals were a constant through my life. My parents had horses, they always loved horses, and everything in the house was ‘horses’. But they didn’t have a sense of losing anything but our generation and my children have this new sense of loss. Writing my children’s book about the valley I live in came from the experience of moving to a national park and not being able to believe how little animal life there was. In the years I’ve been in the Brecon Beacons, I’ve only once seen one fox, so I straightaway had the feeling that the animals had been taken from this place. The story of *The Man in the Mountain* combines the Welsh Story of the man in the wild, King Arthur, etc., who is calling the animals to him. The children in the book have to try and find this Man, and where the animals are going, and work out a way to bring the animals back. It was written for my children. It does have a hopeful ending. It tries to argue that if we act in a certain way, it can all come back. It can be ecologically regenerated, and it can all come back, very quickly.

**AL: As well as loss, it seems that anger is a recurring theme amongst those who write toward environmental devastation and species loss. If we’re going to write about these subjects well—and not as propagandists—we’re going to have to work out how to channel this anger into our work poetically, aren’t we?**

SR: Yes, what to do about anger! If we write strident manifesto performance pieces, there has to be craft and transformation and beauty. People are scared of that word beauty. But it needs to be like that, in the writing, and for the literary quality to be there, because if you’ve got a ranting piece that doesn't have something else, it’s not going to work.

JR: A lot of writers who submitted work to *Zoomorphic* have been angry, or have written from the point of the view of a hunter who’s angry at his own world, people who’ve been sick, cancer stories, etc. The writer has seen the animal as something the character in the story can avenge themselves upon in the story… I don’t know if that’s a great way to approach it, really. Animals become then objectivized, just targets.

**AL: Is anger a useful emotion in writing, then?**

JR: Anger is most of the reason why I write. I feel incredibly angry at the moment. Where I live, I’m surrounded by farmers who are so kindly towards animals, but who also hunt. Recently, in a small lake near where I live there have been swans, and young cygnets. The farmers are driving their tractors over to watch the cygnets and swans on the lake. I got talking to one of the farmers, who has been here for 75 years, He said he’d never once seen cygnets up here before. I was writing about curlew at the time, and I asked him about the birds. He said he’d not seen peewits any more; he said we don’t see the curlew any more, either and there’s was a real sense of sadness to his words.

**AL: But what is he doing about it? And what can you do with his words?**

JR: He was saying one of the main reasons the curlews are gone is that the farmers are mowing in May rather than in August, and the mowers are going over where the chicks are in the nests. It’s to do with the roller mowers, too. The birds used to be able to escape in the gaps in the mowers, but these new mowers don’t let them escape; but the farmer said he didn’t want to go back to the old way of moving. I feel for this man, and he has a sense of sadness, but his own sense of the right thing to do was to stick with the technological advancement. So there’s a bond with this person, and anger towards him too. How do we come to terms with that? We have to write about that, put it into our work, and you can only do that by talking to people, hearing their stories too, not judging.

SR: How do we write about this anger? It’s still uncomfortable, but I feel obliged to do it. I’ve experimented with this in the MCS writing I’ve been doing around on thirty threatened species. These range from the least vulnerable to the almost extinct. How have I been able to find ways to write about these different levels of loss? I’ve experimented with textual absences and gaps in the writing. Also, I’ve been finding with workshops, a lot of people are resistant to writing about loss, and about their anger, so I’ve had to come into it from different angles. I always get to loss by the end, but I have to start with celebration and appreciation, as it turns people off. I find it frustrating, but people have said they cannot write about all the loss, it’s too much. So I begin with personal stories, starting with stories of connection with individual animals, then writers can move into loss more easily, down that route once they have reanimated their connections.

**AL: Do we need to go further than simply remembering or recounting the connections with particular nonhumans we have tangible relationships with? How do we find practices that connect us with the invisible and further away?**

SR: A lot of the MCS creatures are deep sea, we know so little about them, there’s no data. It is the more iconic creatures people relate to. But we need to connect with all of them. During my writing workshops with people looking at marine creatures, I’ve collected quotes about how people feel about the writing process, and the endangered species we’re writing about. They feel poetry can be a really powerful tool, and that they actually want to write about the animal itself, not as a cipher for something else. We need to do this for unloved species too.

**AL: It seems what you’re saying is that a refocusing of craft onto animal-centric practice is central to new animal writing?**

SR: Yes. I’ve been working on this. So animals are good to think with, sure. They have been used as metaphors, extensively in adverts, and I have a few files here for research to go into my writing, standing in for the human, and a lot of nature writing. And so much nature writing is like this. Take Helen Macdonald’s *H is for Hawk*, for example. It’s a brilliant book, but it’s about the writer, not about the animal. There are hierarchies of the animals. The birds of prey are adored and loved and nurtured, and trained, and then the trainers and hawkers have got dead chicks in their bags, out of the public view, dead chicks which are cast offs of the animal agriculture industry, with which to feed the exotic, loved birds. It’s hierarchies of what is appropriate and which animal is deemed appropriate to love and protect. There are problems with it. Our writing has to challenge this and can only do so by focusing on those unloved creatures too. Craft becomes a matter of subject choice.

**AL: So what would you suggest writers who want to practice a more animal-centric form of writing should do?**

**AL: *Zoomorphic* is now a place for animal-centric writing, and an example of a space for a truce between the exploitative, or at best ambivalent, dominant relationships that we humans have with other animals. What are your hopes for the publication going forward?**

JR: I don't see much hope as years go on. I’m going to feel more desperate. You hope that somehow creating a community might contribute something, might change behaviour, just a little. But I don't know. Is hope enough?

SR: I believe it is. That it does. I have to keep believing it does, and that behaviour does change. From doing the bee writing workshops, people were absolutely committed to carrying on with bee friendly work, and were really fired up by the end, and they were still very enthusiastic three months on. Poetry can bypass the intellect and it goes straight to the heart. I do believe it changes how we behave. I have to.

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