[Review] Hope Ferdowsian, Phoenix Zones: Where Strength is Born and Resilience Lives, Chicago University Press, 2018. 212 pp.

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It was a Sunday morning in mid-September. I was woken up by the sound of rain. Thick, steady, there to stay, at least for the day. For a moment I wondered whether I should skip my morning run but decided against it. I wanted to honour the rain at a time when parts of the world were so desperate for it. The streets were empty of humans, the rest of nature relishing the much-needed soak. I thought of resilience.

Later that morning I wrote to a friend – the same friend who had first alerted me to Ferdowsian's book, and who for weeks had longed to feel the rain on her skin and to see the sun without the veil of smoke from the fires devastating the United States west coast. I said to her that very soon the web would be inundated with photographs of new vegetation shoots emerging from the ashes on the ground or sprouting out of blackened tree trunks, like they did here in Australia earlier this year, testifying to the resilience of life and the will to recover, to be. Witnessing such re-birth does not, *cannot*, erase the pain and the desolation that mass-scale life-taking tragedies like wildfires leave behind, but it does give hope.

Physical regeneration is widespread in the living world. This includes our own bodies where various levels of regeneration are occurring continuously (think of your skin, for instance, which regularly replaces dead and damaged cells). The realm of plants in particular is renowned for its remarkable regeneration capacities – a plant can lose up to ninety percent of its body and survive (Pollan). With some exceptions in invertebrate circles where some animals can replace entire limbs and even heads (for example, Zhao, Qin and Fu), most of the rest of the animal

world is less resilient; nonetheless, important, life-saving forms and degrees of resilience – on a strictly physical as well as psychological level – exist also in us and members of other animal species. As we recognise and appreciate such resilience, we indubitably need to recognise that vulnerability too is shared across all life forms. The recognition of both is essential for an ethic of care that inspires action for change.

In 2007, Hope Ferdowsian, a medical practitioner who works with victims of torture and other forms of violence around the world, invited a colleague to address a group of health professionals she was training for forensic examination of torture survivors. Listening to the colleague speaking and going into substantial detail concerning the neurological bases of psychological disorders and resilience, Ferdowsian suddenly realised that the structures and mechanisms the colleague was describing were all found in nonhuman animals. This recognition, of course, was not a novelty, quite the opposite, the recognition of the parallels between humans and nonhumans enables scientists to use nonhuman animals as so-called models in invasive experiments aimed at shedding light on the human condition. What was novel about this event was that Ferdowsian *felt* this recognition rather than just thinking and seeing it in anthropocentric fashion.

'Though I knew something about how [nonhuman] animals suffer', Ferdowsian writes, 'it took more time to understand the depths of their psychological torment, their potential for resilience, and how their needs mirror our own' (46). We should not assume that we may be able to know exactly how another animal feels – nonhuman or human animal – but I am convinced that the shiver of both horror and delight that would have run through Ferdowsian's body following that realisation wasn't too dissimilar to what I experienced upon familiarisation with similar data some years after Ferdowsian's epiphany, and which turned me from a human who wanted to help 'animals', to an animal among many who needs to learn new ways of being and relating within myself and in relation to the rest of the world.

Ferdowsian began paying closer attention to nonhuman animals while continuing her work with human survivors of violence. As she travelled the world, she encountered many human and nonhuman Phoenixes, as well as intersections of both, some of whom we meet in

this book. Phoenixes for Ferdowsian are those who defy 'their seen and unseen injuries' and thrive 'after indescribable trauma, much like the mythical Phoenix' (25-26), a mythical bird cyclically reborn from ashes. Phoenix Zones describes zones – sanctuaries – where the wounded heal, and the core principles that enable this healing for both human and nonhuman animals are 'respect for basic liberties and sovereignty, a commitment to love and tolerance, the promotion of justice and opportunity, and a belief that each human and nonhuman animal possesses dignity' (26-27).

At the very beginning Ferdowsian introduces us to Aiyana, a twelve-year-old Kenyan child victim of sexual assault who was then forced to marry the rapist; Love, a severely injured dog Ferdowsian rescued from a congested Nairobi highway just before leaving the country; and Doc, an Iranian torture survivor as well as expert in a rare field of medicine. Doc was seeking asylum in the United States and came to her clinic for a pro bono examination which would determine the presence or absence of evidence of abuse. In the following chapters, Ferdowsian takes us on a heartening journey to a selection of Phoenix Zones around the world. We meet various rescued animals that have healed or are in the process of healing: chimpanzees, elephants, pigs, wolves, human war veterans who live with the wolves, homeless human children and their companion nonhumans, rising women and gorillas in Congo, and others.

The take-home message of this book is twofold: first, the reason humans are able to suffer is the fact that we are animals; by implication, other animals can suffer too and their suffering is equally intense and meaningful, and second, while we tolerate violence against any sentient creature, we are all at risk. A solid commitment to justice, on the other hand, can heighten awareness and inform action on a personal level with a ripple effect on the environment at large. A lot of the violence in this world is the result of people trapped in the cycle of violence, that is, wounded people trying to protect their wounds with violence - the only means they know. Ferdowsian refers to it as contagion of violence, since it acts like a communicable disease. Luckily it is rarely too late for preventive or reparative action. Resilience isn't fixed, Ferdowsian reminds us:

> Resilience, like vulnerability, is a biological phenomenon influenced by the life, laws, and love in us and around us. This is the basis for the Phoenix Effect, which hinges on whether our vulnerabilities are nourished, as in Phoenix Zones, or exploited. The same is true for animals. As with vulnerability, much of our capacity for resilience stems from the fact that we *are* animals. (41)

A shortcoming of this book, from the perspective of someone who takes great care to linguistically represent the embedment of humans in the animal realm in all my writing and other output, is the use of the term 'people' for human animals and 'animals' for nonhuman animals. Nevertheless, I can appreciate that this linguistic choice may make the book more accessible – less awkward – to the general human population who hasn't put much thought into cross-species representational issues but who does need to be exposed to these facts and ideas. In all other respects, the book is a refreshing read and an important contribution that further exposes cross-species comparability. It is also an invitation to look for and nurture the green shoots we uncover in ashes all around us.

Works Cited

Pollan, Michael. 'The Intelligent Plant: Scientists Debate a New Way of Understanding Flora.' *The New Yorker*, 23 & 30 Dec. 2013. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/12/23/the-intelligent-plant

Zhao, Andong, Hua Qin, and Xiaobing Fu. 'What Determines the Regenerative Capacity in Animals?' *BioScience*, vol. 66, no. 9, 2016, pp. 735–746. https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biw079.