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## Book Review: *Crooked Cats: Beastly Encounters in the Anthropocene*

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*Crooked Cats: Beastly Encounters in the Anthropocene*, by Nayanika Mathur. University of Chicago Press, 2021, xiv + 208 pages.

Reviewed by Felix Clarke, University of Edinburgh

In the preface to *Crooked Cats*, Nayanika Mathur muses on the parallels between her experiences of COVID-enforced lockdowns in Oxford, UK, and living with a dangerous big cat in Gopeshwar, India. Her walking route in Oxford takes in many places I'm familiar with, having grown up in the city. Similarly, while a research assistant in South Africa, I was unable to walk at night because of leopards. So, I felt a certain recognition when I read Mathur's opening sentiments.

*Crooked Cats* describes how certain big cats in India (mainly leopards and tigers, but also lions) come to be "crooked." For Mathur, a crooked cat is one who no longer lives in peace with humans, is no longer fearful of humans, and, most importantly, has come to prey on humans. Mathur's book retains an admirable openness, exploring crookedness rather than prescribing specific remedies to the phenomenon. However, there is a central argument to the book, namely, that while there have always been crooked cats, an increase in crookedness, and the inexorable march of climate change, are not separate, but are two parts of the same Anthropocene story. This assertion leads to a key political project of this book—to explore novel ways of storytelling the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene concept has been criticized for its undifferentiated take on humans and human responsibility, and Mathur shares this unease, especially regarding the Anthropocene's potential whiteness. Yet Mathur makes the case for the term as politically useful and demonstrates this expertly by painting an exceptionally intricate picture of

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human–big cat relations that leaps effortlessly from individual politics as enacted by humans and nonhumans, to global Anthropocene politics.

Chapter 1 introduces the Gopeshwar-wallah bagh (Crooked Leopard of Gopeshwar), the leopard from the preface and, in many ways, the main character of this book. Chapter 2 speaks to the challenges of understanding whether a cat is crooked and sets about demonstrating that there are indeed truly crooked cats. Chapter 3 sits slightly apart—almost a short story in its own right—and tells the tale of Vijay, a white tiger in Delhi Zoo, who came to be a cute celebrity in spite, and possibly because, of killing a human, an unusual twist on the stories of crookedness that populate the rest of the book.

Chapter 4 seeks to explore how petitions about big cats in India (and beyond) are made—usually calling for the killing of a big cat. Central to both this chapter and the book more generally is the potential of (certain) big cats to express their agency, which is greater than that of (certain) humans. Chapter 5 shows that fictional writings on cats may hold as much truth as tales that are considered (or framed as) factual accounts. This chapter demonstrates an alternative way of storying the Anthropocene. If fiction and factual stories about humans and big cats both contain grains of truth and elements of fiction, we can begin to see how different stories of human relations with big cats, most importantly those that haven't been told, or taken seriously, might come to the fore.

Chapter 6 shows how different human-animal (urban) geographies produce different relationships between humans and cats and shows that the locale of human-animal relationships remains central to understanding them. Chapter Seven deals with how big cats come to be known digitally by, for instance, the use of camera traps and CCTV. These new digital renditions change human relations with big cats, for instance, by altering the ways in which humans use digital evidence to mobilize support for various positionings with regard to crooked or straightforward cats.

Before offering some final thoughts, I'd like to pose a question: Is it only when a cat kills or preys on humans that it is crooked? This question is born from an engagement with the work of Val Plumwood by Krithika Srinivasan in *The Sociological Review* in 2022, who points to the human exceptionalism evident in the continued use of the term “man-eater” to describe animals that are considered to have gone rogue because they have killed a human. According to Plumwood in *The Eye of the Crocodile* (2012, p. 91), the position of humans is still that of “the eaters of others who are never themselves eaten.” If a cat can become crooked only because they hunt and/or eat humans, do we risk leaving this human exceptionalism unchallenged? Mathur's use of “crooked” as opposed to “man-eater” may begin to shift this, but there might be a need to find other reasons for crookedness (e.g., living in new places, forming unprecedented kin-relations, undertaking novel migratory routes) beyond simply preying on humans to fully move on from human exceptionalism.

This line of questioning does not, however, take away from the fact that Mathur's book is a great addition to the human-animal relations literature. The narrative form is clear and compelling. But perhaps the biggest compliment I can give is that Mathur, by continually shifting the scales of analysis and argument from local to global, while

centering stories from often-marginalized (human) communities, allows for *Crooked Cats* to be a take on storying the Anthropocene that I believe many of the term's critics could get behind.

And finally, I'll end in a similar manner to the final chapter of *Crooked Cats*, which consists of three stories, the last of which tells of being followed by, but not seeing, a crooked cat. The shared sense of being watched reminded me of my face-to-face encounter with a leopard. One night while reading with a head torch outside my room in Mpumalanga, South Africa, I turned instinctively because I thought something was watching me. Sitting perhaps only 20 meters away was a leopard. Having read this book, all I can say is I'm glad this leopard wasn't crooked. ■

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