

## Love's claim on grief

Commentary on [King](#) on Animal Grief

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**Abstract:** Our very words for grief are borrowed, in the first place, from animals: a howling, a wailing, a keening. We could wallow with these words that we borrow, but we can also put them to work for others.

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I wonder if I have ever really experienced an immersive grief in the way that Barbara King describes in her book *How Animals Grieve* (2013): grief felt as a keening, a howling, a wailing. The stuff of grief is so powerful and the emergence from it painstaking; sometimes animals (nonhuman and human) do not emerge from it at all. Dying from having loved and lost is the sublime triumph of poets, you might think, a territory not shared with cats or goats. But King's analysis of animal grief says otherwise. The measure of *our* love is found not just in the depth of *our* grief but, looking sideways, it is also found in the grief felt by other species, many of whom grieve in ways that are humbling beyond words — beyond words that we have for grief that we have borrowed, in the first place, from them: a howling, a wailing.

Love's claim on grief is recounted in richly detailed stories; the dolphin who refuses to relinquish her dead calf to the sea, and the pod that watches and slows down to wait for her. King writes about the cat who calls for her dead sister over and over; dogs who retrace the daily walks of dead companions; and ducks and elephants attending to their dead, displaying emotional and physical signs of mourning. These stories bring together anecdotes from human companions whose attention to individual behavior is acute, attuned, sensitive. (*How does she sound? Where is she going? Has she eaten?*) They signal intimate and patient proximity with animal others. We read about them watching, knowing, thinking with their animal companions, recognizing patterns no longer adhered to, meals missed, places sought out, footprints of individuals found and recognized in the snow.

Those who tell these stories are attuned to grief in others and also, implicitly, aware of the risk of being seen as crazy, as non-scientific, as anthropomorphic (especially by those who would quibble with and mumble at the title: *surely it is not "how" but "whether" animals grieve*). King makes room for animal trainers whose relationships to "their" animals shift from instrumentalist to conservationist, and to scientists whose field notes reveal an

openness to animal emotions just before they are discarded in the name of disciplinary “rigour.” Perhaps it is painful for them, for us, to recognize animal grief – after all, as King notes, it underwrites an important shift away from “treating animals as *some things* to treating them as *someones*” (167). This is love’s claim on grief; I grieve because I love and long for someone in particular, and in that particularity is a world, not an atom, not a single *thing* in any sense of the word.

The emotional lives of animals raise the bar for human response-ability. While King’s analysis tends towards precision (the “how” of grieving) over principle (*What now?*), it is clear that the bar it sets for response-ability is high and could also be higher. Animal lives are crushed at accelerating rates by agro-business, by the business of making meat and making *it* ungrievable. The wager of *How Animals Grieve* is perhaps that it will alert readers to the importance of not doing this, of not ignoring, or denying. But our selectivity regarding others, in our regard for others, is staggering. It is a howling, a wailing, a keening for a world (and not an atom) that we share with animals but which we have mistranslated as only our own. We could wallow with these words that we borrow, but we can also put them to work for others.

## References

King, B. (2013). *How animals grieve*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.