

# Fly like an eagle

But even the more down-to-earth things an animal does are not easy,  
finds **Paul Cobley**

*Being a Beast* by Charles Foster, Profile Books, £14.99

*GoatMan: How I Took a Holiday from Being Human* by Thomas Thwaites, Princeton Architectural Press, \$24.95/£14.99

Who hasn't wondered what it would like to be a (non-human) animal – flying, leaping, burrowing as well as carrying out more prosaic feral activities? Such musing is pretty much universal. But who actually goes so far as to attempt to 'become' a specific animal in order to try to find out? Two engaging new books, *GoatMan* and *Being a Beast*, offer an answer to this last question, even if, ultimately, they can never get to grips with the substance of what it is like to be a (non-human) animal.

Both volumes veer into the territory of a classic essay by the philosopher, Thomas Nagel, who asked in 1974 "What is it like to be a bat?" Nagel had concluded that the core of the problem was 'consciousness'; in the end, the consciousness of the bat would be inaccessible to us no matter what measure we took to put ourselves in its position. "It will not help", he writes, "to try to imagine that one has webbing on one's arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one's mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one's feet in an attic." Such measures would only enable one to *behave* as a bat seems to behave; what it is to *be* a bat would be another matter altogether.

These books clearly take a different view – or at least try to sidestep the problem. Thwaites is childishly defiant: "Well screw you, Nagel! I'm going to try anyway". Foster, meanwhile, takes Nagel's suggestion for a new phenomenology to describe animal worlds as a cue for poesy or a vague reorientation of language. The projects described by each of them consist of fairly limited attempts to *behave* like certain animals.

So, Thwaites' book recounts how, after winning a grant from the Wellcome Trust, he prepares to live like a goat; Foster, a 'traveller', among other things, who clearly sees himself in a tradition of 'nature writing', takes on some of the behaviour of badgers, urban foxes, otters, red deer and swifts. In terms of value for money, then, the reader can choose: at roughly the same length, one book reveals very little about one species, the other reveals very little about five species.

Foster's approach is, in some ways, allied to recent 'animal studies' that have burgeoned in the humanities in recent years, because it takes a tissue of human perspectives as its starting point and tries to transcend them. Thus, Foster camps out (with his eight year old son) in a badger sett in Wales or prostrates himself in East London so as to gain a fox's-eye view. Following an introductory chapter, subsequent chapters are devoted to highly personalized discussions of his five chosen species.

Thwaites' approach is more focused: originally wanting to live as an elephant, he takes the advice of a Scandinavian shaman and tries to 'become' a goat. His chapters are devoted to 'Soul', 'Mind', 'Body', 'Guts' and 'Goat Life'. Despite the liberal use of irony and bathos as well as a generally jokey tone in both books, Thwaites' descriptions of his consultations with experts do threaten to illuminate the world of a non-human animal. In particular, Thwaites' account of his extensive attempts - and initial failures - to replicate goat physiology is probably the most rewarding feature of these two books.

Yet, the reader is left wondering whether there is much to learn beyond the entertainment afforded by the efforts of the authors. After the elaborate build-up in *GoatMan*, not to mention the enticing cover image - like the book, simultaneously comical and intriguing - it is disappointing that Thwaites seems to spend so little time among his chosen species. However, he does find a way to eat grass. Foster, by contrast, has a friend bring meals to him in the badger sett.

Inevitably, the reader is going to feel short-changed. It is as if both of these projects had involved the authors 'becoming' me and, out of all my characteristics, they chose drinking tea as more representative than my enduring the Northern Line, suffering athlete's foot, carrying the consequences of inability to afford a dental bridge, etc.

Nevertheless, we can now confirm who would go so far as to try to find out what it is like to be a non-human animal: it's the gentleman explorer, alive and kicking with his gentility intact.