

EATING ANIMALS BY JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER AND ITS RECEPTION BY POLISH READERS

Irena Chawrińska

*Faculty of Languages, University of Gdańsk
ul. Wita Stwosza 51, 80-308 Gdańsk, Poland
irena.chawrińska@ug.edu.pl*

&

Elżbieta Czapka

*Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Gdańsk
ul. Bażyńskiego 4, 80-309 Gdańsk, Poland
elzbieta.czapka@ug.edu.pl*

Abstract

In 2013, Jonathan Safran Foer, the author of the bestseller *Everything is Illuminated*, once again became the center of a lively discussions in academic and non-academic circles thanks to his work *Eating Animals* (published by Krytyka Polityczna Publishing House, Poland). In this work Foer presented a non-literary text addressing a socially important topic, that gains new significance from the perspective of the year 2021. In this article, provide a platform for Polish readers of *Eating Animals*, without showing favouritism towards either vegans or non-vegans. We explore its reception, based on the definition, “the reception of a literary work by a literary audience and its functioning among different reading groups” (as defined in the Dictionary of Literary Terms p.464). Although the primary connotation triggered by this definition is sociological, reception pertains to reading, understanding, and subsequently interpreting a work. This attribution aligns it to literary history, disconnecting it from sociological associations. The aim of the authors is to situate Foer’s *Eating Animals* in the sphere of cultural and social research. Additionally, they seek to specify the definition of reception using this book as an example.

Key words: *Book Reception, Animal Study, Sustainable Development.*

The matter of text reception and the reader will always be a fundamental issue in literary research. We seek to move beyond the disputes between literary academics such as Jauss and Iser's reception aesthetics and Fish's interpretative communities. Our focus is instead on individual Polish readers of *Eating Animals*¹. Employing a method drawn from sociology, taking care not to invalidate the identifications and reflections of individual Polish readers of Foer's work, or to obscure their reception of the book with literary theories [Jauss: 267; Fish: 483]. Along with the readers of the writer's bestseller, we acknowledge the different epistemic strands as equal, without fearing interpretive anarchy. This is because readers of Foer's work in 2021 are inevitably shaped by the cultural context that defines their reception of the text.

The way Foer's book has been read in Poland a decade after its first publication, in the context of a background of thought relevant to the 2020's, will provide the American reader with new perspectives and comparisons that would not be revealed in a homogenous space. Each reader enters the reading with their own values, and never it is transparent or innocent. This authors of this paper invite their readers to reconsider the reception of *Eating Animals*, which is grounded in American culture. The inclusion of individual Polish readers' perspectives may introduce inspiring thoughts and a refreshing context, not only presenting the artistic and aesthetic values of the author's text *Everything is Illuminated* but also focusing on its ideological and cognitive function and the significance of the book for specific readers (Damrosch 5). The history of a text's varied reception could become a part of literary history in competition with its traditional version. According to Gunter Grimm, interpretation should be distinguished from reception, as the former involves an objective reference to the object characteristic of the researcher, while the latter involves the subjective opinion of the subject intended for the "normal consumer" [Grimm: 255–267]. The perspective of the ordinary reader in this paper, along with the context of the Vegan Studies Project [Wright: 8; Kubisz: 11], and sustainable development, will enable us to understand how *Eating Animals* has become an important text in Poland, an interpretative strategy, a way of thinking about important issues, and a key to interpreting other cultural texts.

1. MEAT CONSUMPTION, VEGAN STUDIES, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In an era of impending climate catastrophe [Crutzen], Anthropocene marasmus [Bińczyk], and successive attempts to balance development (*Sustainable Development Goals*), dietary choices are playing an increasingly important role in social life. The contemporary human diet is filled with relatively inexpensive meat on an unprecedented scale, as Jonathan Safran Foer signals in his book *Eating Animals*, stating

¹ In the 1960s and 1970s, research into the reception and reception of literary works was one of the main concerns of Polish literary studies, and in many respects it was ahead of world scholarship at the time. They created, so to speak, a new paradigm of it, largely shifting the centre of gravity of the interpretative process from the author's intentionality and the form of the text to the interpretative freedom of the recipient. Nowadays, reception studies exist only to a very limited extent and mostly reproduce the patterns established during the field's glory years in Poland [Jarmuszkiewicz].

that, “taking inflation into account, meat has never cost so little at any time in history as it does today” [Foer: 122]. However, current trends indicate a departure from meat consumption, which may seem marginal in the context of the entire human population, but from the perspective of the growing availability of plant-based products, there is hope that the estimated one percent of vegetarians in Poland actually constitutes a much larger group [Mamzer: 75].

The possibility of producing meat from animal stem cells, which could be a competitor and a threat to meat producers, is opening up to supporters of including meat in the 21st century diet [Lymbey and Oakeshott: 238]. In 2013, a hamburger made from beef produced *in vitro* under laboratory conditions was prepared and eaten in London; it consisted of about three-thousand tiny strips of artificial beef grown from cow stem cells and cost about \$200,000. Hatalska Foresight Institute reports in *Future of Food* that, while for some people meat from artificially grown tissues is the future, human diets may consist of bugs [*Future of Food*: 78]. We do not know if people will face any cultural pressure in their consumer choices in a few years or a few decades, or if not eating meat will involve ethical choices related to reducing animal suffering through meat products printed from artificial tissue.

Today, meat consumption continues to be a significant global problem, and the supposed solution lies in the sustainable development goals². However, incorporating sustainable development into the political agenda is not synonymous with setting binding strategies for sustainable development. The issue of meat consumption is encompassed within goal 12: responsible consumption and production. However, the transformation of socio-economic development into sustainable development, given the complexity and variability of conditions, cannot proceed without encountering occasional unrealistic accelerations and impediments. Relying on arguments alone lacks the sufficiency needed to modernise the economy in a short period of time and develop new patterns of living, working and consumer behaviour.

Eating animals has become an important social and research issue. The Increased interest in veganism, both in practical and cultural dimensions has spurred cultural-political-social research, which found research potential in the realm of veganism. In 2015, Laura Wright’s monograph, *The Vegan Studies Project: Food, Animals and Gender in the Age of Terror*, initiated a discussion on veganism from a cultural studies perspective. Wright singled out veganism as a subject and provided it with a voice, thus creating a space to discuss the cultural contexts of veganism. In this sense, veganism is no longer just a lifestyle but also an ideology and a philosophy. The path to the Vegan Studies Project has certainly been paved by various branches of engaged

² Sustainable development itself as a development concept is a response to technological progress, the environmental crisis and the green ideas of the second half of the 1960s. As a global policy goal, the concept was adopted by almost all countries of the world at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 as Agenda 21. Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising future generations. In 2015, UN member states adopted the now-enacted and implemented resolution *Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, which was set out as a strategy for world development up to 2030.

humanities, including animal studies, ecocriticism, ecofeminism and animal advocacy movements.

Eating Animals by Jonathan Safran Foer and *The Liberation of Animals* by Singer are rarely included reading lists addressing the issue of eating animals. Ten years ago, these books were read by people interested in mass meat production and veganism. However, today, there is a growing body of literature focusing on local nuances and culture. Despite this Foer's work is still consistently referenced to in various Polish texts on veganism, veganism studies, and animal studies. There are ongoing discussions on what makes this book still relevant and how to approach Foer's work in present-day Poland from the perspective of veganism studies.

We chose a qualitative approach to study Polish people's perception of *Eating Animals*. We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individuals who had read the book. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze data. The coding process followed an abductive approach, meaning that we used the coding framework based on existing knowledge and adding new elements that appeared in the data.

The text juxtaposes the perspectives of a sociologist and a literary scholar, bridging the gap between social sciences and the humanities. It applies the same method to Foer's book as to other social phenomena, in order to describe the ongoing impact of *Eating Animals*. Nathalie Heinich statement on how artistic creation "is as much a social phenomenon as any other, so I do not understand how it can be isolated a priori from society", resonates with the authors of this study. They adopt her perspective of the sociology of art, which is dominated by the concept of "art as society" [Heinich: 124].

2. READING FOER IN POLAND

With the guidance of Jonathan Safran Foer, the Polish reader has become accustomed to tackling globally relevant topics. Foer has addressed the issue of meat production in *Eating Animals*, whilst also delving into local themes by publishing *Tree of Codes* – a book based on the English version of Bruno Schulz's short stories, and his bestseller *Everything is Illuminated*, which is set in Ukraine and revolves around the fate of Foer's Polish-Jewish ancestors. The writer's book *We are the Planet: Saving the Planet Starts at Breakfast*, named the best book of 2019 by the "Financial Times" and "The Guardian", was published in Polish in 2020. By citing data and facts about climate change, Foer continued the narrative familiar to Polish readers from *Eating Animals* that humans are turning the planet into a farm for growing animal products, with disastrous consequences.

In 2013, when the Polish translation of *Eating Animals* was published by Krytyka Polityczna publishing house, it received widespread acclaim and continues to be recognised and quoted in academic contexts [Mamzer: 57–78; Kubisz: 11–28]. It is rare for a non-fiction book to cause such a resonance, even though it does not seem to convey anything that was unknown beforehand.

3. THE PHENOMENON OF *EATING ANIMALS* IN POLAND

Eating Animals is considered neither fiction nor science fiction. On the one hand, the author recounts the wartime fate of his grandmother, who escaped from Poland and later instilled in her grandchildren a great respect for food. He also highlights in one chapter the surface area available to a hen in industrial farming. At the same time, the author exposes the suffering of animals by infiltrating industrial farms and visiting the so-called “humane” meat producers.

Eating Animals is not openly critical of meat consumers, instead the author advocates for conscious consumption, using a rhetorical technique to encourage the reader to choose a plant-based diet and accentuates the culpability of the meat industry. Foer’s arguments against eating meat are of an economic, culinary, health and philosophical nature. Above all, he frames these arguments through a personalised narrative with which many young parents expanding their infant children’s diet are trying to answer [Wypychowski].

The writer realises in *Eating Animals* that food satisfies many human needs. The physiological need to satisfying hunger is the most important, but food also satisfies safety needs, as access to sufficient food reflects a secure situation. Eating also has the function of satisfying the desire to belong to a certain social group, because it accompanies important life events and facilitates gatherings, food sharing and expressions of care. Spending time together at the table leads to an exchange of information and provides a positive emotional experience, enhancing the quality of life. Foer recalls that his grandmother’s attitude was that, “Food was not just food to her. It was terror, dignity, gratitude, revenge, joy, humiliation, religion, history and, of course, love” (4).

Refusing someone a place at the dinner table is an extremely unpleasant form of rejection. Food accompanies the initial phases of building intimate relationships, and some foods are aphrodisiacs. Choices related to the type or quality of products eaten, as well as eating with others, may also serve a method of building and defining social status. Eating in specific locations, with certain foods, and in the company of certain individuals holds socio-cultural meaning, which depends on the culture or society itself. Some foods are considered a delicacy in some cultures, while in others, they are considered inedible or repulsive. In Foer’s *Eating Animals*, a character states that, “Food in my house was treated as something special, something not to be wasted. No one thought of food as mere fuel. Preparing and eating meals in my home was given a lot of time and attention. It was a ritual” (8). The writer reassures his readers that every action regarding the choice of a meal constitutes an important social message that can be interpreted in many ways.

However, much has changed in Poland concerning eating animals and veganism since the publication of *Eating Animals* in Polish in 2013. In his unassuming narrative, Foer does not present any alternative to industrial farming besides small farms where the farmer cares for his animals, and the slaughter process is humane. He presents

his audience with a family and a potential story reminiscent of Netflix, devoid of unnecessary drama, and this approach is partially why a documentary film was made based on the book [Kapela]. There was a clear reason for creating a documentary based on *Eating Animals* [*Eating Animals* 2017]. Neither prescriptive nor radical, it offers a personal perspective of an American who has Polish roots and has dealt with topics close to Polish audiences. It is a narrative by an excellent writer who does not shy away from personal confessions, that resonates with the experiences of a significant portion of society. After all, most people have reflected on the dietary choices of a loved one, especially a child. Within the fabric of the text, the author's understanding takes center stage, and his subdued rhetoric invites the reader to engage in similar reflections.

4. METHODS

A. Study setting and participants

The study, conducted in 2021 in Poland's Pomorskie Voivodeship, utilised a qualitative design. Data were collected over six months, employing a purposive snowball sampling method to recruit the study participants. The authors looked for individuals who had read Jonathan Foer's *Eating Animals* and were willing to share their thoughts on the book. It was important to include both meat eaters and vegans / vegetarians among the participants. Seven people agreed to participate in the study, and five potential participants declined to be interviewed for various reasons including: "I don't want to talk about it, it's a difficult topic", "I don't remember the content of the book anymore", "I don't want to go back to it" or "I don't have time". The study ultimately included seven participants, aged between 30 and 50 with all but one having completed a university education (table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants.

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Diet
1	M	40–50	university	includes meat
2	F	40–50	university	vegetarian
3	F	40–50	university	vegetarian
4	F	30–40	university	vegan
5	M	40–50	high school	vegan
6	M	40–50	university	vegetarian, sometimes eats meet
7	F	30–40	university	vegetarian, sometimes includes meet

B. The interviews

Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews were employed to explore the social perception of the book *Eating Animals*. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the researchers conducted interviews on Zoom and MS Teams, with each lasting from 40 to 90 minutes. The interview guide included a list of topics related to the participants' per-

ception of the book. The questions addressed reasons for reading the book, emotions experienced while reading it, and the book's strengths and weaknesses. During the interviews, some participants occasionally became very emotional due to parts of the book that described the cruelty to animal occurring on farms.

C. Data analysis

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to identify and analyse recurring themes and patterns [Braun & Clark 2006]. The researchers followed the six steps of thematic analysis: familiarization with the data, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the results.

D. Ethical considerations

All participants provided oral informed consent to participate in the study. The study was approved by the Ethical Advisory Board at the Faculty of Humanities, the University of Gdańsk.

5. RESULTS

A. Reasons why the participants read the book

The participants declared various reasons for reading the book. One of them said:

I am in the Political Critique Publishers' bubble. I read a lot of the stuff they publish. When the book appeared, I thought that I would buy it. And the topic interested me, made me curious. I was curious about the book's perspective. (1)

He did not intentionally seek out a book about eating animals. Some participants read the book because they were interested in the subject, even from a professional point of view. One participant, who had been vegetarian all her life and did not need motivation to stop eating meat, decided to read at least one iconic book on this subject. She wanted to "deal with this topic more theoretically" (3). Another female participant had long planned to read the book due to her interest in animal welfare. She explained:

The content of the book seemed to me to be so elementary and emotionally difficult that I put off reading it until later. Ultimately, the recommendation of friends convinced me to read it. (4)

Two study participants mentioned other books by Jonathan Safran Foer. One of them declared that the authors' previous books made her read *Eating Animals*:

„Everything is illuminated” I liked the book and the film based on it very much, as it was the second book about the WTC disaster. In those years, the topic of eating animals was not as widely commented as it is today. I was curious to see what Foer had come up with. At that time, I was not very interested in the subject of meat production and its impact on our planet. (7)

Several interviewees also noted that at the time the book was published, there was limited discussion about eating animals, vegetarianism and veganism in Polish society.

B. Earlier interests in the subject discussed in the book

Most of the participants declared that before reading the book they had varying degrees of interest in the subject of eating animals. One participant felt that it was “such a natural interest for every conscious person” (2) and admitted that she had always been interested in the ethical aspect of eating animals.

The interest of the research participants manifested itself in different ways. One participant discussed how her interest had evolved over time, “I’ve been interested in this subject for about eighteen years, although it’s only really been about five years since I started to take the subject ‘seriously’, so not just reading newspaper articles or watching videos on social media, but also reading scientific studies and popular science books.” (4)

Interest in the topics covered in the book was not always linked with a preference for a vegetarian/vegan diet. One research participant, who declared that they ate meat, spoke about how the topic of animal welfare was always present in his family. Another was interested in the origin of the products that they consumed.

Two research participants had not been particularly interested in the subject of eating animals before reading Foer’s book. One of them admitted, “I mean I always think I was aware of that in my adult life, that I eat animals, yes. Whereas, I’ve never had the kind of reflection that would lead me to think that this fact was going to make me stop doing it.” (1)

Another participant explained that, although she knew that these were important issues, she hadn’t attempted to explore them, “I used to eat at the Greenway vegetarian diner as a student and saw various leaflets and posters every day over a bowl of lentil soup, but the issues were not part of my worldview, they did not concern me.” (7)

This participant also explained that people advocating ecological approaches, including vegetarians and vegans, seemed strange to her, even radical. She even compared them to members of a cult.

C. Emotions readers experienced while reading the book

Due to the subject matter, reading *Eating animals* can evoke strong emotions, and the research participants reacted in different ways to its content. One participant, who had read the book some time ago, recalled feeling compelled by the author to adopt a certain position:

First there was some curiosity. Just the usual kind of curiosity connected with reading a book which was some kind of reportage, the kind of narration I could expect. A bit like I associate with the propaganda, ideological dimension. You know, stories about how killing animals is wrong and so on. I also don’t like when somebody speaks to me in such a language. If somebody tries

to convince me that something is cool, I say “ok”. But if someone tells me that something is bad and that I mustn’t do it then I immediately harden up. (1)

Another participant initially felt as though she was being manipulated, and it was only after further reading that her attitude changed. She explained why she perceived the message of the first part of the book in this way:

Well, the beginning of the book made such an average impression on me... an exalted gentleman from America writes about his personal struggles of some sort. At first I didn’t know what it was about. I knew I would read the book anyway, but my first impression was that I was afraid someone would try to play on my emotions. Especially when the recipe for the wedding dog came up. So the beginning was on the one hand shock and disbelief and on the other hand, I felt a bit manipulated. As if I had been hit between the eyes at the beginning... Many times I wanted to stop reading the book when he was describing all these practices in slaughterhouses. You knew it was like that, but when you read about it, it’s terrible. You think about animals, but also about people. To what point have we reached. We are like a virus on this planet. (3)

Another participant (5) had read books with similar themes and did not experience particularly strong emotions while reading *Eating Animals*, but was positively surprised by the literary value of the book. One participant admitted that she did not have an “emotional-personal attitude to this book, as well as to the topic of vegetarianism, veganism and eating animals in general” (2). She explained that the ethical issues were important to her, and that she approached the book on a rational rather than an emotional level.

Other research participants talked about experiencing extremely strong emotions while reading the book. Descriptions of the practices used against animals in industrial livestock farms made them want to interrupt or stop reading the book. This is illustrated by the words of one of the participants:

I stopped many times, just like when I was watching the documentary based on *Eating Animals*. The description of how the farm looks and how the chickens are killed, it’s horrible, the sight of the big vat with the chickens being killed in it and their droppings accompanied me for a long time. This book disturbed me, it also disturbed Foer. (7)

Statements by research participants indicate that reading Foer’s book was not always a pleasurable experience.

D. Strong and weak points of the book

The participants were asked about their favorite aspects of Foer’s book, and what themes seemed particularly important to them. Their responses varied as they considered both the message of the book and its literary value. Moreover, the content of the book was interpreted differently.

One of the participants expressed a strong preference for the beginning of the book, in contrast to the rest of the book where the author describes practices used on livestock farms:

The way of telling the story and creating this axis at the beginning was cool, that it used to be different, that there was no food, that his grandmother overfed him because she associated food with safety and so on. The psychologisation was so good. And suddenly there comes this boom. Maybe this is how the book should have been written. Maybe it is some kind of poetic license. But of all the things I liked, it was the beginning. (1)

Another participant admitted that the book somehow forced her to make a decision about eating meat. This message seemed the most important to her:

The most important thesis was that it is impossible to eat meat ethically. So if I eat meat, I have to accept that it is unethical. I guess that I know this, but someone had to tell me directly and force me to confront it and make a decision. (2)

Meanwhile, the participant who had abstained from eating meat for almost her entire life, interpreted the author's message differently. According to her, the book had, "no such radical theme of protesting eating meat. An annihilation of this whole business of eating meat. It was about striving for people to eat ethical meat." (3) This absence of a radical approach to eating meat appeared to be the book's greatest merit in her eyes.

Another participant appreciated the "light pen combined with a handful of well-researched data" (4), but only in the case of the original version of the book. She read the translation sporadically and without much enthusiasm.

It was also noted that Foer's book could serve an educational function if used skillfully. One participant said:

It is a deeply educational book and should be read with very young people, to make them aware, to show them the documentary. There are not many such narratives; we have either many books of fiction or popular science, and Foer's proposal is unique in this respect (7).

Most of the interviewed participants did not offer critical comments about the book. One woman admitted that, although she did not rave about the book "from beginning to end" (2), the book was well written and the message was not simplistic and naive. Another participant (6) emphasized that it was the content, not the book's form, that was important to him and hence, he had no critical reflections concerning the book itself.

Only one research participant made it clear that the narrative style of the book did not convince him. He felt that the book was too ideological and explained:

It rather scared me and so on. But I really dislike this form of ideological writing. At that moment, the book became ideological, showing how bad it is. This is how I perceived it - how bad you are, that you are doing this. It discouraged me. (1)

E. The book influence on participants' attitudes towards eating animals

When a book addresses issues related to eating animals, the question of its influence on readers' attitudes towards this topic cannot be overlooked. Three participants declared that the book reinforced their negative attitude towards killing and eating animals (3,4,5). Another participant admitted that she began to make more conscious food choices stating, "[the book] was an important step for me on the road of mental change, because I can never eat too much meat." (7)

A participant who included meat in his diet talked about how the book made him even more critical of global food production:

I didn't become a vegetarian, but the book makes me more aware of the scale on which animals are treated inhumanely...I feel more intensely against the inhumane killing of farm animals. (6)

Only one participant in the study admitted that the book they had read had no significant effect on their attitude towards eating meat:

Well, rather not. On the Likert scale, I would wonder whether to say 'rather not' or 'definitely not'. That comes from the fact, as I told you earlier, that I'm so intracontrolled. It would have to be such a process going on in me. I think it would be interesting to think about who this book is written for. Is the writer writing a bit for himself, to show off his own stories? He's talking about the group, the environment, the social world of vegans. Is it actually written with the intention to encourage others to change their habits. (1)

The participant indicated that that he was uncertain to whom the book was addressed and whether the author's intention was to convince readers to stop eating meat.

F. Is this book worth reading?

With the exception of one participant, everybody found Foer's book worth reading and emphasised both its literary value and its message. Two participants particularly highlighted that the book challenged people's ideas about animal husbandry by revealing what happens in slaughterhouses. One of them took up the theme of slaughterhouse workers who experience what happens in slaughterhouses on a daily basis. Although they work in slaughterhouses and are therefore perpetrators of animal suffering, in a way, they are also victims of industrial farming:

People need to know where that pink cute little chop comes from. What it looks like. I also think in terms of the people who work there. I have always wondered about who goes to work in a slaughterhouse. Who goes to work in a butchery. What type of people they are, and how long they work there. They should work for a year and that's it. It absolutely rapes the human soul. (3)

I think that there is still not enough, let's call it ugly, awareness raising or confronting people with what happens in these slaughterhouses. So yes, the book is worth reading for at least these three reasons. (2)

Another participant said that the book enlightens and shows the importance of “producing meat in an ethical way” (6). One participant recommended Foer’s book especially for those who were beginning to take an interest in the subject of animal husbandry, ethics and nutrition (4).

Many people pointed to the book’s features as evidence of its literary value. There was an opinion that the book “balances reliable knowledge - which is somewhat lacking now - and a less reportage-like form” (2). (2). The book was also considered to be worth reading not only for its factual value, but also due to its language and “a mature and nuanced description of how to reach the presented conclusions, as well as their consequences for the author and his environment” (5).

One participant drew attention to the personal nature of the book:

‘It’s worth reading because it’s personal, the author’s perspective is very evident in the book, it’s not a popular science essay; it’s the story of a seeker who really wants to learn something, not for popularity (I hope), but out of conviction...’
(7)

The participant added that the literary formula of Foer’s book effectively kept it from becoming outdated.

Only one research participant was not willing to recommend the book to others because they found it mediocre:

In my opinion it wasn’t a super book. Such an average book from Krytyka Polityczna. Neither super nor hopeless... Would I recommend it? I don’t necessarily think I would recommend it. (1)

6. BETWEEN SOCIOLOGY AND LITERARY STUDIES – DIALOGUE ABOUT EATING ANIMALS

The results of the qualitative research conducted show that Foer’s book is perceived differently depending on the participants’ previous experiences of the subject matter covered in the book. Not all respondents’ opinions align with those of the critics cited in the first part of the article. One respondent felt that the content presented in the book was ideologized and that Foer’s text is considered to be the personal story of a person seeking justification for a vegetarian diet, as mentioned in the first part of the article.

Respondents cited various reasons that led them to read Foer’s book, and an interest in animal welfare was not necessarily the key one. Were the respondents likely to become vegans, a stance Hsiunga considers detrimental to the animal rights movement? This controversial position stems from the belief commonly attributed to vegans, where converting to veganism is seen as a way to stop industrial animal farming. However, according to Hsiung, it is not enough to end the fight for animal rights there, which is an approach taken by vegans. They consider that choosing a vegan diet is the morally right decision, and this step, according to Hsiung, should

only be the beginning of a process of change [Hsiung: 2]. Undoubtedly, Krytyka Polityczna, which published the American writer's book in Poland, as well as his earlier books, played a significant role for the respondents. In 21st century Poland, Krytyka Polityczna has been a litmus test of social change, creating the online opinion journal KrytykaPolityczna.pl, a publishing house and social and cultural centers, and inspiring the addressing of important social issues.

Foer's popularity was certainly enhanced by the way he built his story, basing it on his Jewish roots and traditions cultivated by his grandmother, whose respect for food originating in Polish culture she tried to pass on to her grandchildren. The cultural dimension of food rooted in Polish traditions undoubtedly emotionally binds the Polish reader to the book by the American writer. Furthermore, *Eating Animals* in Poland was preceded by *Everything is Illuminated*, which was interesting to the Polish reader because of the writer's Polish-Jewish roots and the narrative built around events taking place in Ukraine. In literary circles, another factor in favor of Foer's work is his 2010 book *Tree of Codes*, a tribute and literal monument to the work of Bruno Schulz, whose *The Street of Crocodiles* turned out to be the American author's favourite reading.

The content of the book made a strong impression on the participants in the study, although this was not always due to strong emotions triggered by the descriptions of brutal practices used against animals on livestock farms. Again, the literary value and the manner in which the narrative was conducted were convincing enough to encourage continued reading. The vast majority of respondents gave the book a positive rating because of the importance and topicality of the subject matter, its literary and educational value, and the personal threads present.

The respondents appreciated the story spun by Foer. The personal narrative of the writer, combined with the abstractness of the cited figures related to industrial meat production and the portrayal of animal suffering up close, from the perspective of a witness to the events taking place on farms or in slaughterhouses, lends credence to the story and makes the book resistant to the passage of time. It represents the voice of the vegan subject that studies on veganism are calling for. Foer's text equips the vegan or "veganizing" subject with the tools to describe their condition so that they can overcome the impasse of power and knowledge relations constructing knowledge about meat and plant-based diets, and develop a critical approach to the question of the public perception of veganism. The images proposed in *Eating Animals* have the potential to inspire the quest for an improved socio-political-cultural system at the individual level. In the new humanities discourse, great importance is ascribed to the agency of the subject at the individual level. Domańska advocates that, "I am inclined towards realistic micro-utopias that can be realised on a local scale, limited in time and space, as valid for a specific time, for the needs of a specific community in order to support the well-being of its members" (51).

The well-being of the members necessitates the inclusion of non-human subjects, challenging the anthropocentric perspective and necessitating the developing of new strategies for coexistence of human and non-human subjects. Foer introduces the vegan experience in his book, and his book also demands a vegan optic. At this point, the disconnect becomes apparent between the potential of the text, the theoretical framework that forms emerging vegan studies, the humanities of engagement, and the results of qualitative research into the reception of Foer's book in Poland. It may seem disappointing to conclude that, in most cases, the book had no impact on the attitudes of research participants towards eating animals. The responses of the participants indicate that reading the book either reinforced their current views or, in only one case, made them take a stance. The examination of the reception of the book by Polish readers, as revealed by the proposed study, highlights a disparity of discourses created within the framework of the new humanities and the reception of readers who do not belong to the group of representatives of the "veganised academy" [Kubisz]. Social practices can be revealed here, which can be characterised to a significant extent by an asymmetry of power and status. On the one hand, there is a milieu of humanist intelligentsia with firmly established views, using a value system constituted by certain categories. On the other hand, there are Foer's readers, who are not academically educated in these topics and are only beginning to ponder the ethics of dietary choices and the problem of speciesism.

Undoubtedly, however, *Eating Animals* resonates socially and represents a narrative that addresses current global issues expressed through the Sustainable Development Goals. The growing popularity of plant-based diets should be seen as the popularisation of a lifestyle that is oriented towards adherence to the concepts of sustainability and sustainable management of natural resources, which is sometimes associated with slow life thinking. Foer's book serves an example of a text that fits within the literature for sustainable development, which includes artistic texts that relate at the level of content and fit to the goals and objectives of the 2030 Agenda. Sustainability, from a textual perspective within literary research is not a fixed or uniform concept, but a field of interdiscursive resonances that may not always be at the foreground, but clearly contains the radical potential of literary art, both in terms of cultural criticism and aesthetic experimentation. Foer's experiment conducted over a decade ago is still valid and relevant from a humanist and social perspective despite the emergence of artificial meat. In the context of progressive climate change, it has assumed a renewed significance as an ethical choice on which the fate of the planet also depends.

Eating animals has now become an unavoidable part of socio-cultural reflection, present in various types of texts, from journalistic to academic inquiries, especially in discourses built around the objectives of sustainable development, the new humanities, vegan studies or the Anthropocene. Foer's book has been embraced by the

interpretative community of Polish culture consumers³, as evidenced by the reception presented in the article and referred to in recent journalistic and academic texts. *Eating Animals*, is one of the books that has initiated discussion on industrial meat production in Poland, and has become a key tool for reading and writing other texts on the subject, building discourses and interpretative strategies. The reception of *Eating Animals* signifies its integration into Polish discourses, appearing in Polish magazines and books, becoming a part of resonating narrations, and serving as a tool that can be used to construct our own discourse related to eating animals.

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³ It is necessary to take into account the complexity of this category and to refrain at this point from identifying Polish culture with national culture, to replace the monolith of nationality with multiculturalism, because transcultural situations make national culture and literature an open concept. Local tendencies are always accompanied by global ones, and national culture today must be a hybrid, in which texts that are locally rooted but wander translocally, often being a conglomerate of multinational discourses, are relevant. A catalog of texts relevant to a particular interpretive community should not necessarily be referred to as a canon, since the important role of a given cultural text in an interpretive community depends on the trends prevailing in a given period of time, and the boundaries between different discourses are fluid.

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