



## Animal People

*Charlotte Wood*

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## **Animal People** Charlotte Wood

A sharply observed, 24-hour urban love story that follows Stephen Connolly – a character from the bestselling novel *The Children* – through one of the worst days of his life. The day he has decided to dump his girlfriend.

On a stiflingly hot December day, Stephen has decided it's time to break up with his girlfriend Fiona. He's 39, aimless and unfulfilled, he's without a clue working out how to make his life better. All he has are his instincts – and unfortunately they might just be his downfall . . .

As he makes his way through the pitiless city and the hours of a single day, Stephen must fend off his demanding family, endure another shift of his dead-end job at the zoo (including an excruciating teambuilding event), face up to Fiona's aggressive ex-husband and the hysteria of a children's birthday party that goes terribly wrong. As an ordinary day develops into an existential crisis, Stephen begins to understand – perhaps too late – that love is not a trap, and only he can free himself.

Hilarious, tender and heartbreaking, *Animal People* is a portrait of urban life, a meditation on the conflicted nature of human-animal relationships, and a masterpiece of storytelling.

*Animal People* invites readers to question the way we think about animals – what makes an 'animal person'? What value do we, as a society, place on the lives of creatures? Do we brutalise our pets even as we love them? What's wrong with anthropomorphism anyway? Filled with challenging ideas and shocks of recognition and revelation, *Animal People* shows a writer of great depth and compassion at work.

## **Animal People Details**

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## From Reader Review Animal People for online ebook

### Brenda says

*Animal People* by Aussie author Charlotte Wood is a difficult book to review. Beautifully written, the span of the book covers one day in Stephen Connolly's life – the worst day of his life.

Starting with an unwelcome phone call from his mother, followed by the usual greeting from the neighbour's dog, Balzac, Stephen could feel it all going wrong. As he fought his way through peak hour traffic in Sydney, in the relentless heat of the Australian summer, he knew he'd be late for work. Taronga Zoo was where he worked, though he disliked animals and was allergic to them as well. But one after another the disasters followed him, crept up on him – there would be no improvement.

His decision to break up with his girlfriend Fiona was a constant on his mind – the children's birthday party at the end of the day something he wasn't looking forward to. But would the crisis of fractured families, of tormented minds overwhelm this man who had no idea which direction his life was heading?

Charlotte Wood is an amazing writer – I read *The Children* some time back and really enjoyed it, then recently read *The Natural Way of Things* and absolutely loved it. So *Animal People* was one I had to read and I wasn't disappointed. This author's style of writing is different and unusual, but always inspiring. Highly recommended.

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### Leonie Jordan says

This is such a wonderful, humane, sensitive book; heartbreakingly, deeply pathetic and inspiring. Wood's refusal to judge, just observe compassionately, make her a formidable writer. I felt I knew the places, and to some extent, was the people, she wrote about. Her verbs in particular are just so very good- for instance, the ferret 'wafting' and 'rolling' - make the most inconsequential details memorable.

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### Helen King says

I really enjoyed this, surprisingly! I was drawn to it in the first half, but wouldn't say I was loving it - I was reading with a combination of admiration for Charlotte Wood's writing, and cringing for her character. Sometimes someone can be too sensitive to everything (I know) and Stephen in this novel is an extreme example, and why it may be counterproductive. But then, part-way along, the tone changed, and I felt less anxious for him, and more aligned. What a day he, and all that he interacted with, had. I feel like I've been on an emotional roller coaster. Really amazing. Note - I have read *The Children*, also by Charlotte Wood, and this almost sits within that story, which is spread over a longer time period. I wonder if my opinion would be different without that background?

Quotes:

From Stephen's mother: 'I don't ask you for much,' she had said this morning, But it was too much. He wished he could properly eradicate her injured voice on the phone. He was so tired, already, of managing his mind, of fending off all the things that must not be allowed to burden his day'.

With the neighbour's dog: 'This mess and agony. It was a life, ending, he marvelled, just as he was beginning to understand. The point of an animal was not for it to love you: it was that you could love it. In all its otherness, your unbelonging to its kind, it could yet receive O boundlessly - your love. He inhaled the dank animal breaths with his own, and he thought of his father, of his mother, how one day soon this dying gaze would be hers, endless and sorrowful. Poor creature ... It was in this abjection, he saw now - his eyes close, face pressed into the dog's neck - that we were most animal and because of that became most human after all. We are all only hair and bone and stinking breath, and the only thing we can hope for is a fellow creature who will lie beside us in the road and stroke our flanks while we die'.

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### **John Purcell says**

I loved *Animal People*. I am now trying to write a review. I've read it twice. And may read it again. It is so difficult to review a book which has so much to offer with each new read. It is as though Charlotte Wood had written an encyclopaedic multi volume chronicle of our times and then had whittled it down to its essentials, before crushing the remnants into a paste, and pressing this essence into an engaging narrative.

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### **Kimbofo says**

Charlotte Wood is an accomplished and award-winning writer who is largely unknown outside of her native Australia. I've read two of her novels — *The Submerged Cathedral* and *The Family* — having purchased them on trips back home and loved them both. *Animal People*, picked up on my last trip, only confirms my high opinion of her work.

The book spans just one day in the life of Stephen Connolly, a middle-aged man who's feeling slightly lost and depressed with the way his life has panned out. We have met Stephen before — he's the "drifter" in Wood's previous novel *The Family* (but note, you don't need to have read that book to appreciate this one — they're completely stand-alone novels), the one who's never followed a "proper" career path, the one who his parents and his siblings are always worried about and fretting over.

Now, several years later, he's living in Sydney, working a dead-end job in a food kiosk at the zoo and is constantly mistaken as a chef because of his (quite hilarious) penchant for wearing black-and-white chequered trousers, a bargain purchase from Aldi.

On the day in question, he's decided that it's finally time to dump his long-term girlfriend, Fiona, who has been putting pressure on him to move in with her and her two (bratty) children from her failed marriage. But as the day enfolds, Stephen's plans get thwarted, then sabotaged, and before he knows it, he's beginning to doubt whether dumping Fiona is the right thing to do at all.

To read the rest of my review, please visit [.](#)

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### **Mish says**

This book is set in the suburbs of Sydney and it tells of a single day of the life of Stephen. Stephen is a 38 year old odd ball; dislikes animals (yet he works at a zoo), unsure where his career and life is headed, and is socially inapt. Waking up everyday seems to be huge effort for Stephen and he is very distressed. On this particular day, Stephen has decided that he must do something that will turn his life around and give him freedom but in the process hurt the one person that accepts and loves him dearly.

Charlotte Wood is a superb writer and has created a simple story but with a lot of depth, wit and compassion. Her characters are true to life, with flaws and all - I think there is a character here that we all can relate to in our own life. I didn't warm up to Stephen at the start as he's not a likable character. But I could see his frustration building up within him throughout the day and the humiliation he had to endure from the people around him that you couldn't help but to feel sorry for him. I must say the build up at the end did bring me to tears and it took my breath away. I was feeling all that Stephen was feeling - the tension, frustration and emotion just crashing down on him all at once.

This is my first Charlotte Woods book and it definitely won't be my last. Highly recommend it

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### **Jane says**

I felt this book very strongly. I really wanted Stephen to be able to have a shower and change out of those pants, to be able to be comfortable in his life, to stop finding himself in such awful, misunderstood (often by himself) corners. To be able to stop and breathe and be OK about being him. Poor Stephen. Sometimes I want a beer and the quiet of an empty room in just the same way. I had to cry on the train while reading the ending. It's perfect.

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### **Maree Kimberley says**

Animal People is a difficult book to review. Wood is a deft and able writer with an eye for detail that adds light and shade to the mundane, but for me the distance she puts between her protagonist, Stephen, and the reader was a little too much. Its clear this distance was deliberate, that Wood wants the reader to watch him unravel, wants her writing to make you uncomfortable as a reader at times. But I think I never really "got" Stephen. Most of the time I felt like giving him a good slap!

Nevertheless the prose in Animal People is lovely. This is a quiet book. It's not showy and (except for one instance) I felt Wood had total control of the writing at all times. She details the minutiae of suburban life with precision. I felt a few of the minor characters lacked depth, particularly in the party scene, but this doesn't detract from the overall quality of the novel.

The ending was pitch perfect, which more than made up for any other small quibbles I have with this book. Recommended for those who enjoy a well-crafted, thoughtful novel.

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### **Anne\_MB says**

A stunning book from an unbelievable writer! So sharp and observant, funny in places, and with a cracker last few paragraphs that I read over and over, in tears and elated.

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### **Gail Chilianis says**

A story of a single day in the life of Stephen..I was captured by the descriptions and events. I was totally holding my breath during the child's temper tantrum at her birthday party..the volcanic explosion and the aftermath! I feel like re reading this book again some time. Charlotte Wood's earlier novel The Children is in my to read list .the main character, Stephen, was taken from this book.

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### **ALPHAreader says**

Stephen is not an 'animal person'. He's not a dog-lover or a cat-lover; he is baffled by doggie sweaters and hates the itch of animal fur. At the zoo kiosk where he works Stephen observes the inanity of people cooing and ahing at caged animals who could care less.

Stephen especially hates his perceived soullessness for not connecting with all creatures' great and small. He hates that every day in the city he observes the cruelty between human beings – those who ignore The Big Issue sellers, or who sneer at junkies and side-step the homeless. Yet people worship their pets, they give medals to bomb-sniffing dogs and offer triple-digit rewards for lost animals.

Stephen muses on these thoughts throughout one day in a crowded, soulless big city. His head is clogged with disillusionment with the city and his life, because on this day he intends to dump his girlfriend. As Stephen goes through the motions of his crappy job and choking life, receiving phone-calls from his nagging widowed mother and controlling sister, he counts down to the moment when he'll be free of Fiona.

'Animal People' is the new literary fiction release from Australian author Charlotte Wood.

Stephen is a character from Wood's successful 2007 novel, 'The Children' – about a family's pilgrimage to see their dying father. I haven't read 'The Children', but that didn't hamper my decadent enjoyment of 'Animal People' – a book that is equal parts raw, funny, voyeuristic, unsettling and all together wonderful.

Stephen has an albatross around his neck as he goes about his day. He intends to dump Fiona, his girlfriend who also happens to be the ex-sister-in-law of his sister. In leaving Fiona, Stephen will also be losing her two children, girls Ella and Larry, whom he has affectionately come to think of as his own. As his day drags on Stephen's increasing paranoia and dread at the impending dumping turns his outlook on life rather bleak. He starts to notice things, like a suspicious plastic-wrapped package lying on the floor of the bus. When he accidentally hits a pedestrian (a junkie that everyone tells him he should drive off on) he remembers again and again her head bouncing on bitumen.

Stephen's wry observations of life in the big city are disturbingly astute. Throughout the book I was nodding along like a bobblehead, muttering 'yes!' under my breath at his hit-the-nail-on-the-head accuracies. Everything he muses on is so affirming and precise. Like the collective pity/relief we feel while sitting on

buses and trains when the crazy person (because there's always a crazy person) picks someone else to latch onto and make uncomfortable with their insane chit-chat.

*But the worst thing you never got used to was this: the man beside him now leaned suddenly close, making Stephen shut his eyes. You never got used to being trapped into intimacy with the mad.*

Stephen's circling observations about 'animal people' and various dog/cat/ferret lovers are also hotly astute. Through Stephen, Wood points out the ludicrousness of certain pet-centric activities. The most accurate animal observation of Stephen's though, is his musings on the accused awfulness of those who don't like animals and don't actively seek out their company;

*Stephen knew he demonstrated some lack of humanity by not being a Dog Person. This seemed unfair. He was not a cat person either. He was not an animal person in the same way he was not a musical person, or an intellectual person. One was born to these things, like the colour of one's eyes, or the length of one's legs. Not to be musical or intellectual was unremarkable and provoked no suspicion. But not to be an animal person somehow meant he wasn't fully human.*

Charlotte Wood's writing is lulling and affirming. She has a keen eye for society's inanities and flaws, and her characterizations are luscious and accurate – from our day-long journey with Stephen as we read his unravelling, to the 'Facebook' girls he overhears on the bus. Wood writes all of these characters with envious precision, so we piece together Stephen's puzzle over the day, but in one line of dialogue we have Fiona's ex-husband all figured out. 'Animal People' was a beautiful and poignant novel, and I'm going to make sure it's not my last Charlotte Wood read.

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## **Jo Case says**

Charlotte Wood's *The Children* is among my favourite Australian novels: she's just so good at the dynamics of relationships and minute social observations that give worlds of information about the people and places she captures. Woods' writing reminds me of Helen Garner's, in that it's easy to read, but deceptively so: it's rich with ideas and absolutely distinctive in its voice.

So, I was pretty excited to receive *Animal People*, which follows one (monumentally bad) day in the life of middle-aged man-child Stephen, as he prepares to break up with his girlfriend. Stephen was a character in *The Children*, and others moonlight here too, but you don't need to have read that novel to thoroughly enjoy this one. This is at once a novel about Stephen, and his relationship with girlfriend Fiona and her two girls; and about urban life, with our relationships with animals (and all the absurdities those relationships often entail) as a recurrent theme.

Stephen works at a zoo kiosk; he is determinedly unambitious and a bit hopeless. He often says the wrong thing in social situations, he unwittingly wears chef's pants (because they're comfy), and must duck the exasperated attentions and expectations of his eternally disappointed mother and sister. Yet, he's an utterly lovable character – gauche and irritating, but big-hearted. The mystery at the core of this novel is why Stephen wants to break up with Fiona: their relationship is imperfect, yes, but it's also affectionate, genuine and touching. The answer seems to lie in Stephen's palpably human insecurities.

*Animal People* may centre on a pending break-up, but it's a romantic comedy of sorts, with some wonderful

observational humour – particularly at the children's birthday party in the final third of the novel. Thoroughly recommended; it made me laugh and cry. What more could you ask for?

*This review was first published at [www.readings.com.au](http://www.readings.com.au).*

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### **Moses Kilolo says**

Perhaps I should start by saying the people here in Africa are not animal people. You don't just see a person walking a dog, or petting a rabbit!, out there in the streets of Nairobi, for example. I am not animal person. I love animals, of course. But its about the culture I have grown into, animals are animals, and people are people, if all are well fed life continues. Perhaps I should adopt a puppy, keep him close, and hope I won't be thought 'weird'!

Well, perhaps the most commendable thing about this book is the beauty of the language, how each word seems to have been used just right. Each sentence is a joy to read. And at times I'd forget the story and just drift along, admiring the language. This is a story about the way people approach animals as it is about how people need each other through life. Told within a span of 24 hours in the life of man named Stephen, its about his passionless observation of people and their different loves for animals, in the zoo where he works. But all day he plots on damping his girlfriend Fiona under the pretext that he desires to be free. But in the end he realizes that the people in one's life are much more important than some preconceived notion of 'freedom!'

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### **Lisa says**

Charlotte Wood is an impressive Aussie author. The ANZ LitLovers book group has read and enjoyed discussing both her novels, *The Submerged Cathedral* and *The Children*. (See my review of that one at <http://anzlitlovers.wordpress.com/200...>). Wood is a sharp and witty observer of human frailty, and her mastery of characterisation is superb.

Character is what drives *Animal People*. Readers of *The Children* will remember Stephen: he is the loser, the 'hopeless' one, the one who dithers about going nowhere. In a dynamic family Stephen was a drifter and he drove his siblings to distraction. Charlotte Wood has made this character and a single day in his so-ordinary life the focus of *Animal People*. Perhaps contrary to expectation, it works perfectly.

To see the rest of my review please visit <http://anzlitlovers.wordpress.com/201...>

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### **Kirstie says**

Charlotte Wood is one of my favourite new discoveries - I can't wait to read the rest of her work. *Animal People* is a gorgeous essay on emotional distance or closeness and how we fear or embrace that - through the lens of the (to the protagonist) unfathomable closeness of some people with animals. It has a lot to say about compassion and unconditionality and builds to a lovely denouement.

