
Book Review

FRANK MANLEY

The Cockfighter

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Last November, the citizens of Arizona and Missouri voted to outlaw cockfighting. Now, with the exception of Louisiana, Oklahoma, and New Mexico, the activity is banned in the United States. Despite its clandestine status, however, organized cockfights flourish, particularly in the South. Three magazines are devoted to the sport, and cockfighters have organized a political lobby group, the United Game Fowl Breeders Association. Gamefowl breeders sell roosters over the Internet, and the members of the University of South Carolina football team are still officially dubbed, "The Fighting Gamecocks." There are a half dozen active breeders in the county where I live. When I get my morning paper, I often hear the crowing of gamecocks from across the valley.

The cockfighting culture of Southern Appalachia is the setting of this haunting coming-of-age novel by Frank Manley, an award winning short story writer and director of the creative writing program at Emory University. I am not a neutral reviewer of *The Cockfighter*. I first stumbled upon this subculture 20 years ago when I moved to the mountains of western North Carolina. It became the subject of my doctoral dissertation. For two years in the 1970s, I traveled to Saturday night derbies in converted barns, interviewed cockers, and photographed their children and their birds—often together. (One of these photographs appears on the cover of Manley's book). These experiences forced me to recognize the paradoxes inherent in many aspects of human/animal interactions and convinced me that the relationship between humans and other species was a psychologically and morally complex topic worthy of academic pursuit.

Manley's novel revolves around a 12-year-old boy, son of an overbearing, small-time cockfighter, who apparently is following in his father's footsteps. In this context, Manley explores rich psychological themes—the struggle between a mother and father for their child's soul, the oedipal ambivalence of the son toward his father, and the boy's sexuality and emerging independence.

Coming of Age

What this novel says about two aspects of cockfighting may concern readers of this journal in particular: (a) the relationship between gamecock and cockfighter, and (b) the process by which young men are socialized into a culture that sees manhood, insensitivity, and cruelty as synonymous. The relationship between cockers and their birds is complicated, and the author understands this. Gamecocks are beautiful and brave, and it is difficult to convey the admiration cockers have for their roosters. But the roosters are not companion animals. The emotional response of a cocker toward a mortally wounded bird might include disappointment, anger, concern about potential gambling losses, and, when a cock flees from its opponent during a fight, even embarrassment. It is unlikely, however, that this emotional repertoire will include grief. This is not surprising as a rooster has only about a 50:50 chance of emerging alive from a single match. Cocks that have survived three or four fights are rare, and a “six-time winner” is treated with something akin to awe.

The second theme—what it means to become a man in a culture of cruelty—is particularly germane to the topic of this special issue of *Society and Animals*. Again, Manley’s eye is accurate. Breeders commonly enlist their children to care for game chickens. Cockfighters sometimes justify their sport on the grounds that it instills responsibility in their children. It is not unusual for children and teenagers, to attend fights. I know of one “high status” North Carolina cocker whose son—like the protagonist of this novel—was groomed at about age 13 to take over the responsibility of handling the family’s roosters in the pit. Sometimes the process by which boys come to model the adult behavior is surprisingly overt. When a fight is over, typically the mangled, but not always dead, losers are thrown on a pile in the corner of the pit. I have seen groups of young boys revive these injured and discarded birds and, acting out the roles of handler, referee, and spectator, stage minifights under the bleachers.

“Low-lifes” or Average Citizens

As literature, this book works. The tale is compelling; the psychological issues are real. It has been favorably reviewed in literary circles. One reviewer labeled it a “minor masterpiece”. *The Cockfighter* is also available in paperback and has recently been adapted for the stage. I doubt, however, that the cockfighting community will receive this book with equal enthusiasm. On the one hand, cockers will find the book an accurate depiction of aspects of their culture. Manley’s descriptions of the sights and smells of the pit ring true. He knows the lingo—what

it means when a rooster is “rattled,” the difference between a “shake” and a “stag,” and between a Claret and a Grey. He knows the rules of the modern derby, what the “short score line” is and what it means to send a fight to the “drag pit.” He puts the right words in the referee’s mouth: “Bill’m up.” “Pit’m.” “Handle!” He notes cockers’ obsessions with prefight diet and conditioning regimens.

On the other hand, cockfighters will not like the way Manley depicts them. The boy’s family members are “trailer-trash.” His father is an arrogant, insensitive, backwoods Georgia cracker. His mother is weak and neurotic. His opponent in the pit is a cheat, and even his sympathetic uncle is an inept drunk. This cast of characters will play nicely to those who would like to dismiss cockfighting as an enterprise of ignorant and sadistic Southern “low-lifes.” They do not, however, resemble most of the cockfighters I knew, who were average citizens with conventional middle class values. Indeed, the most interesting thing I noticed about cockfighters was how ordinary their lives were in all respects but one—their involvement in a subterranean blood sport.

Cockpits and Slaughterhouses

The real theme of this book is not cockfighting. It is a boy’s confrontation with his own manhood and his father’s hypocrisy. But cockfighting itself raises troubling questions of hypocrisy. I once took a friend, an organizer for Amnesty International, to a fight at a pit I was studying. At the end of the evening, I asked him what he thought about the experience. He responded that compared to the struggle to eliminate the death penalty for humans, cockfighting was “a small moral problem.” Although many readers will disagree, in at least a numerical sense he was right. It is likely that a couple of hundred thousand roosters die each year in American cockpits. The number, although large, is a tiny fraction of the 35 million chickens who die each day to satisfy the culinary preferences of Americans for white meat, drumsticks, and hot wings. Put another way, roughly 60,000 chickens are killed in industrial slaughterhouses for each gamecock who dies in the pit. Further, game roosters have it pretty good—a relatively long life (two years on average), a varied diet, and lots of fresh air. In contrast, almost unimaginable squalor and stress characterize the 42-day existence of a commercial fryer: filth, air heavy with ammonia and urea, rough handling, and extreme overcrowding.

Cockfighting is a cruel and ethically indefensible anachronism. But the pain and suffering that result from this illegal blood sport pale in comparison to that associated with the virtually unregulated multi-billion dollar poultry industry. *The*

Cockfighter is a novel of brutality and hypocrisy. It is not for the faint of heart, and it may cause some readers to squirm—as well it should.

Note

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