

Animal rights, and wrongs

Karen Dawn busts stereotypes as wisecracking vegan ambassador

By Bill Lueders

The other day I was telling a friend, a fellow journalist, about Karen Dawn's 2008 book, *Thanking the Monkey*. My friend has a deep sense of personal as well as social morality, an encompassing sense of curiosity and an active sense of humor. I felt sure he'd like it.

But as soon as I said it's a treatise on animal rights, he rolled his eyes and mentally erased it from his to-read list. He needed only one sense — common — to grasp the truth: Oh, *those* people.

Yes, Karen Dawn is one of those people: a vegan and an animal rights activist. A transplant from Australia who now lives in New York and Los Angeles ("I'm bicoastal, baby"), Dawn is the founder of the e-newsletter/website DawnWatch, which tracks animal issues in the media. She's snagged book blurbs from folks like Bill Maher and David Duchovny, and testimonials from dozens of other celebs. She's the animal rights activist to the stars.

Thanking the Monkey, subtitled "Rethinking the Way We Treat Animals," is an eye-opening dissection (pardon the pun) of the astounding varieties of abuse inflicted by humans on other species. The book is comprehensive and well researched, heavily footnoted and corroborated by authoritative sources. But it deals with things most people prefer to look at with eyes wide shut.

There is good reason for this. Modern America clings to its old ways of testing medicines, cosmetics and household products (one still-common method, LD50, determines the toxicity of a substance by finding what level must be given to a group of animals to kill half of them) and has new ways of maximizing meat, egg and milk production on factory farms. It has embraced cruelty to animals on a scale unmatched in human history.

Virtually every member of our society, Karen Dawn included, assists in perpetuating this cruelty. It's just a matter of degree. Dawn's message is that people can easily reduce the amount of animal cruelty they support.

Though hardly an incendiary message, it's one that people like my friend are eager to close their minds and hearts to. They feel they have enough other things to worry about, and perhaps they do. But many of these are less within their ability to change than the ones Dawn identifies.



MONTY MARSH

Karen Dawn, with her dog, Paula Pitbull: 'I hope to dispel the myth that animal rights activism is radical and unreasonable.'

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to getting people to care about how animals are treated is their belief, wholly unfounded, that we as a society already do.

There is currently a great hue and cry over a group of three young Wisconsin men who used their snowmobiles as weapons against deer, killing at least five of them. The young men are facing serious criminal charges — although, ironically, the maximum penalty for ripping out a terrified deer's guts with a snowmobile is about half that of taking this snowmobile without permission.

If you Google stories about this case, you'll find reams of furious reaction. ("The three of these, whatever they are, should never get out of prison," writes one. "EVER!") That anyone could do this to helpless animals has folks enraged.

Yet far worse things happen to helpless animals all the time. At least these deer didn't suffer for long. It's not like they were born into cages, separated from body parts

without anesthetic, stuffed into tiny spaces their entire lives, injected with drugs and fattened with food they were never meant to eat, then led to gruesome slaughter. (Thousands of cattle, about 5% of those processed by slaughterhouses, are still alive and conscious when they are hoisted by one leg onto a trolley to the bleeding area.)

Still, the knee-jerk response toward anyone who would dare disrupt dinner with such observations is scorn: Oh, *those* people.

"They're so self-righteous and insufferable," another friend recently assured me. But of course. If it wasn't for that, they might even be right.

Now and then, a writer comes along who confounds people's ability to maintain popular stereotypes about animal advocates. Matthew Scully did it with his seminal 2002 work, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, the Call to Mercy*, which drew its moral imperative from another well-received book, the Bible.

Scully, a conservative Republican who was at the time a senior speechwriter for President George W. Bush, disclaims a belief in animal rights but argues that humankind was commanded by God to treat animals with compassion. He blends in original reporting — on wild game hunting, international whaling and factory farming. His anger, well masked in the early chapters, eventually spills forth, like when Billy Jack gets pushed too far.

For Isthmus' irreverent interview with Karen Dawn, including her take on David Duchovny and her answer to the question, "Is there any scenario in which you might eat a bacon double-cheeseburger?," see this article at TheDailyPage.com

Dominion is a serious manifesto, at times dense and philosophical. *Thanking the Monkey*, as its title suggests, is a more whimsical book, with clever headlines and colored fonts, cartoons and celebrity photos on nearly every page. Dawn confounds stereotypes of animal rights activists.

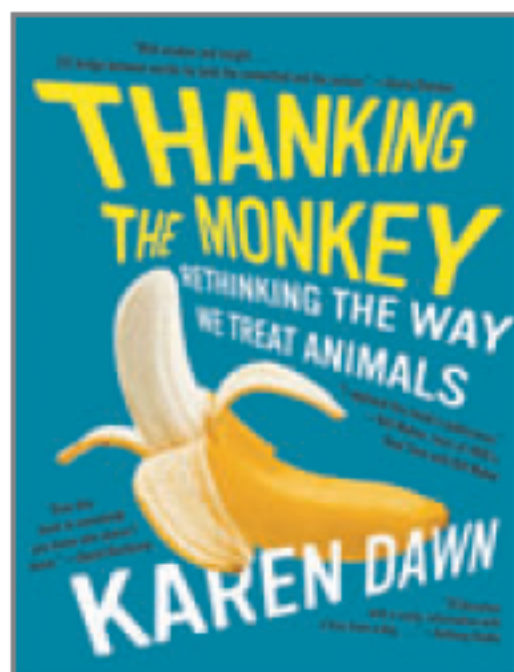
"I hope to dispel the myth that animal rights activism is radical and unreasonable," she writes on page 1. "In fact, as you read of the cruelty we offer animals as thanks for what we take from them you may see radical departures from your own standards of reasonable decency."

The first issue she tackles is the notion, reiterated constantly by mainstream commentators, that people who care about animals don't give a hoot about human beings. The operative assumption is that people have finite quantities of compassion, and those who devote theirs to animals will be

fresh out when it comes to children, old people, the disabled, crime victims, political prisoners and such.

In fact, any fair assessment of human nature would lead to the opposite conclusion. It's easier to imagine an animal rights activist volunteering in a soup kitchen, as Dawn did for years, than it is to imagine the proprietor of a factory farm writing letters for Amnesty International.

"The compassion shutdown switch that allows us to chew pieces of veal while blocking out thoughts of baby calves alone in crates is the same switch that allows us to change TV channels away from news of starving children in Darfur," writes Dawn. "When we disengage that switch, when we get out of the habit of closing our hearts, the world will be better for the calves and the kids."



Karen Dawn will read from and discuss her book at A Room of One's Own Feminist Bookstore on Sunday, Feb. 15, at 2 pm. She's also the guest speaker at the local Alliance for Animals' "Vegantines" dinner and dance on Feb. 14 at the West Side Club. The Alliance will present Heart of Journalism Awards to Bill Lueders and others; see www.allanimals.org for details.



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BOOKS

An irreverent interview with animal rights activist Karen Dawn

Bill Lueders on Thursday 02/05/2009 10:00 am , (10) Recommendations

Isthmus recently quizzed author and animal rights activist Karen Dawn on her book *Thanking the Monkey* and her cause.

The Daily Page: What’s your favorite funny line in Thanking the Monkey?

Dawn: In the chapter on animal testing, I discuss recent experiments in which scientists attempted to turn gay male rams straight, then killed them so their brains could be dissected. The section is called "He's just not that into ewe," and the final line is, "Surely a ban on same-sex animal marriage should be enough." Nice and topical.

You note that animal rights activists are often asked: Who would you save, a person or a dog, if both were drowning? Your excellent comeback: “Well...what person?” You say most folks could probably think of a world figure who would come in second to their dog’s favorite chew toy. Who would this be for you?

Ronald McDonald.

What’s David Duchovny like, and did he hit on you?

Ha! No such luck! If I believed what I read in the tabloids I would take it personally, but I know better. I know David mostly from yoga class. He's super-smart and funny. And he is kind, always happy to help the animals when he can.

Admit it: Haven’t you met vegans who fit the stereotype of being self-righteous and unreasonable?

Never! Well, maybe one. Or two or three or four or five. But, gosh, I tried hard not to perpetuate that stereotype with my own style in *Thanking the Monkey*. A consistent comment I get in reviews that makes me proud is that the book isn't preachy.

What are three things people reading this can do today to reduce the suffering of animals?

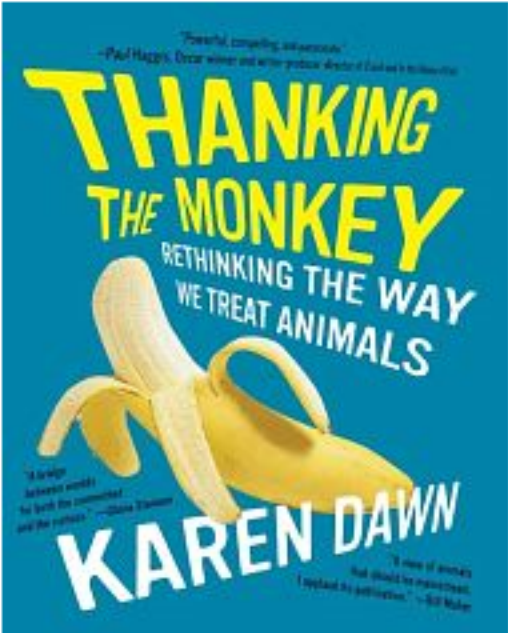
1. Overcome the horror of seeming trendy and suck up a soy latte. They taste good, they're better for you than cow's milk lattes, and when you read the part in *Thanking the Monkey* where the cow is running after the trailer that is carting her baby calf off to the veal crate, you're going to lose your craving for cow's milk anyway. Oops, was that a buzz-kill?

Is there any scenario in which you might eat a bacon double-cheeseburger?

I would eat one anytime there was a good reason to. For example, if I were on *Survivor* and could win a million dollars that I could donate to charity, then I'd put aside my personal moral compass and chow down. But I generally don't eat bacon double-cheeseburgers because the fact that they taste good is not a good enough reason for me to cut short a life, especially when there are many healthy and tasty alternatives.

When I told you I had jokingly referred to your book as *Dominion for Dummies*, I thought you’d get a kick out of it. Why did you object?

The Washington Post listed *Thanking the Monkey* as one of the best books of 2008. I don't think they've done that for any *Dummy* guides! I love *Dominion* but don't see my book as a simpler version of it. I prefer to think of it as a comprehensive animal rights handbook for smokin'-hot smarties.



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