

Animals: Eight Studies for Experts

Eva Menasse

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In Eva Menasse's short story collection *Animals*, families, parents, and lovers are understood in terms of excerpted zoological descriptions of animal behavior.

"Butterfly, Bee, Crocodile" delves into the private grief of a woman who lost a childhood friend. She attempts to soldier on during a family vacation despite the cantankerousness of her husband's previous wife. This introspective focus on grief and departure continues in subsequent stories. In "Caterpillars," a stubborn, elderly husband insists that he knows best and oversees his wife's care at home, despite her deteriorated memory and against the wishes of his children.

Elsewhere, "Sheep," which features an anonymous narrator, distinguishes itself by venturing into a dystopian world that has experienced ecological and infrastructural collapse. Its speaker is part of an artificially created colony; they live with a found family of fellow artists, scientists, and thinkers. A quiet hysteria oozes among this collective: the group attempts to discover what they have been gathered together to do, but their efforts seem futile.

Despite their deep intimacies, the stories collected in *Animals* still avoid insularity. There are inclusions of complex Germanic cultural elements; there's an awareness of the histories of Nazism and the division of Germany into East and West portions. "Sharks" concerns not just the worries of a mother whose daughter enters a diverse school system—it also illustrates the scapegoating of a boy in the daughter's class for his Turkish ancestry. Modern-day family constructs overlap with a twisted history of racism, in-groups and out-groups, and ostracization.

Interested in the silenced feelings of isolation, frustration, and anger experienced by individuals entangled in close family relationships, the short stories collected in *Animals* explore histories that are both personal and historical.

ISABELLA ZHOU (January / February 2024)

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