

SHEEP AND OTHER ANIMALS (BUT MOSTLY SHEEP)

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Inspired by Bertha, heroine for those who dare to be free.



Pierre Durand's monthly newsletter for readers of quirky realism and that kind of thing

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In this newsletter I'll tell you about two books I finished last month, one of which has a lot to do with sheep, which is why I'll share my personal interest in them that persists to this day. I am also delighted to say that the Alliance Française in Cape Town South Africa, is hosting a launch for the French translation of *Bertha's Law* (*D'après Bertha*) on 23 March (18h00). If you in the city at this time, I always appreciate the opportunity to meet readers. In the non-fiction corner there's some interesting trivia about racoons and: Have you ever heard of ollidges?

But before all this, do you know about Project Gutenberg? It is a wonderful initiative that has been going for several decades now. It provides free e-book copies of many of the classics (and some more contemporary books) that you may have encountered at school/university as well as lots of non-fiction. You will [find it here](#). Perhaps I will eventually get round to reading *Wuthering Heights*, seems like one of those that should be on my bucket list.

Two Books

We're all looking for happiness, but how will we know when we find it? I think that *Letters To My Sheep* by Teya Brooks Pribac, an Australian scholar and artist, has an answer (which you can [find here](#)). I found it a deeply moving account of Brooks Pribac's insights into her ovine companions named Jonathan, Henry, Orpheus-Pumpkin, and Jason. [I looked up 'ovine'. If, like me, you didn't know: ovine is to sheep as porcine is to pigs.] Her four sheep must surely be the most loved sheep in all of Australia. To give you an idea of just how much, she says she is "...writing this book because I want people to know that they were here, that we were here, together, and that, at least for a while, it

was perfect." I know what she means. I have felt the same about dogs, birds, chickens and others and am often struck by the richness of their lives—if they have the opportunity to live in peace. And that's what *Letters To My Sheep* is really about. The tenderness and authenticity pour off the pages. I loved it. And as for happiness, real happiness I mean, well it's there for all to see. Brooks Pribac articulates it wonderfully. She says, "You'll know when you've reached happiness, because there will be no need to feel differently, no longing to change the state you're in." Beautiful!

The second book is *Paul and Virginie* by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (it's on [Project Gutenberg](#)). It is a romance novel, not my go-to genre, but I chose it because it takes place in Mauritius and I hadn't read anything located on the island, despite my close association with it. Turns out, it is a very popular book in schools in Mauritius (first published in 1788). At its heart it's a love story with a message about sacrificing, or at least postponing, life with the person you love for a few years abroad in order to take up an offer of building financial security and societal approval. As you can imagine, there are grave risks associated with that and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre was known for cautionary tales like these. If the idea of a love story in a village-like setting in Mauritius with a message about not following your heart appeals to you, this is something you will enjoy.

A bit about me and sheep (or sheep and I, I never know which way round it is)

When I lived in Ireland, I was fascinated by their sheep. It all started when I saw a farmer and his sheepdog herding sheep. First, there was the sheep: they were unlike those I had seen in the southern hemisphere, which were less woolly and I didn't remember them having black heads and feet like the ones I saw in Ireland. I was intrigued by their cuteness and had an overwhelming urge to catch one, wrestle it to the ground, tickle it and run my hands through its fleece (later, I'll tell you why I am happy I never managed to do that.) And second, the sheepdog: my word she relished her task and performed it with equal amounts zeal and pride. I found the whole spectacle mesmerising, and I have been thankful for this ever since because it became a great help for when I have trouble sleeping. It helps so much that I subscribe to a YouTube channel that shows sheepdogs herding sheep and the videos almost always help me drift off. It's more than just the bucolic setting, and the sheepdog's enthusiasm is a pleasure to watch, but I think it's the act of finally getting all the sheep into the pen that does the trick. No matter how much trouble she's having, you know she is eventually going to get it right, and maybe it's that final flourish that triggers a release of whatever that happy hormone in our brain is called. I feel a rush of satisfaction, a catharsis that almost always makes me drop off.

Why am I happy I never managed to catch a sheep in Ireland? Well, besides the fact that the farmer may have thought I was trying to steal it, I didn't realise that their fleece is pretty oily and caked with mud and other farm debris. They lovely, but oily and grimy. More relevant for my story, though, is their temperament. Apparently, they are exceptionally anxious creatures and can die from shock if they manhandled. Sheep have died when they're separated from the flock for long periods. I don't know what they're so worried about, maybe it's the same stuff that makes it difficult for me to sleep, but I suppose that's not the point. The farmer wouldn't have been happy if I was the cause of one of them dying.

Have you ever played that game where you guess the collective noun for a specific animal? I'm not sure why racoons came to mind, but I wondered what the collective noun is for them. I've never seen racoons in the wild but take a look at the image below. It's easy to see why it is a *gaze of racoons*. Some of the collective nouns are absolute gems: *a murder of crows*, *a murmur of starlings*, and *a crash of rhinoceros*



A gaze of racoons

About those ollidges. It's something I'm keeping for next time, but as a primer, they are both real and imagined depending on your belief system. The word was coined by my brother when he studied social anthropology and came across an oral tradition about these mystical spirits that roam parts of southern Africa. They make for an intriguing story, I look forward to sharing it with you.

In April...

...you will hear about *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. Caramba! In the non-fiction section there's something about cross-species friendships like the ones I read about in *Letters To My Sheep*. I am keen to tell you about painter Zdzisław Beksiński's writing. I'll be telling you about ollidges and space permitting, I'll share details about publications of my flash fiction and non-fiction contributions in edited volumes, and perhaps a photo of the launch of *D'après Bertha*.

Until then, warm greetings and be free to be.

Bertha and me.

Pierre



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