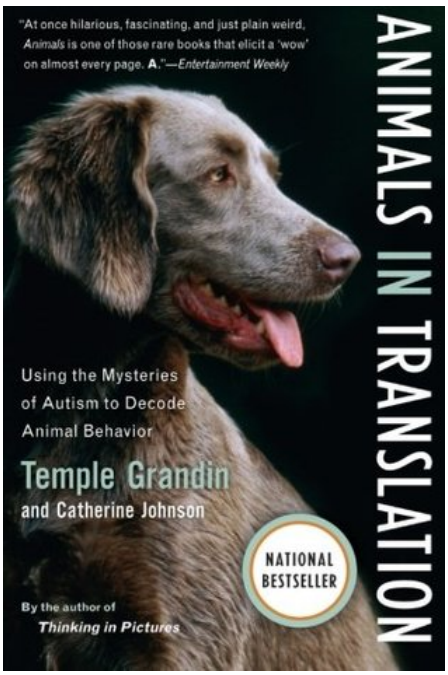

Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior

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Why would a cow lick a tractor? Why are collies getting dumber? Why do dolphins sometimes kill for fun? How can a parrot learn to spell? How did wolves teach man to evolve?

Temple Grandin draws upon a long, distinguished career as an animal scientist and her own experiences with autism to deliver an extraordinary message about how animals act, think, and feel. She has a perspective like that of no other expert in the field, which allows her to offer unparalleled observations and groundbreaking ideas.

People with autism can often think the way animals think, putting them in the perfect position to translate "animal talk." Grandin is a faithful guide into their world, exploring animal pain, fear, aggression, love, friendship, communication, learning, and, yes, even animal genius. The sweep of Animals in Translation is immense and will forever change the way we think about animals.

*includes a Behavior and Training Troubleshooting Guide

Among its provocative ideas, the book:

~argues that language is not a requirement for consciousness--and that animals do have consciousness.

~applies the autism theory of "hyper-specificity" to animals, showing that animals and autistic people are so sensitive to detail that they "can't see the forest for the trees"--a talent as well as a "deficit".

~explores the "interpreter" in the normal human brain that filters out detail, leaving people blind to much of the reality that surrounds them--a reality animals and autistic people see, sometimes all too clearly.

~explains how animals have "superhuman" skills: animals have animal genius.

~compares animals to autistic savants, declaring that animals may in fact be autistic savants, with special forms of genius that normal people do not possess and sometimes cannot even see.

~examines how humans and animals use their emotions to think, to decide, and even to predict the future.

~reveals the remarkable abilities of handicapped people and animals .

~maintains that the single worst thing you can do to an animal is to make it feel afraid.

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Details

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From Reader Review Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior for online ebook

Somewhatbent says

I have a number of conflicts with this book – which should in no way diminish the remarkable body of observations made by Dr Grandlin. It is generally accepted as cold hard fact that animals don't think like humans. Until such time as there is scientifically verifiable information and understanding, we, as scientists, don't know how humans *or* animals think. With ongoing study using functional MRI (fMRI) and Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scanning we are learning more about the workings of the brain in many species.[return][return]It is somewhat clearer and better understood that perceptual and cognitive processing in persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) and the general population can be quite different. There has been advancement in this field in the few years since the first edition of Animals in Translation was published and is not unreasonable to expect far greater understanding of the variety and depth of ASDs in the next few years.[return][return]As a behaviorist Dr Grandlin effectively uses her perceptual abilities which are rather outside the conventional 'boxes'. That she has developed some methods of livestock management that might not have otherwise been implemented. There is no question that she observes things that can be applied to some animals very effectively, as the numerous anecdotal examples in the book illustrate. What is not clearly addressed is that techniques that are effective on large livestock do not apply to domestic pets, foul or other species. There are some presumptive statements regarding canine behavior a species which she admits having minimal experience with and the behavior she asserts is inconsistent with the experiences of dog handlers and trainers in a wide variety of disciplines; (Search & Rescue, Police and Security, Service Dogs of varying specialty).[return][return]What I hope many people bring away from this book is not the controversy of animal behavior, slaughterhouse and feedlot practices and whether or not a person eats meat, but that there are as many variations of perception and cognition as there are species. ASDs come in an enormously wide variety from people you would never recognize as having one to the stereotypical internally focused, non-verbal, rocking child. There can be huge value in thinking outside the norms, as Dr Grandlin and Bill Gates (with his publically acknowledged Asperger's Syndrome).[return][return]Recognizing this and allowing for adaptations when some students are simply incapable of learning in 'conventional' ways will allow all of society to benefit from the advances these people can make, because it's simply not comprehensible to them that something *can't* be done just because it never was before. The potentials for humanity and the species we share the Earth with are indeed boundless, if only given the opportunity to function in a way that optimizes and celebrates them, rather than marginalizing and stereotyping.

Elizabeth says

I was actually really disappointed in this book. It seemed like just a collection of anecdotes. There was some science to back up her hypotheses but there wasn't that much. I was hoping for some better insights.
She also makes some crazy generalizations. For example the paint horse that was crazy and had whole body twitches every 30 seconds or so. She said it was Tourrett's like and was probably because he had a lot of white coloration. She never explored that maybe he received a physical head injury at some point or other nerve trauma. She just assumed it was white. I have never heard of this being common in any other paints or breeds that have a lot of white (Appaloosas, Lippazzaners etc).
I was expecting more out of this book because of all of the hype.
Read it for the few good ideas and some interesting parallels and correlations but there is actually very little concrete science or conclusions that could be drawn from any of this.

Kspeare says

I have mixed feelings about this book. On the one hand, it's almost worth the purchase price for the explanation of the difference between negative reinforcement and punishment, a distinction that escapes far too many pet owners, not to mention parents. And there is a ton of useful information in it for people who are learning about how animals think.

However, there are a few spots in it that give me cause for pause. Grandin has some unique ways of looking at things, and once she has a hypothesis, she is going to prove it come hell or high water. One fairly benign example is that she seems to be under the impression that only autistic humans think in pictures. Of course, many humans who aren't autistic but are visually oriented think in pictures at least as much as in words, and in many cases more so.

More worrisome is her hypothesis that animals are mentally ill in direct proportion to the amount of white skin they have. She contends that paint horses are crazier than solid-colored ones, and the more white they have, the crazier they are. As anyone who has worked with very many examples of both knows, paints on average tend to be mellower than many other breeds which are solid-colored, and the amount of white skin has nothing to do with it. The most reactive paint I ever worked with had only a small splash of white on his belly and white stockings, while one of the most levelheaded ones was an overo with only a minimal amount of color other than white. This kind of pants-seat hypothesizing worries me, because readers who don't know better may take it as gospel.

So this book it worth reading, IMO, but if something in it sounds off to you, check it out with a knowledgeable friend.

Jessica says

I liked this book more than I expected. For a long time, I'd been reluctant to pick it up because I thought the premise was more or less, "I'm autistic so I'm halfway between 'normal' people and animals (every other species)." I'm sure I don't need to explain why that's offensive.

Instead, Dr. Grandin uses brain research, coupled with her experience as an autistic person, to try to explain how members of other species may experience the world.

If you can disregard the sweeping generalizations about "animals" (which range from clams to humans), Dr. Grandin has a lot to say. For starters, she points out that we don't treat other animals very well -- and she goes on to explain how treating members of other species as if they were human won't really rectify the situation. And some of the research she discusses is fascinating. I, for one, never knew that prairie dogs' language is so rich that it can be characterized in terms of nouns, verbs, and even adverbs.

Where I do take offense is that this book starts from the major premise that animal liberation is a pipe dream and that humans will continue to keep other species in captivity to serve our most trivial whims for time immemorial. The world Dr. Grandin envisions is one that's infinitely more humane than the one that exists now -- but I have hope that we can achieve even more.

Sammy says

This book truly is a must-read for any pet owner, and I highly recommend it to anyone who just loves animals. Temple Grandin offers fascinating insights to the animal world, which will confirm things long time pet owners always knew, and bring to light startling new information.

One main thing this book brings to light is to not underestimate animals or those with autism because often times they're smarter than us. Yet, that's one thing Grandin tries to avoid, saying things like animals are smarter or humans are smarter. Rather she just tries to point out that animals may do things differently but that doesn't mean they're stupid. It's all about skill level that certain creatures are better at than others.

This book never got boring, whereas many other "animal" books tend to get dry and scientific. Grandin, while delving into scientific facts, puts them into words the average person can understand, and most always will support every fact or theory with an example. Always there was some story to go along with everything she was telling the reader about, and every story was amusing and fascinating to read about.

Another thing this book was wonderful at was pointing out autistic characteristics in a way that's not so harsh or right in your face of "look at how similar they are!" It was gentle, casual, not making a big deal out of it. It's also divided into easy sections so if you want to skip something or find something specific you can.

I really enjoyed this book. I want to try to get my roommate with the puppy to read it because it will teach her things about her dog that I'm sure she never knew. This is a very good book to have at your side when training animals, or even planning on getting one. Even if you've had your current pet for a decade, still get this book, it may help you when Fluffy starts doing something completely off the wall.

Suzanna says

This was a GREAT book for anyone who wants to learn about the way animals process information - and as a bonus, you learn about how humans do as well. I love that the author puts things in terms a lay person can understand, and I love that she is honest and humble. Grandin writes matter-of-factly about her own disability, and how it has enabled her to identify with the minds of animals in certain ways. I came away with a deeper understanding of how to interact with my horses and dogs, and found that many of the ideas I had suspected about their mentality, she confirms.

There were a few small (very small) theoretical points on which I disagreed with the author. But these minor issues are entirely theoretical, and don't take anything away from the book.

A very worthwhile read for any animal lover/owner/handler, or just anyone with an interest in the mind and how it functions.

Clif Hostetler says

The word "animals" is in the title, but the reader learns a lot about human behavior from this book. The author writes from her own personal perspective of being autistic.

I learned from the book that the frontal lobe's ability to screen through all the incoming sensory data to the

human brain to quickly form broad generalizations is what we understand to be normal human consciousness. The more limited functioning of animal frontal lobes allows them more direct access to the raw data from lower parts of the brain. This allows animals to super specialize in certain skills that help them to survive. (i.e. dog's ability to smell, or migratory bird's ability to remember 1,000 mile routes).

Impared functioning of the frontal lobe may explain how some autistic persons appear to have super human skills in specialized areas. They have privileged access to the raw data from the lower parts of the brain unfettered by screening by the frontal lobes. Unfortunately, it also explains how other autistic persons can be overwhelmed by the flood of incoming sensory data and are unable respond appropriately to their surroundings.

The book is full of interesting anecdotal stories about human and animal behavior. One part I found particularly fascinating is the theory that the evolution of the human brain may have been influenced by the presence of domesticated wolves (i.e. dogs). I know it sounds hard to believe, but there is a rational basis for such speculation. The comparison of dog and wolf genetics indicates that dogs started being domesticated about 135,000 years ago which is the approximate time that modern humans began spreading throughout the world. The partnership between dogs and humans may have given an edge to modern humans in their competition with Neanderthals in Europe during the last ice age. So the expression, "Man's best friend," may have more truth to it than we realize!

Simone says

Ummm. So I liked this, then about halfway through it became one of those books I just wanted to be over. So, there's that. Also I generally have objections to the dominant "pack leader" theory of dog training / rearing. Dog Sense: How the New Science of Dog Behavior Can Make You a Better Friend to Your Pet, to me, provides a much more compelling model for thinking about dog behavior. If dogs are able to differentiate between other dogs and humans, as Grandin says that they are, why would they take rules that might apply to dogs living together and impose them on humans? To me it's not a compelling theory. However, most of the rest of the research she talked about (aside from the dog stuff), was really interesting and more about animals than autism which I enjoyed. She also reads as anti-Rottweiler/Pit-Bull, because she says they are innately agressive, and people who live with them and don't get bittern are apparently just lucky the dogs never attack. She doesn't so much say that outright, but something really close to that. /Shrug.

Hillarymagee says

Where do I start? This book was delightful. I so enjoyed this look into Temple Grandin's life and her life's work. Though I don't think Grandin would ever describe life with Autism as easy, she's certainly not going to sit around and pity herself either. Grandin was key to her own autism therapy at a very young age, designing a "squeeze" apparatus modeled after a machine she saw on her aunt's cow farm that was designed to gently squeeze the cattle as a means of calming them. Grandin had rather interesting childhood and achieved a PhD. Her life's work is to ensure humane treatment of cattle that are designated for slaughter, and with only 10 simple rules, she has done wonders for the industry and the cows that feed us.

One of the comments on the back of the book stated that the reviewer was often unsure if this was a book about animals that used autism to help explain them or if it was a book about autism that used animals to help explain it. I feel as though I came away with a wealth of information about animals and about the hidden blessings that can be associated with autism. I loved this book and cannot recommend it highly enough

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Jennifer says

I have mixed feelings about Temple Grandin's "Animals in Translation". On the one hand, she writes about interesting and useful concepts. On the other hand, parts of her book are outdated (I checked the publication date 3 times while reading to confirm the book was written this century) and oversimplified.

I'm a professional dog trainer, so I'm constantly trying to figure out better and different ways to explain reinforcement (positive and negative), punishment (positive and negative), the hyper-specificity of fear, generalization of behaviors, the need for socialization, etc., to my students. These are all hard concepts for many to understand, and Grandin does a magnificent job of explaining them plainly. Her simple way of explaining these training concepts was wonderful, but doesn't work nearly so well when applied to more complex scientific concepts.

If Grandin's book had been filled to the brim with journal citations and science vocabulary, it wouldn't have reached nearly as wide of an audience. However, she has dumbed things down to the point that she makes dramatic and overgeneralized statements. (For instance, her inaccurate statements about "normal people". It makes me wonder how many of her statements about people with autism, or animals, are also inaccurate.) Her writing style also makes it hard to differentiate fact, from theory, from hypothesis, from her own speculation. Her use of outdated hypotheses was especially grating.

One example of this, was her use of the triune brain model (the reptile, animal and human brain) as fact. I learned about this model in college, but only in the sense that it hasn't been embraced by the scientific community as a valid hypothesis since the 1990's.

Based on her writings, she is also appears to be a believer in dominance theory. Dominance theory originated with a study of captive wolves back in the 1940s. This study spawned more studies of captive wolves. Captive wolves act nothing like wolves in the wild. Wolves in zoos are (usually) unrelated and forced to live together in an unnatural environment--as a result they do engage in violent social struggles. These findings on captive wolves were then wrongly applied to wild wolves, and then our pet dogs. In the wild, struggles for "dominance" would simply take too much energy. Wolf packs work like a family depending on each other to survive, and fighting would inhibit the pack's ability to do so.

The definition of "dominance" is not what most people believe it to be (which is also the way that Grandin uses this word). Dominance only describes the relationship between two individuals in terms of one individual having pick of a specific resource (such as food, water, toys, etc.) over the other individual. Dominance of a resource is not achieved through force, but through through one individual peacefully allowing the other first pick. It's like letting your little brother have the chicken leg out of the bucket of fried chicken. Technically, you could physically assault your brother to claim the chicken leg for yourself, but it's easier just to let you brother have it. When you see a dog use force to get what they want, it isn't dominance, but instead an anxiety-based behavior. This tends to be exacerbated when followed up by verbal/physical threats from a human owner attempting to show their "dominance" over the anxious dog. Dominance theory is not only flawed and dangerous, but also ignores that fact that wolves are NOT dogs. Dogs are about 14,000 years (or possibly 100,000 according to Grandin) of evolution away from wolves. Dominance theory

has widely penetrated our society, but has been on it's way out of dog training for about 20 years now.

Due to this, Grandin's book was incredibly hard to get through. Most any time she talked about dogs, I ended up putting the book down and walking away out of frustration. The plain language of this book leads me to believe its intended audience is readers with little science background. This combined with the blurred lines between outdated concepts, current theories, and personal speculation, I worry that many readers won't think critically about the concepts she's introducing.

There are ideas in this book that are accurate and would be helpful in interacting with animals, but others that are outdated or (like dominance theory) even harmful. The title "Animals in Translation" implies this book will gives readers a greater understanding about the inner workings of an animal's mind. However, I mostly feel like I need to fact check everything I learned from reading this book.

Debbie Zapata says

My mother gave me this book and I wanted to get it read before my next trip north. I am very glad I did; it was fascinating on many levels.

Temple Grandin uses her own life experience as a person with autism to explore animal behavior. She compares the way brains work: 'normal' human, autistic human, animal. She talks about her own work and research with animals, but also mentions many research projects and publications that also deal with the ideas of why we (animals and people) are the way we are. How similar are we? How different?

Chapters range from 'How Animals Perceive The World' to 'Animal Aggression' to 'How Animals Think'. She talks about selective breeding and how it is changing not only dog breeds but pigs and cattle as well, because when one specific trait is encouraged, a lot of others are lost, thus affecting the overall disposition of the animal and creating health or behavior issues that were not around before.

I was tickled by the idea of prairie dog language, and the reason offered for why these little rodents seem to have developed the ability to use calls that correspond to nouns, verbs, entire sentences. While Man usually congratulates himself for being the only creature intelligent enough to develop language, what if that ability actually came from being a prey animal? If you are a prey animal and have no way at all to communicate to your fellows, you will all be eaten eventually. Prairie dogs are every predators favorite snack. Not hard to imagine how tantalizing early man would have been to all the hungry predators around those days. Language in man would have made it easier to survive. Apparently language in prairie dogs is doing the same thing. I thought that was cool, and would love to read more of the original papers written by Con Slobodchikoff about his research and findings.

I don't usually take as many notes for a print book as I do when I am reading online, so I don't have specific examples handy to share. But I have worked with animals: dogs and cats at two veterinary clinics, and even more closely later with horses. I found myself constantly thinking 'yes, of course', or 'Oh, that makes so much sense'. I think anyone who observes, loves, and understands animals will appreciate this book. And if a reader wants to develop better relationships with animals but would like some guidance, this an excellent place to begin, in my opinion.

During my four years living and working on a horse breeding farm, I often felt like one of the herd, as odd as that may sound. But I had developed a connection to the horses that allowed me to wander around with them as if, in their eyes, I was just another horse. This was a huge benefit when I was working with the babies.

Once I was able to figure out why one youngster freaked out whenever we walked past a certain pick-up truck: he was seeing his reflection in the shiny bumper and thought it was a horse-eating monster. I coaxed him up to the truck and had him touch noses with himself. Whether he understood exactly what he was seeing at that point, I don't know, but he immediately relaxed, his entire body language revealing that he seemed very proud of himself right then, and he never was scared of that shiny truck bumper again.

My experiences over the years on the farm is why I agree so strongly with Ms. Grandin's final thoughts:

"I don't know if people will ever be able to talk to animals the way Doctor Doolittle could, or whether animals will be able to talk back. Maybe science will have something to say about that.

But I do know people can learn to "talk" to animals, and to hear what animals have to say, better than they do now. I also know that a lot of times people who can talk to animals are happier than people who can't. People were animals, too, once, and when we turned into human beings we gave something up. Being close to animals brings some of it back."

Tim says

I had serious problems with the way this book is written. Though Grandin's plainspoken writing style is refreshing, I often felt like she was oversimplifying very complex ideas in order to appeal to a scientifically illiterate audience (or worse, to make her arguments more convincing). Statements such as "Autism is a kind of way station on the road from animals to humans" aren't just over-dramatic (and ultimately nonsensical), they're also potentially offensive. Much of the book is purely speculative, and I'm left wondering whether it's really appropriate to write a popular science book that's mostly about completely untested hypotheses (this seems to be a growing trend in popular science literature, but that's another discussion entirely).

At the very least, Grandin could have been clearer in differentiating between 1) widely accepted scientific consensus, 2) well regarded schools of thought, 3) contested minority theories, 4) solitary experiments that have not been reproduced, 5) purely anecdotal evidence from her own life or that of friends, and 6) her own untested hypotheses. As is, they all sort of blur together, and a reader not entirely familiar with how science works might be led to buy into Grandin's arguments with less skepticism than is warranted. It certainly didn't help that many of the studies and "facts" she mentioned weren't even cited. Those that were were often cited as news publications ABOUT scientific studies rather than directly citing the studies themselves. It's important to remember that much of what is written about in the book is outside of Grandin's own area of professional expertise, and though I think it's perfectly fine to write about a topic you don't have a degree in, it was things like that that made me wonder whether Grandin herself could stand to be a little more skeptical, methodical, and cautious. To put it simply, I trusted her when she was talking about farm animals and dogs, less so when she was talking about neuroscience and other kinds of animals, and not at all when she tried giving insight into stuff like politics or child rearing.

One constant point of annoyance: For someone with a PhD in Animal Science, I was astounded that Grandin seemed to have no idea whatsoever of what the word "animal" even means. The book was littered with phrases like, "Animals feel pain. So do birds, and we now have pretty good evidence that fish feel pain too" or "I know dung beetles are insects, not animals, but..." Since distinguishing between the six taxonomical kingdoms is one of those things you learn in 9th grade bio class, I can only assume that Grandin is dumbing down for her audience. This has the duel effect of insulting the intelligence of those readers who have a basic grasp of Bio 101, and spreading misinformation and confusion among those who don't.

The confusion over the category of "animal" extends to talking about humans as well: "People were animals too, once," she writes. And what - we're not any more? Throughout the book, Grandin condemns overgeneralizing (a vice she associates with "normal people") and champions a pragmatic focus on specific details (a skill she associates with autistic people and animals) as the best way to handle any situation. Yet Grandin is guilty of many massive over-generalizations (the aforementioned "waystation" idea being one example, her failure to treat autism as a spectrum being another). And among the most frustrating of these for me was Grandin's view of humanity's relationship to the rest of the animal world, which is vague, romantic, and naive. Statements like "dogs and people belong together" or "people and animals are supposed to be together" amount to nothing more than mushy utopianism. What exactly would such a thing even mean? Together how? Grandin never elaborates.

Her idea of "nature" is pretty unscientific as well. At one point she asks, "Is animal infanticide really what nature intended? Or is it, at least some of the time, an aberration of what nature intended?" That question doesn't even begin to make logical sense. What kind of mystical nature is Grandin talking about that has things like intention? Nature doesn't intend. There are no aberrations in nature. These are human concepts. Nature just is. Even if she takes the classic anthropocentric view of defining nature as "everything in the world except humans and things made by humans," the question still doesn't make any sense. Animals have been killing their young long before humans even existed. What Grandin really means to say is that animal infanticide seems to serve no evolutionary purpose. This may be debatable. But either way, plenty of animal (and especially human) behaviors serve no apparent evolutionary purpose. "Evolutionarily advantageous" is not the same as "natural" and neither of those is the same as "right," "good," "moral" or what have you.

All that having been said, Grandin's many anecdotes are entertaining and there's a lot of cool ideas to chew on throughout. If you're an avid reader of pop neuroscience or animal studies books, you might already have encountered a good deal of this stuff, but the parallels Grandin draws are interesting (even if I'm skeptical of some of them) and her emphasis on "getting inside the black box" of the animal mind is an important one. Overall, I enjoyed reading this book, even if I was often frustrated with it.

Mandy Leins says

Temple Grandin is autistic, and has applied her experiences as an autistic woman to her work with animals. This book is sprinkled with information from all aspects of her work, including anecdotes of working within the food industry and why animals that are photographed in the wild are almost all marked with a white patch (no joke). It's a bit of a hard slog at times, and if you are at all at odds with the slaughter industry, you may feel that she is acting as an apologist and might become angry. While I don't believe she is doing so, I do believe that she is presenting events in a positive light, especially given her efforts to make slaughter more humane. Definitely worth a read.

Amantha says

I love psychology, so I was really pleased that this book is jam-packed with psychological data and experiments, in regards to both humans and animals. However, I feel like Temple Grandin may be a victim of her generation. She (or her coauthor, it's hard to tell) consistently refers to neurotypical people as "normal" which is generally something I don't feel should be in a professional book. The other thing about her that made me hesitate was her implication that rottweilers and pit bulls are inherently Dangerous Dogs.

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g-na says

Considering one of my favourite subjects is animal behaviour, I was looking forward to reading this book. Unfortunately, it didn't live up to my expectations.

Grandin is an autistic woman with a Ph.D. in Animal Science, so I thought this book might have a somewhat scientific bent to it. Instead, it is written in a conversational tone, poor grammar and all. That aside, it has some other major problems: Namely, despite the book being about the similarities in behaviour between animals and autistic people, the author never defines or explains autism. She occasionally refers to autistic people perceiving the world in a particular way, but the reader is left wondering what exactly autism is.

In addition, all of Grandin's information about autistic people comes from her own experiences. Not that her experiences aren't valid, but we have no idea if they are typical. And she also paints a big line and places autistic people on one side, and non-autistics on the other, and infers that non-autistics just can't see what autistics do, and that's just not always the case; I notice some of the things she says "only autistics" do, and as far as I know, I'm not autistic.

In general, there is some interesting information in here, and there are bits worth paying attention to. However, had it been written "right," it could have been a great book.

Janice says

I liked this book and found many of the author's insights fascinating. It is interesting in reading reviews that many people gave it five stars but an almost equal number gave it a one star. I think there was one reviewer that said she'd have given it less than the one if that option was available. My main complaint with the book was that there were too many (though captivating) details and not enough generalizations. But, that is what makes this book interesting. Temple Grandin admits that this is what autism is about and I think makes clear with her writing. I'll definitely be thinking about this book and reviewing some of the notes I took. By the way I don't normally mark passages but I was afraid I couldn't find them again because they were scattered about so much (like the nuts that squirrels hide for themselves) I was afraid I couldn't find them again.
I found a wonderful interview with Temple at: http://conversations.psu.edu/episodes...
It was so interesting to hear her speak after reading the book.

Lauren says

This book is so awesome, everyone should read it. Grandin talks about the ways that her autism gives her insight into animal behavior, while weaving in discussions of genetics, breeding practices, and stories about animals. She talks about horses, cows, cats, dogs, and chickens, really there's something for everyone. Grandin is responsible for the redesign of slaughterhouses to be a lot more humane (she talks about some of the contradictions in ethics this entails, but overall, it seems like a very good thing that most major meat packers are using her systems), a nice counterpart to some of the hype created by FAST FOOD NATION and the like. It's just start to finish fascinating.

Krista says

I have mixed feelings about this book, and I haven't finished it, so I'm not sure if it's fair to write a review yet. But one thing keeps annoying me throughout the text: her constant use of the term "animals" when she really means "mammals" or specifically livestock. She makes generalizations such as "animals are visual creatures" which is certainly not true for the majority of animal species. She's specifically talking about livestock and hoofstock, but she's not using the specific term. On page 59, she uses dung beetles in an example of differing forms of sensory perception but then actually writes "I know dung beetles are insects, not animals, but..."

Um, what? You have a PhD in animal science, but you don't think insects are animals?

In order to get through the book I find myself mentally replacing the word "animal" with "mammal" in order for the text to make sense -- but even then, there's too many gross generalizations that annoy me. Also, Grandin comes across as somewhat smug and snobby about her "talent", but I'll attribute that to her autism and difficulty with human social interactions.

I agree with some of her perspectives; disagree with others. It's not a bad book, but it's certainly not the be-all and end-all of animal behavior.

Tim says

This book was an absolute delight to read. I wholeheartedly recommend it to everyone everywhere but especially to people who have an affinity for animals. You learn a great deal about animals in these pages but by way of contrast and compare you also learn a whole lot about human beings. Using scientific studies of animals, her own experiences as an autistic person, and her experiences working with commercial enterprises to improve the welfare of animals, the author hypothesizes that the way autistic people perceive the world may be similar to the way animals perceive the world.

Quite a few of the statements in this book begin with the phrase 'I think' or something similar so the author does acknowledge she is speculating. However, it is not unfounded speculation. Her method for discovering some unidentified factor in the farm environment that is scaring or harming the animals and then suggesting changes involves seeing things not from the perspective of a human but that of an animal. The reason she is so successful at this is because autistic people (based on her own experience and many other studies) perceive the world differently than most humans do. People see one unified thing: a landscape, a building, a statue. Autistic people see a collection of details. A fence made of weathered cedar posts, a length of rusty chain, a bright yellow rain coat, etc. When it comes to identifying what is spooking an animal, the devil, as they say, is in the details. So who better to note that than someone who sees discrete objects as collections of details? People focus in on the things they want or expect to see and all of the other details fade into the background (the 'Gorillas In Our Midst' psychology experiment is a well known example of this). Autistic people are less prone to doing that. The reason for this, according to the author, is because autistic people think with pictures instead of words (ie. they think in concrete terms and see details whereas people who think with words think in abstract terms and see objects). Mammals and to a lesser degree, autistic people, have a less developed frontal cortex. One of the roles of the frontal cortex is to serve as an associative system. It takes a whole bunch of seemingly unrelated details and associates them into one integrated whole. There is an expression: big picture thinking. The neocortex is responsible for big picture thinking. We invent or discover a sort of overarching structure that binds all of the disparate details of existence into one coherent whole (which of the two we believe we are doing is obviously going to be based to some degree on the subjective epistemology of the individual him/herself and is a debate outside the considerations of the book).

In terms of personal history, these overarching structures are known as schemas/schemata, in terms of human history they are called meta-narratives. Basically, your neocortex looks at the details and tells you a story about what life is about. It takes all of those details and turns them into one cohesive thing. This may be a good thing but like all good things, there is a trade-off. The author explains:

'The price human beings pay for having such big, fat frontal lobes is that normal people become oblivious in a way animals and autistic people aren't. Normal people stop seeing the details that make up the big picture and see only the big picture instead. That's what your frontal lobes do for you: they give you the big picture. Animals see all the tiny little details that go into the picture.'

I am going into all of this detail because it sets the stage for the topics covered in this book and compares how a neurotypical human experiences it, how an autistic person experiences it, and how it is believed (based on things like observation and fMRI scans) an animal may be experiencing it. The TLDR: the author is using the autistic perspective to translate the intellect, emotions, and perceptions of animals into terms a non-autistic human can understand. Thus the title 'Animals In Translation.'

There is a lot of fascinating information about animals in this book, divided up into the following chapters:

How Animals Perceive The World
Animal Feelings
Animal Aggression
Pain and Suffering
How Animals Think
Animal Genius: Extreme Talents

This is bookended by a short autobiographical account and a behaviour and training troubleshooting guide.

I am always amazed when I read accounts of animal intelligence. Alex the african gray parrot is one of the more famous examples. He became so adept at spelling he was able to spell out new sounds associated with objects without being trained to spell that particular word; demonstrating he wasn't merely parroting phrases, he had some grasp of the concept of phonics. Alex would also ask questions unprompted (for example, asking what colour he was when catching sight of himself in a mirror.)

Another interesting area is research into the relationship between music and language. As humans, we tend to think of language merely as the content of a word or string of words. If I direct a statement at you, you understand what it is I am saying. While that is true, it is equally true that if I say something to you in a gruff manner, I have communicated something different than I would have if I had made the same statement in a well modulated tone. Likewise if my voice rises at the end of a statement, it turns that statement into a question. How something is said is as much a part of communication as what is being said. Tone matters. There is some research into whether some animals employ a sort of tonal proto-language. There is once again an autism connection here that the author unfolds. The author also considers the experiences of people who never learned any sort of verbal or sign language until they were fully grown adults. That was a fascinating read also. The story of Ildefonso, A Man Without Words, makes it clear that people can understand abstract concepts without the benefit of words.

Tool manufacturing was another topic the author covered; crows bending wires into makeshift hooks was one example among a number the author gives. The current scientific controversy is whether animals are capable of true cognition, defined not as instinctual hard wired behaviour or learning a simple rule of thumb but instead solving a problem under novel conditions. Crows noting that cars stop at red traffic lights and go at green traffic lights, placing nuts in front of the front wheels when the light is red and then swooping down to eat the innards of the now broken nut after the light has turned green, the traffic has moved on, and the coast is clear might be an example of this.

I have read before that it is the animals with the most complex brains that exhibit a greater potential for empathy. This book speculates about another, far less benign similarity between humans and animals with more complex brains:

'.....when I read through the research literature I'm struck by the fact that the animals with the most complex brains are also the ones that engage in some of the nastiest behaviour. I suspect people and animals probably pay a price for having a complex brain. For one thing, in a complex brain there may be more opportunities for wiring mistakes that lead to vicious behavior. Another possibility is that since a more complex brain provides greater flexibility of behavior, animals with complex brains become free to develop new behaviors that will be good, bad, or in between. Human beings are capable of great love and sacrifice, but they are also capable of profound cruelty. Maybe animals are, too.'

It was at this point that my own neocortex did that thing it does and made an association. Something I had read in the book Mere Christianity: that the more intelligent an entity is, the more potential it has for great good when it goes right but the more potential it has for great evil when it goes wrong. Of course, C. S. Lewis was looking upwards to celestial beings, this book is looking downwards to animals.

There was so much intriguing material covered in this book I could go on at length. Suffice it to say, we've come a long way since Rene Descartes arbitrarily assigned animals to the category of automatons with no inner life. The author writes near the end of the book:

'It's time to start thinking of animals as capable and communicative beings. It's also time to stop making assumptions. Animal researchers take a lot for granted: "animals don't have language," "animals don't have psychological self-awareness" - you find blanket statements like this sprinkled throughout the research literature. But the truth is, we don't know what animals can't do better than we know what they can do. It's hard to prove a negative, and proving negatives shouldn't be the focus.

If we're interested in animals, then we need to study animals for their own sake, and on their own terms, to the extent that it's possible. What are they doing? What are they feeling? What are they thinking? What are they saying?

Who are they?

And: what do we need to do to treat animals fairly, responsibly, and with kindness?

Those are the real questions.'

Sigh. Now I want an african gray parrot so we can, you know, discuss the reality of platonic objects and stuff. But perhaps that is a job for The Philosopher's Dog?

Lightreads says

Came for the autism, stayed for the Labradors. Background: Temple Grandin is an animal behavior specialist. She's single-handedly revolutionized the humane treatment of slaughter animals in the United States. She's also a vital force in the neurodiversity movement. This book argues broadly that animal cognition shares some key features with autistic cognition – picture-thinking, working memory shortages, detail-fixation, etc. It also takes a fascinating tour through what we know about animal emotion, consciousness, and cognition.

Awesome, on multiple levels. The animal psychology wasn't just interesting (though it really is!) but also

useful for those of us who handle a working dog. And also, Temple Grandin is one of those people who manages to make her *life* a sustained act of advocacy, which is something I aspire to on my very best days. This book spends some time explicitly explaining autistic cognition, but it more subtly *is* autistic in a way that just says, *here's my brain. It's not like yours. Just so you know*.
