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Finding a Good Read: Animals

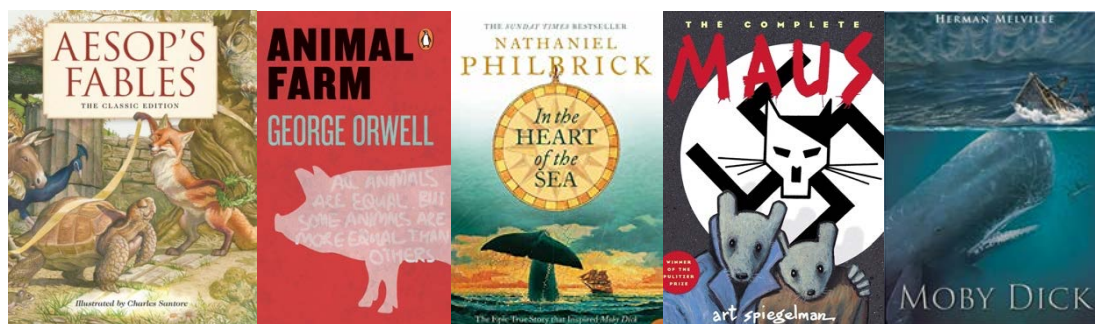
A regular column to help you find a good read even if you can't get to the library yet

Animals in books fascinate us, whether as the talking characters of folktales, as companions or enemies to human beings, or subjects of study in their own right.

Folktales may use animals to teach us life lessons. **Aesop's fables** are a good example. Aesop was thought to be a slave in ancient Greece over 2500 years ago. His stories survive today and most of us are familiar with some of them: the boy who cried wolf, the ant and the grasshopper, the lion and the mouse. They all have a clear moral and have been retold again and again. Perhaps the most famous of all of them is The Tortoise and the Hare. A cocky hare boasts about his speed and dares other animal to compete with him. The tortoise accepts the challenge and the race is on. But the hare is so sure of himself and contemptuous of the slow tortoise that he stops halfway for a nap. He wakes just in time to see the tortoise cross the finish line as the winner. The moral: arrogance can be our downfall whereas dogged determination wins out.

Other famous animal figures from folktales include the West African trickster spider **Anansi**, and the mischievous Brer Rabbit, a character who uses his cunning intelligence to triumph over stronger animals like the fox and bear. Brer Rabbit originated in the slave South of America and some critics argue that his stories were a way for slaves to criticise and triumph over their masters without being punished for it.

George Orwell's **Animal Farm** uses animal characters to dramatise the corruption of whole political systems such as totalitarianism and communism. More recently the cartoonist Art Spiegelman's graphic form **Maus** explores the Holocaust with an animal cast: Nazi cats, Jewish mice, Polish pigs and American dogs. A cartoon with animal characters may sound like an offensive trivialisation of the horror but most readers agree it's in fact disturbing and very powerful.



Perhaps the most famous – and certainly the biggest – animal to feature as a central character is the great sperm whale of Herman Melville's 1852 novel **Moby-Dick**. It centres around the pursuit by Captain Ahab of the creature that has bitten off his leg and possibly driven him insane. It's a book about many things – power, slavery, human creativity and destruction. It's also a book from which the reader learns a lot about whales, from the size of their arteries (big enough for a person to swim through) to the way they see (with eyes on the sides of their heads and two distinct fields of vision).

In a more recent book, **In the Heart of the Sea**, Nathaniel Philbrick tells the extraordinary true story on which *Moby-Dick* was partly based – the deliberate sinking of the whaleship Essex by a furious sperm whale, and the fate of the survivors.

Human / animal interaction is a recurrent theme. The relationship between a cowboy and his horse is a staple of Western films and books, from the Lone Ranger's Silver to the unlikely Tub in ***The Sisters Brothers*** and Mattie's Little Blackie in ***True Grit***. Or for brilliant explorations of dogs and masters, try Jack London's ***The Call of the Wild*** and ***White Fang***.

The relationship between humans and apes has been the subject of extraordinary experiments including attempts to raise chimpanzees alongside human children. Karen Joy Fowler explores the possibilities and dangers of this in her novel ***We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves***. Riveting studies of the behaviour of great apes in the wild include Dian Fossey's ***Gorillas in the Mist*** and Jane Goodall's ***In the Shadow of Man***.



The idea of children being raised by animals goes back at least as far as the myth of ***Romulus and Remus***, the founders of Rome. Italy is full of stories and statues of the boys being suckled by she-wolves. Rudyard Kipling picked it up with Mowgli in ***The Jungle Book*** stories and more recently it has become a subject of serious study in books including Michael Newton's ***Savage Girls and Wild Boys***.

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