



## UNNATURAL HABITATS & OTHER STORIES by Angela Mitchell

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## CONVERSATION STARTERS

### Animal Lovers

- What do you make of the title, “Animal Lovers”? Is it ironic? Is it both ironic and sincere?
- Have you ever had a pet, maybe a large dog or a snake, that frightened other people, or have you been frightened by other people’s pets? What do you think motivates people to have “scary” pets?
- Do you like the characters in the story? Dee? Carter? Gary? Do you need to like someone in order to like the story itself?
- What do you think is the fundamental reason Dee and Carter break up? Is it really because “she knew she’d never want to get pregnant by a man like him, one who honestly valued china or silverware or the crystal goblets for which she’d so foolishly registered”? Would Carter or Gary be a better choice for Dee, or are they both intolerable?
- There are hints that Gary is not completely on the up-and-up: he has a shotgun in his truck, he does not respond when Dee asks what the dogs need to be guarding, and her friend Shelly is convinced his business, Insure-U, is a drug front. Dee seems drawn to him anyway. What does she seem to be finding in Gary that she did not in Carter?
- The story stresses that Dee is “unnatural” and likes being that way. When Carter says her haircut looks “a little unnatural,” she says, “I don’t give a shit about what’s natural,” and she says about makeup, “Natural was the fashion now, but she’d tried and it didn’t look right. What was the point, anyway, of wearing makeup so it looked like you weren’t?” Does she become more “natural” in the story? She ends up in bed with a bobcat. Is that “natural”?

## Not From Here

- The narrator says, “What I needed was to see the place Annette come from, and there ’d figure out what the difference was between her and me.” What is the difference, and does she figure it out? Is the difference just that Annette’s family has more money, or is there something else?
- Why does Libby feel the need to “Touch every single thing [she] can” when she is in the Clarks’ bathroom?
- Does Annette know that Libby doesn’t actually have a bathroom emergency? Is she too polite to mention anything, or is she unaware, even after Libby leaves smelling like the perfume?
- The interactions between Libby and her father are complex: she berates him for muddy shoes, and he chides her for the perfume she sprayed on, demonstrating he has little authority over her. She mentions, “I don’t like it when he gets close to me like that,” making it obvious that they are not affectionate with each other. He doesn’t have a job, but fixes cars for cigarette and alcohol money. How does their relationship affect Libby’s view of the world? How does her father’s view of the world affect Libby’s view of the Clarks?
- Libby says about Ronnie, “I think sometimes that he might make a good husband, but I’m not in love with him and I don’t expect I will be. Still, he might be in love with me, though it’s hard to tell such a thing.” Ronnie uses Libby and abuses her. Is it possible he’s also in love with her in some way? What is the author’s attitude toward Ronnie? Is it different from Libby’s? What is your attitude toward Ronnie? Is it different from the author’s?

## Pyramid Schemes

- Initially, Tonya seems convinced she can do anything she puts her mind to, including modeling and losing weight. When the modeling agency attendant at the mall suggests that Tonya is not right for modeling, in what ways does this affect Tonya and her future decisions?
- “That was what had been so unusual about Donald, that Tonya actually thought about him when he wasn’t around, something she tried never to do with Randy.” Is this a key factor in relationships—whether or not you think about the other person when you’re apart? If you’re in a relationship with someone or in love, how much do you think about them when you’re apart? Have you been in a relationship that seemed really good even though you didn’t think much about the person when you were apart?
- Tonya would “rather her mother find out about the men she had sex with at the Holiday Inn Express than about her financial troubles.” Why do people feel ashamed or self-conscious about their financial

situation. Would you feel more uncomfortable about revealing sexual secrets or financial secrets?

## Retreat

- As in other stories (and the title of the book), the theme of what's natural and unnatural is emphasized. "Gary liked things natural and he let the yard grow, unrestrained," and his bobcat is "his first love." Is the violence that occurs in the story natural? Is it connected to characters' attraction to the "natural"?
- Does the business people are in affect their views? Working in the insurance business of Insure-U, Dee says the clients "behaved like animals with cars."
- What does Dee's itch seem to represent? What events make it come and go?
- "The circle that had surrounded her for so many months, the odd collection of people and creatures, had disbanded, and she felt a particular relief. She should worry about her mother and her new, strange independence, about Gary's pets and even Layton, but it wasn't in her nature. She was no good at caring for so many. At heart, she was a solitary being, at her best when she was alone." Is this true, or is this Dee telling herself this for another reason?
- Many of the characters engage one another in struggles for power. Gary and Layton compete for dominance, and Dee "was no longer an accessory to her mother, but a competitor." Is that self-destructive behavior that keeps them from genuine love, or is it realistic and a necessary form of self-defense?

## Deeds

- The story says of Garnet, "people were more afraid these days and he guessed he was the same way." Is that true of the United States as a whole, of the Ozarks in particular?
- Similarly, "It was true that the countryside was infested with people cooking meth and doing things you'd think would only happen on TV." What does the book as a whole have to say about contemporary America?
- The story mentions in passing some key historical events: the woods "where some of the early family was buried, along with their few slaves," and Garnet's plan to booby trap the fields using "tricks his generation of soldiers learned in Vietnam." What light, if any, do these allusions to slavery and the Vietnam War shed on the events of the story?
- At one point Dee says of Jody, her son, "I should've drowned him as soon as he was born." Many stories include moments like this that

might be called “dark epiphanies,” where a character realizes or says something darker than what people usually let themselves say out loud or even think. Is one of the functions of art to express truths in a fictional frame that would be too painful to express in life, or should art be more hopeful and uplifting?

### This Trailer Is Free

- In this story, too, a mother seems to reject her child. “Take him, I know I said, and I doubt they were surprised. They’d seen my kind before ....” Is she being too hard on herself, or is she bravely taking responsibility for her actions?
- Frequently sentences start with “I could say” or “Let’s say.” What effect does this create?
- What do you think the author’s attitude is toward the main character, in contrast to the character’s attitude toward herself? What is your attitude?

### Unnatural Habitats

- We last saw many of the characters of this story in “Retreat,” where Layton was brutally beating Gary. What effect does it have on the reader that this story begins from Layton’s point of view, his memory (“he was sure”) of Gary beating *him*?
- One way that Layton seems to have changed from the earlier story, “Retreat,” is that “he’s learned you can keep some thoughts to yourself—a lesson that has improved his business.” Has Layton really learned this—and is it a good lesson to learn, or is it just learning how to be dishonest and manipulate people?
- Layton seems proud of the fact that he has not changed much—that he is “fatter now, sure ... but he is still the guy who beat the fuck out of Gary, who got his revenge. He can still do whatever he wants.” Do you understand this part of Layton, at least to some extent, and have some empathy for him or is he simply “deplorable”?
- We know that Layton beat Gary to get revenge, but do you think Gary in fact beat Layton, or is Layton wrong about that? Is Gary possibly right when he tells Layton that he was obviously beaten by “your girlfriend’s husband”?
- Dee is one of the main characters in “Animal Lovers” and “Retreat.” What does it mean that in this story from Layton’s point of view, she is simply “the girl from the office with the bleached-out hair”?
- Whether or not you believe in God, what do you think of the question whether God punishes the guilty or “merely removes himself from their presence”? Layton seems to believe and delight in punishment and revenge, judging from his violence toward Gary. Is this some kind of

reaction against his own father's "removal" of himself far from Layton, the fact that Gary takes the "punishment" approach while his father took the "removal approach?"

- What does it mean to be a hillbilly? "'We aren't hillbillies, are we?' their daughter asks. ... 'No, baby, we're not hillbillies,' Sheila says. 'We're just from Arkansas. We're normal.'" Are they hillbillies? Are they normal?
- Do Layton and Elijah love each other? Layton thinks, "Can a son hate his father? As much as he rebelled against his own, he never hated him. He loved his father and, by every indication, his father loved him, too. All that was in between was a mystery, one that he hasn't worked hard enough to understand." What is the mystery that's in between?
- The story (and the book) end, "He came here for forgiveness—he understands that now—but he would settle for repentance." What is Layton seeking forgiveness for, and from whom? What does he repent? Is he thinking of his own repentance? Is he hoping for a change of his own heart? Do you find this ending satisfying? Why, or why not?