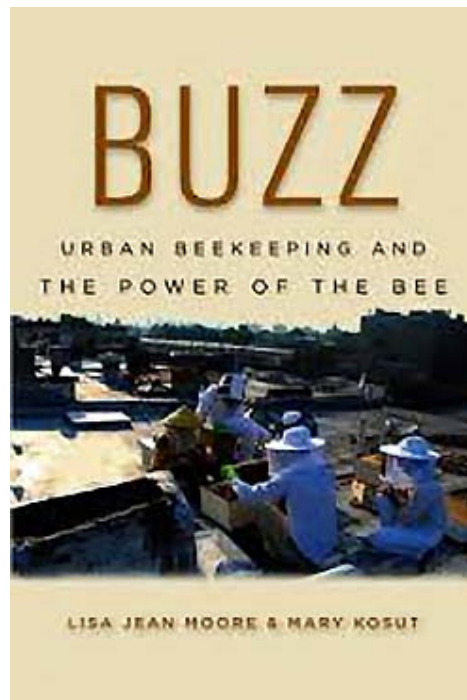


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Bee Buzz.....

Lisa Jean Moore and Mary Kosut, *Buzz: Urban Beekeeping and the Power of the Bee*. New York: New York University Press, 2013. 241 pp. \$85.00 hb; \$26.00 pb.



Buzz is a book about human relationships with bees. Its focus is mainly on honeybees, which is one type amongst a staggering 20,000 species of bee. It is a fascinating story of the many different approaches, theories, and practices by which humans exercise their role as “caretakers” of bees.

Written by sociologists hitherto used to immersing themselves in research related to different human subcultures, this book knowingly pushes human-centric boundaries in order to create an overall understanding of this insect animal other. The book explores the life and biology of bees, their environmental impact and role in sustainable living, as well as their historical and cultural meaning in human-centric societies.

It is the result of three years of research in which the authors immersed themselves in numerous bee-related activities, including attending classes on beekeeping and acquiring first-hand experience through negotiating the keeping of bees in a public space, as well as attending to the hives and the bees within them. Despite this, the authors have been keen to observe and maintain scientific objectivity in their research and are at pains to distance their own practical involvement from pure beekeeping.

They do, however, gladly acknowledge that the intensity of their combined practical and theoretical research had an effect on them beyond their normal experience in other academic studies, and concede as a result a changed and enlarged perspective of this tiny insect being.

The buzz streaks through what we have learned from the bees and their keepers, and it is the organizing principle of this book. We hope that you will also experience in a way the endorphin rush and exquisite pain of petting the bees, standing in the middle of the hive in flight, and getting stung. (14)

This mix of practical information and emotional-affective study is sustained throughout the book. It is exactly the mix of methods and approaches that made this book special and intriguing. The different emphases within their specialties of sociology enable Moore and Kosut to conjure up an expanded image of the bee as a being who provokes wonder and amazement. Kosut's own research into the art world, for instance into the need for making art and the imperative towards associated critical and/or economic recognition, is interesting in this context, as the interdisciplinary research methods deployed for the authors' research mirror much artistic research undertaken in preparation for the production of contemporary artworks.

The book strategically avoids attempting to use the bee and the working organization of the hive as a metaphor for production (or indeed the art world), and focuses instead on creating an awareness of the deep-seated importance of our relation to bees by referring to and reflecting on the many cultural stereotypes projected through the ages onto this non-human animal being.

Through such recorded narratives we are also able to see the reciprocity of the relationship. Humans project character and emotion onto the bees better to empathize with them and the hive; but the already established image of the ethical solidity of a working hive also encourages in their keepers certain values and behavior already held in high esteem in most Western societies.

Chapters in the book entitled “Entangling with Bees” and “Breeding Good Citizens” discuss the roles of the queen, drones, and worker bees, as well as the act of swarming. We learn how a hive has been used as a metaphor for the capitalist working ethos as well as for Marxist theories of division of labor. The idea of superorganism that bees exemplify with their seemingly cohesive and collective communities of workers has been seen by many to resemble an industrial working machine. This image of the working machine is so embedded in our psyche that it is almost impossible to consider an alternative argument but we are cautioned again by the authors that the model of insect “superorganism” is a human construct. However, the power of bees’ cultural representations is indisputable, as is their individual and collective significance in historical and contemporary adoptions of apiculture as a metaphor in human warfare.

Many books have been written on bees and beekeeping but what makes this book different is how the authors avoid objectifying the bee and instead constantly refer to it as bound up in relation to a wider urban environment. Many of those cited places are within New York City, and as such they are ultimately environments of interspecific social and cultural entanglements.

The book stubbornly avoids removing the bee from its cultural enmeshing, and beekeepers’ stories about personal interaction with their bees together with descriptions of bee stings and protective clothing could be seen to kindle notions of an almost colonial microcosmic engagement with wildlife and wilderness. In this microscopic wilderness-construction it is, after all, the supremacy of human beings that prevails.

That said, in the chapter “Being with Bees” we are reminded of, amongst other things, the sting and potential fatality of the bee’s venom. Statistics in the US show that human deaths by bee sting, though fewer than might be expected, are recorded as 54 in the year 2000. The chapter explores more subtly what happens between bees and humans when they come into close contact with each other. We know from research that humans are profoundly affected by bees, and that this combination of positive and negative emotions simultaneously engenders a spectrum of affect from calm reflection to pain, and is part of the transformative bonding and ultimately love. Moore and Kosut refer to

this in the book as the affective buzz: “The affective buzz is a form of insect love, and also, similar to other types of love, it encompasses fear” (88).

But what about the bee, how do bees feel about their human keepers? Feelings and thoughts of the “Other” are, of course, the constant imponderables in animal studies. How do we extract answers to our questions from a “silent” Other, or perhaps not a silent other, but, in this case, a buzzing other. To translate the buzzing sound of a bee requires implicitly clumsy human interpretation of animal actions, which we then translate into human language as an embodied representation. The ability of the human to empathize is an (albeit contested) part of this equation, and may often be the most reliable tool upon which to rely. In “Being with Bees” individual stories of bee and human encounters are accounted for often by bee keepers and carers. In sampling a number and variety of stories, the proposal might be that in multitude these encounter tales will diffuse possible projections in which the bee and its behavior are made to stand as a cipher for specific human emotions, projecting instead not a definite image but an ever-emergent and increasingly complex index of experience.

The theories of Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari on life and matter are present throughout the book, but it is Jane Bennett and her terminology of the “agentic assemblage” from her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010) that gives the authors the inspiration to explore a two-species coexistence in a shared world. Theoretical applications are used as a guideline in the book and placed in context with the practical enquiry and exploration of its subject.

Buzz is an accessible and highly informative read that can operate for readers on many levels. It is a timely investigation into a life of an animal insect that has been so closely related to humans through the ages. It is topical in that it seeks to open up and give insight into different research investigations underway to account for the decline of the bee and the impact this will have on the environment. It offers possible solutions to the future sustainability of bees without pointing fingers and engaging in blame. It does to the reader what it seemingly has done to the authors — that is to open up new spaces of knowledge so that we understand better the bee and ultimately to allow it productively to get under our skin.