https://theartofeveryone.com/animal-instinct-poetry-law-an-interview-with-stephanie-barber/

AUG 31, 2021 | BOOKS

ANIMAL INSTINCT, POETRY, LAW: AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHANIE BARBER

BY ADAM ROBINSON

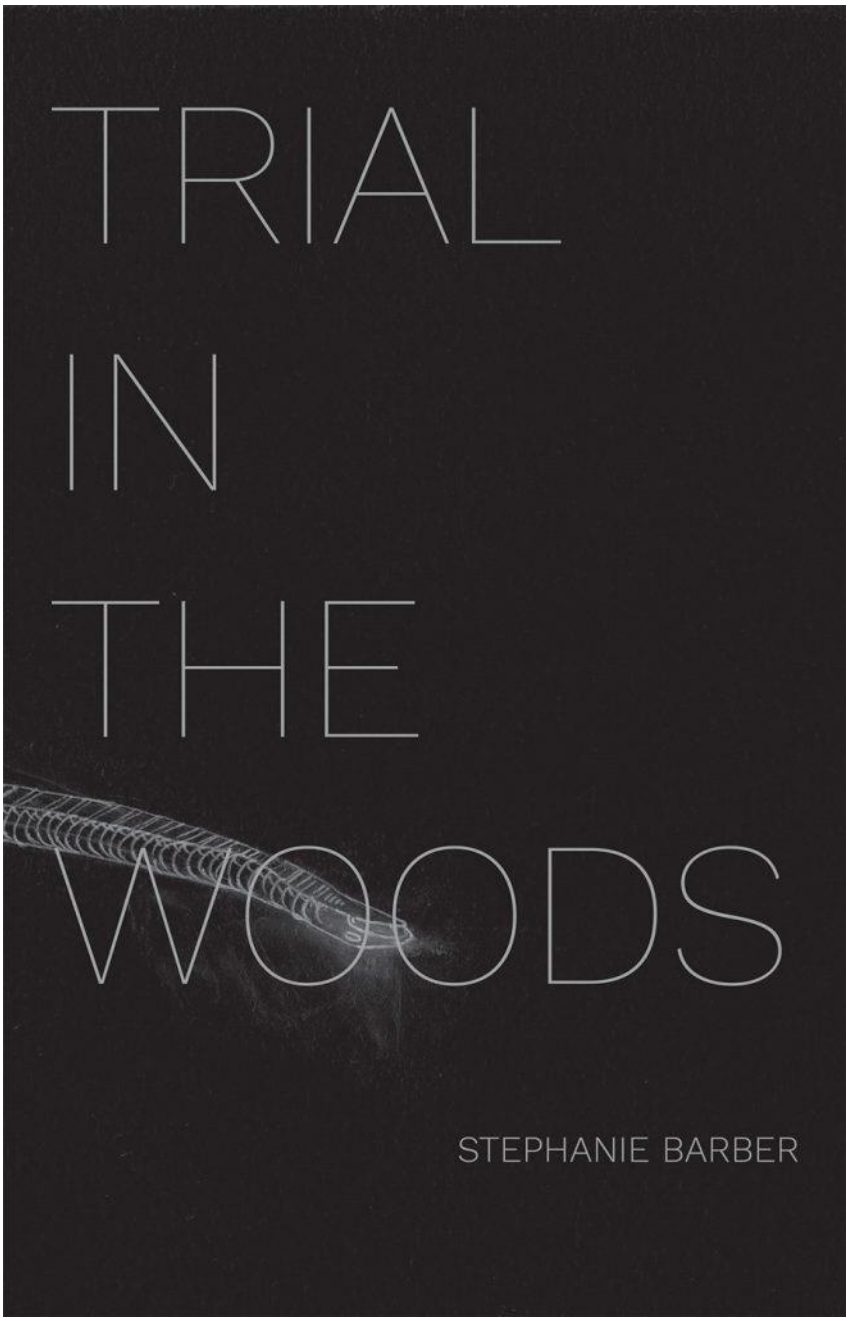
Animal Instinct, Poetry, Law: An Interview with Stephanie Barber
by Adam Robinson
...
Stephanie Barber's new book, "Trial in the Woods," is a farcical examination of how our principles of justice would look if we pinned them on animals.

Animal Instinct, Poetry, Law: An Interview with Stephanie Barber
by Adam Robinson
...
Stephanie Barber's new book, "Trial in the Woods," is a farcical examination of how our principles of justice would look if we pinned them on animals.

Congratulations to TAoE contributor Stephanie Barber on the publication of her new book, *Trial in the Woods*, from Plays Inverse. The book, which is a play, just came out this month. Since her contribution to *Everyone Quarterly Issue One* features letters to a deer, a mouse, a cat, a rhino, and so on, it's fitting that her new book is also preoccupied with animals. In this case, it's a courtroom procedural incited by, curiously, the murder of a wolf by an otter. From there, the play explores, well, the nature of nature. Why do animals do what they do and how should they be held responsible? How does the allegory extend to human beings (who, we're reminded below, are also animals). Already there's been some great praise for the book. Laura van den Berg calls it "philosophical and frequently hilarious." Jackie Wang says, "With humor and lyricism, Barber uses absurdist allegory to poke holes in the foundational assumptions of social contract theory" and Zhu Yi compares it to "a strange dream." Aside from being provocative and funny, it's also an immersive puzzle—reminiscent of the kind of storytelling where the reader is never sure who's right, or how the author will be able to resolve anything. A puzzle like life.

Here's the publisher's description:

On the morning of the 5th gibbous moon, Ovelia Otter attacks and kills Pennstin the young wolf at Bear Chondra's Mix Flow Get Up And Go exercise class. That same afternoon, Ovelia Otter is brought before a jury of her peers, Judge Bodon Boar presiding. Prosecutor Lynx believes she should be expelled from animal society immediately, while Defense Squirrel S. argues animal instinct ought not to be prosecuted at all. Witness after witness are called to the stand and the forest's animals hang on the trial's every word—most more interested in the spectacle than its outcome. One part crime procedural and one part fable, Stephanie Barber's *Trial in the Woods* is a bold new play about ethics, the efficacy of punitive justice, and our (human, American) criminal justice system. It's also very, very funny.



This part of the woods is a good distance from where Winnie the Pooh and his friends hang out. I was happy to ask Stephanie Barber a few questions about the book and its deeper meanings.

TAoE: You seem to know a lot about the justice system, how courtrooms work. I love how you talk about voir dire, objections,

all that. Does this knowledge come from being alive in America in the 21st century?

Stephanie Barber: NO! I had to do so much research! Some of it I knew… voir dire of course, but a lot of the process and language I had to research. As always, the majority of my research didn't make it into the play (all that Latin memorized to have the correct logical fallacy at the ready! dashed.) Sometimes research, regardless of it being obviously evidenced in the writing, works to get me in the mindset of the scenario. I was interested, and worked really hard, throughout all of the antics and fantasy of non-human animals, to make clear, logical and followable arguments for each discussion point that is introduced. Logic and clarity against the silliness of an elephant newscaster or squirrel defense attorney is also an aesthetic choice. Each confounding and consoling the other. Something that was interesting for me to learn (realize? relearn?) is that a lot of the legal system (or, at least the contemporary American legal system) is actually not as concerned with logic as you might hope. So that ethics (what I am, in the play, most interested in considering) and legality are a little too far away from each other for comfort.

Situate this play for me. Do you think of it as more *Law & Order*, or well, more Kafka?

I did watch a lot of *Law & Order* while writing this (and still). I only watch SVU so I don't know about the others. But it is much more focused on the detectiving work and less emphasis on the courtroom. I've never been too interested in Kafka so I'm really not sure, but important ethical novels for me are Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and also *The Brothers Karamazov* and Father Zosima's passage in that piece. Also the senselessness and befuddlement at play in *Sozaboy* by Ken Saro-Wiwa. But I haven't read these books in a long time, though I did do a little dipping back into Frantz Fanon (on violence) and Foucault's essays in the Punitive Society while writing. But lightly. This play is not meant to have a discrete mission statement (which all of those texts do).

Process question: at what point when you were writing did you know how the trial would end?

I always knew I couldn't acquit or prosecute. I mean, I do not know. I cannot see the best way forward but I do not think it is prison. The play does not say this specifically—I am really interested in sitting uncomfortably in the not knowing. I think it's important. I'm not a legislator in the criminal justice system (thank god), nor am I an ethicist. I'm a poet and should not be expected to have any answers—only more questions.

Poet-lawyer. Poet Laureate. Poet Laurie Ate. Potentate. Autocracy. Failed governments. Failure of government. In another interview you talked about how living in East Baltimore factored into your writing of the play. Do your experiences there complicate your understanding of "the justice system"?

[Stephanie Barber by Seon Park]

I've always been interested in, and suspicious of, the workings of "the justice system" but absolutely the community I live in has, maybe not complicated my understanding, but reinforced my belief in its deep (and deeply destructive) fallibility. This whole play was inspired by the very real and devastating violence against me and my neighbors in my East Baltimore neighborhood. Violence from within the community and outside of the community (the now

disgraced Baltimore Gun Trace Task Force worked very aggressively in our neighborhood).

I was surprised the otter killed the wolf. It defies the natural order of things, right? Was it this way from the first draft?

Yes, this was always the murder. I think there were several reasons for this, one is to sort of disembody violence. It's almost like the act becomes more important than the body committing the act. The violence can attach itself to any creature regardless of "the natural order." I'm interested in the ideas about violence as an epidemic and the contagion of violence and this sort of removal of the act from the perpetrator.

How do you mean?

Certainly it complicates the ethics and indicts the community and context in which the act occurred. Removes the implied individuality of an action (or actor). (I wonder if we can do this same thing with the victim?—interesting.) So that was one reason to choose this unlikely take-down pairing. Another thing this otter/wolf combo does is—and maybe this is related—it makes it more fantastic. More ridiculous, more senseless, like a lot of violence. Also, maybe I am poking fun at the excellent job otter's PR teams have done these last bunch of years. It's always funny to me how we humans package our ideas about different non-human animals. Remember my rap song about animal PR?

in the 80s seals and koalas had good PR
that seems to have gotten those guys very far
on any notebook or pen and pencil case
you could see their adorable face

The cruelty of human attraction (like to charismatic megafauna) and its dire consequences for our fellow earthlings.

"I don't know why we caved and started acting all human." Tell me about this line.

One of the things that the characters in the play keep getting distracted by is the system in which they are playing. Why are they having a courtroom trial?

Why are they using the language and choreography of a human justice system to respond to Pennstin the Young Wolf's murder? Their meta-understanding of the process and its lineage is funny while also speaking (hopefully not too didactically) to any culture, gender, community being changed by the customs and ethics of a dominant groups' systems.

What scares you most about the fact that humans are animals?

On the contrary, the fact that humans are animals is very consoling to me. I feel better being reminded that I'm one of a whole. An element of an organism. I keep bees and I find them to be such a great reminder of my part-ness. Everything about contemporary American society triumphs the individual, the exceptionality of our existence, and I think this anthropocentricism is a very heavy burden. Or, I feel burdened by it. When I remember my ephemerality, my smallness, my cog-ness, I feel better. What scares me most is the myth of the human. The deep loneliness and selfishness of that myth.

Which do you love more, all cats or your cats?

Define love.

"Yes, I am NOT aware of a reason. Or NO I am not aware of a reason. I don't know how to say it properly." That's a good one. What are some of the other funny lines people have been quoting to you?

When Zinnia the snake is being "sworn in," they refuse to swear to tell the "truth" and Prosecutor Lynx says, "Yes, your honor, please forgive me. Zinnia Snake, it is well known in the forest that snakes have a distaste for the stultifying rigidities of the concept of truth." I got a message about that. And when Zinnia says, "Long time ago I done felt the tug of want, the want of something that aliveness trick us to." Zinnia, in particular, seems to be a favorite. Also the Bison and the Turtle who are these sort of stoned jury members seem to charm people. I got an email, not about a funny line but a sweet/sad bunch of lines that I also really love: "I saw Ovelia Otter and her sister asleep on their backs. Floating in the river asleep on their backs and they were holding paws. When I think about it it makes me want to cry, it was so

tender. So tender as to be almost the definition of tender. When I demand of myself more tenderness in my familial and community interactions I picture these two soft paws clasped gently together on a soft spring day floating down the river." Mr. Shellscape says this, trying to suggest that each creature puts good and bad into the world and that the good must be measured alongside the bad.

When Ovelia discusses her motivations—feeling so alive and turned on (and on and on and on)—is this an animalistic emotion—is it something humans can't also feel, or something we've turned down in ourselves, lest we behave murderously or simply antisocially?

I think humans regularly behave murderously and antisocially. We can look to many genocides and mass displacements currently underway for evidence of this, or the more subtly disguised (but no less actually violent) murderousness of systemic misogyny, racism, and classism so present in our own (contemporary, American) society. But I think also what Ovelia Otter is talking about—this ineffable awareness of being, this being completely dumbfounded by the incomprehensibility of being alive—I am just leaping from one branch which says "can't describe" to another which says "can't describe" in this sentence—but I mean exactly this. Kant's sublime, and the horror implicit in that wonder. This is what Ovelia was feeling. Or, rather, of course I don't know everything she was feeling but this is part of it and I would guess this is a very human perplexity.

My neighbor's dog caught a squirrel and shook it to death, the way dogs do. Completely instinctual, no passion. Don't you think it's wrong to equate this with the metaphor of human crime that is "a result of her being a product of this forest and its legal and social and spiritual and educational system." Let me know if I need to rephrase this.

Well, I would say first of all that you don't know that there was no passion. It might be quite a passionate act—the chase, the grab, the lock of jaws, the joy of having "won," the taste of blood after (I'm guessing) so much kibble for so

many years? What we describe as passion or instinct might look different in different animals. Though, I love the work of the Dutch ethologist Frans de Waal and the way he allows (or has even advocated for) allowing for some "anthropomorphism" in our understanding of (or writing about) animals. That, in a way, to say that something is "instinctual, no passion" is as presumptuous as saying its opposite. We can presume, I'd say. I would presume that your neighbor's dog had quite a bit of passion in the catching of that squirrel. But, it's all too much for this short interview because we'd have to define instinct and we'd have to define passion. Certainly I am taking silly liberties in the play and not trying to draw a precise correlative, but I would not say it is "wrong" to equate such an action (your neighbor's dog, Ovelia's freak out) with human crime because truly, in both cases (the human and non-human animal violence) we really don't know what happened. "What Happened?!" there is the same presumptuousness we employ when thinking about non-human animals at play in our understanding of ourselves and our fellow humans. I think we do not know all of the "motives," the passions, the instincts at play in human violence, just as we do not always know in non-human animal violence (with the exception of violence for food). These sentences have gotten a little clunky in the effort to be clear/not clear at the same time. One thing that is important to me in this play is that I am primarily trying to complicate the issues and not make a clear and concise edict about violence and its causes.

Who's the worst person you can feel empathy for?

You know I can't answer this question in print, but I think this practice of radical empathy/radical forgiveness is incredibly important. Exercise and practice.

I saw a tweet or something that said "humans are the only animals that pay to live on earth." Your thoughts?

Wow. great tweet. I had to stop being on twitter cuz it is so *violent*! That tweet reminds me of a great line by The Coup, "All these motherfuckers tryna pimp me for living," in the song "Breathing Apparatus."

At what point did you know you could spell "macaque"?
I still can't. It's like the word tongue. Gotta spell it wrong two times, each time.
Another process question. The end really picks up the pace. It's fun to read, like Alexander Pope or something. Did writing in rhyme there help your process, help you untangle things?
Huh, that's funny, I had not thought of that, but I wonder if the rhyming speeds the tempo. I don't know, but I do know that I love when a novel changes pace. I LOVED whatever, almost physically, happened at the end of Ann Patchett's *State of Wonder*, it just like kicks into overdrive. But then, on the other hand I always thought Dostoevsky's endings were too fast and sloppily (but interestingly) sewn up. It's almost like, for him, as soon as the wandering around in the ethics and intentions of the characters is over, he loses interest. A different kind of speed. But for *Trial* the speed at the end is specifically in reference to the judge getting exasperated and "hangry". All of them, really, showing their human/animal focus on getting back to their bodies, their concerns. We do this too. There's only so much focus and attention we can extend outside of ourselves, and yet it seems like we can't afford not to pay attention elsewhere.