

The Biggest Animals, Michael Kenyon

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Michael Kenyon's latest novel, *The Biggest Animals*, continues his fascination with experimental fiction, and it plays on three main levels of story. It switches among a contemporary fiction featuring a small group of friends involved in making a film to the novel on which the film is based to the film itself. And Kenyon stretches the narrative lines by having ten chapters broken into 159 short segments incorporating various points of view, poetry, and letters.

In a way, *The Biggest Animals* is more to be studied than simply read: the architecture of the book is infinitely more arresting than most of the characters, who are in the service of the experiment and who are generally not particularly likeable. The pace is frantic and the tone is intellectual, so anyone expecting a conventional narrative should look elsewhere; however, anyone who respects attempts to make fiction will be rewarded by reading Kenyon's work.

At the heart of the contemporary story are Sam and Mary Gentles. Sam has written *Flooded Fields*, a critically acclaimed novel. He has completed the screenplay and is supposed to direct, but the film is taken over by a commercial director with a moneymaking track record, and Sam sees his vision vanishing. "And now Herb Thedal would swallow the heart of *Flooded Fields* without once biting down. Hollywood Herb, specializing in fragrant breezes wafting over mattresses devoid of blood or sperm,, all his earlier efforts effete grab bags of half-baked thoughts and paralysed truths, would keep Sam around just to rub his nose in it." Sam does stick around rubbing his own nose in the collapse of his dream while at the same time falling in love with Charlotte, daughter of Thor Thorlakson, composer and old friend of the Gentles. Yes, it is a potentially incestuous bunch, especially since Thor once made moves on Sam.

Mary, Sam's long-suffering and supportive wife, is a poet (although the poems of hers included are uneven). She has also done much of the research for Sam's novel and appears uncredited. And Mary has a thing for Thor. The sexual longings in the novel, along with the sex itself, are realistic and indicate the complexity of human desire and guilt. Along with the sexual tensions, Kenyon throws other intoxicants, such as drugs and alcohol, into the mix. Doing lines of cocaine is simply a part of this hyper-creative world, and lack of money is not an impediment to these characters, who move freely between Vancouver Island, New York, and elsewhere.

In grim contrast to the materially comfortable lives of the contemporary characters is the life of Rosa Pryznyk, the subject of Sam's novel and the film. Rosa is deeply sympathetic when she suffers the loss of her family and home as she escapes Europe and the Great War by fleeing to New York. Rosa is a remarkable creation, and it's easy to see why Sam is upset at the film version of her, which doesn't fit his. Kenyon deals trenchantly with the pangs the novelist feels when his work is taken out of his hands and refashioned.

Rosa's life, in Europe, then New York, and finally Montreal, has some moments of joy. She experiences love, but overwhelming pain. As a young woman, she is separated from Gustav, the boy she loves, and then he is killed in the War. Kenyon presents Rosa's life spliced into the story of the film and the lives of his contemporary characters. Various levels of fiction, film, and reality merge, blend, and ricochet in a delirious mix that confuses and demands consideration. The shifts in time and place and focus seem random, but are artfully controlled to force readers into new apprehensions of the whole.

Not only does Kenyon forge imaginative narrative paths, but also he has a compelling gift for language on a sentence level. When Rosa buys a treat for her bird, we are told, "Holding onto the love that lit the street, she counts money as though counting money is the most vital thing in the world, an accounting of ecstasy." In a way the novel deals with the economics of ecstasy and how impossible it is to tabulate such a thing.

Animals are mentioned several times in the book, but it's Rosa who articulates the most meaningful observation in terms of its title:

"Whales are like God/' says Rosa. 'I will never see one, but I know the biggest animals love and help one another.'" Kenyon dances around both "biggest" and "animals" using size in a moral way and animals to include human beings. Love is at the centre of the novel, and while the ending seems a bit contrived in order to demonstrate that positioning of love, it makes sense within this context and as long as the novel is taken as an aesthetic experiment not an overall excursion into realism.

—Candace Fertile