

## Bat

Tessa Laird

Review by Norie Neumark

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**M**y first encounter with Tessa Laird's book was looking at the delightful opening illustration, captioned: "two grey-headed flying foxes hanging out together." I found myself gazing back at these 'upside down' bats, lured in by their promise that if I hang out with *Bat*, my own world would be overturned. And it was. From that very first moment when my proprioceptive body was startled, I was drawn into *Bat*'s very different, upside down world—a world that opens up new ways of knowing

and thinking, from bats and beyond to wider questions of human/animal relations.

*Bat* is an important addition to the valuable Animal Series published by Reaktion Books. It is thought-provoking, surprising, and deeply pleasurable to read—both for more introductory readers and for those deeply into animal studies. Laird feels and engages with bats not as objects but as subjects, lively and enchanting. She compellingly brings alive, or rather, shares the life of bats with her readers. Her writing—its understandings, insights, and questions—reveal a transdisciplinary dexterity and a theoretical sophistication.

*Bat* is a book written by a scholar, who is also an artist—an artist who knows how important sensory entanglements are to awaken us to the otherwise inaudible and invisible in our world. So, while *Bat*'s 99 stunning illustrations are a marvelous feast for the eyes, it arouses my other senses too. My ears resonate with, as Laird puts it, the "constant chatter of fruit bats and the silent screams of the echolocators" (149). Touch, too, is enlivened, as my

fingers tingle with her evocation of the super sensitivity of bat's wings that are hands. And, of course, the odorous – malodorous – conjurings of bats' guano (powerfully fertilizing excrement) arouse my sense of smell. As the author affectively invigorates my senses, she invites me to attune to and care about the world of *Bat*. Laird herself certainly cares about bats, as she does about the earth, which suffers from the endangering of bats so vital to its ecosystems. As she writes, "[Bats] are excellent bioindicators: 21<sup>st</sup> century



Tessa Laird, *Bat*, 2018,  
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canaries in the Gaian coal mine, telling us that life is literally getting too hot to handle” (137). There is clearly, Laird tells us, much at stake within and beyond the bat caves.

The first chapter, ‘Dazzling Diversity,’ provides insight into diversity in a species that is both feared and despised, fascinating and repulsive. The book opens on a scientific note where Laird explains the biological classification for bats, Chiroptera, comes from Greek *chier*, hand and *pteron*, wing. She relates how these nifty hand-wings enable all sorts of bat behaviors, from cradling a baby to flying, and even doubling as “raincoats or sleeping bags.” From this opening chapter, Laird’s book conjures a world we share with bats, a more-than-human world, where boundaries between more-than and human are experienced as porous. I feel both strangely close and very far away—like us, bats are mammals, but unlike us, and uniquely, among mammals, they can fly.

*Bat* offers a cornucopia of research...a richly fertile soil turned over with a loving hand. This is careful, care-full research, beautifully written in a text contagiously enlivened by its bats. Moving like—with—these unique creatures in their inimitable and nifty navigation, *Bat*’s text twists and turns through biology, art history, ecology, cultural studies—traversing these fields with dazzling battitude and beatitude (as my self-correcting spell checker insightfully insists on rendering battitude). On one page I read about bats’ fascinating eating and sex habits (from fellatio and cunnilingus to the male bats who lactate); and on another page I turn to stories of human torture—torture by humans, that is. Whether it’s the devastating effects of global warming on habitats or more directly cruel experimentation and extermination practices (from bat bombs to poison gas, dynamite and flame throwers, to state sanctioned shootings) things are looking bad for bats. Let me recount one of disturbing examples, the so-called Judas bats. This involves the deadly practice of humans spreading poisonous chemicals onto the coats of bats who then return to their colonies and infect the bats who groom them—which is why they’re called Judas bats. But as this strategy exploits the friendships and sociality of bats, I wonder who is really the Judas here, the bats or the humans? It reminds me of anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose’s essay, “Judas Work: Four Modes of Sorrow,” where she describes the similar use of Judas collars on feral female donkeys to exploit their sociality in order to exterminate them. Like Rose’s understanding, thanks to her Australian Aboriginal elder teachers, that animals take care of Country, Laird, too, helps me grasp how the Judas cruelty against bats is a crime against Country, ecology, and of course the creatures themselves. Indeed, Laird has much to tell us about bats and Indigeneity, from environmental concerns to Australian Aboriginal art works such as Lin Onus’ remarkable *Fruit Bats* (1991) which depicts bats hanging upside down on a rotary clothes line: “For those that insist bats are pests, however, Onus’s flying foxes become a phalanx of protesters claiming their land rights in the midst of a white Australian suburban fantasy” (160).

The manifold human cruelties unleashed against bats have much to tell us about human/animal relations—Laird writes with painful acuity of the fears, panic and hysteria they evoke. She proposes that it is the closeness yet difference of these animals to human animals that shapes them as likely subjects for projection and fascination—for scapegoating, yes, but also for celebration. Indeed, it isn’t all madness and melancholia, cruelty and sorrow in these pages. There are joyful and *enchanted* stories too. Enchantment, for political philosopher Jane Bennett is “a state of openness to the disturbing-captivating elements in everyday experience ... a window onto the virtual secreted within the actual” (Bennett 131). Enchantment tunes us up and into the world and makes audible and visible the more-than-human voices and relations. When we *sense* enchantment, we are energised and inspired to engage more openly and generously in “productive assemblages” with other beings and things. “Without modes of enchantment we might not have the energy and inspiration to enact ecological projects...or to respond generously to humans and nonhumans that challenge our settled identities” (Bennett 174). *Bat* is indeed an enchanting text—a

productive assemblage. It is not just enlivened by the enchantment of bats, it also breathes palpable life into the concept of enchantment itself.

And there are heart-warming passages. Speaking literally of heart-warming, Laird conveys the story of Richard Morecroft, a once well-known Australian tv news reader, who held his foster bat, a juvenile grey-headed flying fox close to his heart, inside his shirt, as he read the nightly news. The story of Morecroft flapping his arms and trying to teach Archie to fly is beguiling—eventually “Archie took a literal leap of faith; seeing his human carer’s arms akimbo, he flung himself across the abyss of species difference and landed on the other side. He may have only landed on Morecroft’s head, but metaphorically, he had crossed the interspecies divide. Archie found out what it is like to be a bat by imitating a human imitating a bat” (146). In a way, this is the very move that Laird’s book makes: crossing the interspecies divide, entangling with bats, her writing inverts us, our world, turning it upside down so we can move past the ill-informed, unfounded figuring of bats that blinds us rather than bats.

*Bat* is a significant and valuable contribution to the ethical human/animal relationship that animal studies is advancing. Bats have a lot to say, about themselves and their/our world, and Laird knows how to listen. She *attunes* to bats. As philosopher Vinciane Despret proposes, human/animal relations are a mutual attunement—a passionate, affective, bodily with-ness (Despret 2004). This is the attunement afforded to readers of *Bat*. This deceptively small book is exuberant and generous. From an affective register to a thoughtful mode, it zooms right into you like a bat out of hell, inverting your attitudes, as Laird would have it, undoing your certainties, shifting your feeling and thinking.

## References

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