

Interview with writer Regina Rheda

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Literature, talent, and consciousness

A *paulista* from Santa Cruz do Rio Pardo, Regina Rheda is a talented writer whose work is recognized in both Brazil and abroad. She has a degree on Cinema from the University of São Paulo. Her literary debut was in 1994 with *Arca sem Noé* [*Stories From the Copan Building*], a short story collection which was awarded the Jabuti prize in 1995. She has five books published in Portuguese, as well as 3 participations in anthologies of short stories. Two of her books and a trio of other stories are also published in English, in one University of Texas Press volume. Her works have been adopted in Brazilian Literature classes at several North American universities and analyzed in academic essays. In 2006, Ms. Rheda translated into Portuguese the book about animal rights *Empty Cages*, by philosopher Tom Regan (Porto Alegre, Editora Lugano); in 2007, she started doing authorized translations of texts by lawyer and philosopher Gary L. Francione, whose animal rights approach has **veganism** as its fundamental principle. Regina has been a vegan since 2000. Her new book, *Humana festa* (Editora Record), has just come out. *Humana festa* is the first Brazilian novel to dwell upon veganism and animal rights. In this exclusive interview for ANDA with the participation of Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond, professor of Luso-Brazilian literature at University of California-San Diego; Fabiane Niemeyer from the animal advocacy group Gato Negro; and Rafael Jacobsen, member of SVB-Porto Alegre and writer, Rheda talks about her trajectory, her new book, veganism and other matters related to animal rights. Check it out.

Fabiane – 1) How did you first connect with veganism and the animal rights movement? Tell us some of your history and your involvement with animal rights.

Regina – I was a relentless meat eater until I was 43 years old. “Animal rights” was something romantic and distant to me: save the whales in the Antarctic region, save the baby seals in Canada. And although I found it horrible to kill animals for food, or to torture them in laboratories, or to imprison them in circuses, I never really stopped to think about the problem, because I believed that humans were more important than animals and needed to use them. The furthest I got was to muse that I’d end up being a vegetarian some day in the future.

It was in the afternoon one day in the year 2000, one year after I had moved to the US, that I saw an explanation on the internet about all the suffering that animals go through in the industry from the moment they are born to the moment

they are slaughtered. Most information concerned factory farms. I was shocked and began to cry. I cried like hell. And I swore that I'd never again consume anything that had been produced at the expenses of animals. That very evening my meal was completely plant-based. Interestingly, I didn't know yet the words vegan and veganism. I only learned about these concepts some weeks later, as I was talking with a young woman at a party. She told me that she was an "ovo-vegetarian" and that I was a vegan.

In order to do something to help the animals, besides being a vegan I started donating money to some organizations such as The Humane Society, PETA, Doris Day's organization... I alternated my donations: sometimes I sent money to one organization, other times to the other, and so on. A friend of my husband's noticed that I was interested in those matters, so he gave me Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*. I read the book and, under its influence and under the influence of the organizations that I contributed money to, I spent years quite confused about what animal rights really was, not knowing whether the core issue was just the suffering that we impose on animals or the fact that we use animals, whether the right thing for us to do was to stop using animals or to use them sometimes, if it was better to be vegan, but if it was also OK to be ovo-lacto-vegetarian or even eat organic meat... Despite the confusion, I stuck to my veganism.

Then the publisher Lugano from Porto Alegre hired me to translate Tom Regan's *Empty Cages* into Portuguese. After I read this book it became clear to me that animal rights means not using animals as resources for humans at all, even if the use involves as little suffering as possible. But I continued to send money to those organizations.

Finally, in September or October 2006 I received a newsletter reporting a debate between two positions in the animal advocacy movement in the United States: one position was that campaigning to decrease animal suffering in the industry would lead to the end of animal exploitation; the other position was that such campaigns are counterproductive and reinforce animal exploitation. PETA and The Humane Society of The United States were among the primary advocates of the first position. And a lawyer called Gary Francione was a tireless defender of the second one. Francione also said that animal advocates should stop donating money to organizations such as those that I donated money to, and should become vegans and spend their activism time on educating others about veganism.

I had never read anything by Francione, I had only seen his name in the bibliography of some book -- by a feminist, if I'm not mistaken. But his views attracted my attention and I read his interview. Everything he said there made perfect sense to me. After googling his work, I contacted him in order to clarify some doubts that I still had. I stopped donating money to those organizations and during the subsequent years I translated almost all his website

(<http://www.abolitionistapproach.com>), which presents the abolitionist approach to animal rights. With the help of advocates that I contacted while participating in Brazilian e-groups, I made those translations well known and available. (All the translations are published at: <http://www.anima.org.ar/libertacao/abordagens/francione.html>). Now, when I make any donation, it is for Peaceful Prairie Sanctuary, which is abolitionist and educates people to go vegan.

Fabiane – 2) In your novel *Humana festa* you address the questions of animal rights, feminism, bulimia, and land reform. Are you involved with other social movements? What's the connection between animal rights and the other struggles for equality and justice?

Regina – I'm not directly involved in any social movement. I learn about social movements through the news or by researching them if necessary. I engaged in the student movement in the 70s', when I was in college, still under the dictatorship, and by participating in that movement I gained social and political awareness. I joined a strike to get rid of a reactionary college dean, I walked in protest parades for democratic freedom, and I participated in meetings, study and discussion groups, political drama groups... We wanted socialism. I witnessed the very early beginnings of what would later become the Workers' Party. I remained in the student movement for a very short period but that experience was crucial to my formation. Then I spent a long time between political apathy and cynicism...

As I got involved in animal advocacy, I became once again more concerned about other social struggles for equality and justice. After all, if animal rights means justice for every sentient being, it means justice for all humans as well because humans are sentient.

I'm not saying that animal rights advocates have an obligation to engage in all other struggles; I actually think that it must be better for them to focus on animals. That is because at least the institution of human slavery was abolished, whereas the institution of animal slavery is still very powerful, and as long as it exists it is impossible to really change the animals' situation. The struggle for animal rights is much tougher because even the most oppressed humans believe it is OK to exploit animals... But all forms of oppression are inter-related and they all spring from the same exclusionary, authoritarian, and predatory worldview.

In sum, what I learned from or about social movements, including the animal movement – and the interconnections among them all – influenced me as I created the chapters where the militants who work at Bezerra Leitão's farm appear.

Alexandra – 3) *Humana festa* is a novel that addresses animal rights with humor, a quality that, according to many, is lacking in vegans. How would you

compare humor as a tool to induce identification with animal suffering to PETA, other animal advocacy organizations and activists' tactics that use graphic images and descriptions? As I was thinking about what would be the most effective tactics to induce empathy towards the animal rights cause, I thought of Susan Sontag who, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, warns us that images of the "body in anguish" don't always raise empathy. Would you agree with her?

Regina – I think that images of animals in anguish don't raise empathy all the time, but they normally do. Suffering is empathetic because no one wants to suffer. No one wants to be in a suffering being's shoes. I think that images documenting animals suffering because humans are using them are very effective for vegan education, as long as the advocates always make it very clear that the solution for the problem is to stop using animals, rather than to continue using animals who "suffer less". This doesn't mean that there shouldn't be any humorous moments at all during advocacy. But one should be very careful with that humor because the question of animal rights is still regarded by the general public as something ridiculous. To add pranks to what is already perceived as ridiculous can only be counterproductive for animal advocacy.

The nature of my stories and my novel that address the question of animal rights, on the other hand, is different from the nature of activism itself because my works are fiction – they are artistic inventions. They have more freedom, they allow for (and are enriched by) ambiguities, complexities, irreverence, whereas activism is more focused, more directed.

Humana festa could be used in vegan education, but only to complement or illustrate, or as a ludic activity. It doesn't replace a pamphlet or a theoretical essay, much less a conversation between the animal advocate and the person who's listening to her. It has humor because writing with humor gives me pleasure and makes the reading pleasurable.

In *Humana festa* I tried to write as few animal suffering scenes as possible, just enough to describe various aspects of animal exploitation and to try to raise empathy. I sought to use humor whenever I could. To use more humor than horror works in the novel because it helps to keep the reader interested in the book, but I think that it wouldn't work in an educational action in the street, for example.

Rafael – 4) Your novel *Humana festa* is one of the few works of fiction where the central subject is -- very explicitly -- veganism. But the question of animal rights appears or at least is suggested in a number of literary works, even though it is not the predominant theme in the majority of cases. In your view as an activist and a writer, what are the most relevant works or authors in this area?

Regina – I don't know whether one could characterize as "rights" the animal question that appears or is suggested in those several literary works. I haven't

read all the fiction in the world, and I know that there are several works that address animals with various approaches or levels of concern. But how many of those works, especially in the West, go beyond concerns with suffering and cruelty in order to really suggest, in whatever way they can, that animals should not be used as means to human ends, or that animals have a right not to be property? It's difficult to find a novel or a story collection that presents such characteristics.

Among relevant Brazilian authors, one who shows some sort of concern with animals in various parts of his work is Guimarães Rosa, for example, in his story "My Uncle The Jaguar", where a jaguar exterminator comes to regret his job. Machado de Assis has the story "An Alexandrine Tale", where animals are victims of scientists, and "The Secret Heart", where they are victims of a sadist. In the novel *Barren Lives*, by Graciliano Ramos, a female dog called Baleia is a character with personality and not a mere object. But I think that South-African J. M. Coetzee is the author who has written the works of fiction that bear the most relevance with respect to the visibility of the matter of animal ethics; he has written a book which addresses specifically that issue, entitled *The Lives of Animals*, and has created an outstanding character who appears in at least two of his books, the vegetarian Elizabeth Costello. But up to the present moment Coetzee's work, if sometimes it actually transcends a little the suffering and the cruelty that humans inflict on nonhumans, hasn't got to the point of embracing veganism and the abolition of animal exploitation.

Rafael – 5) Mario Vargas Llosa referred to novels by Ayn Rand, who's one of the fiercest defenders of economic freedom, as he declared that "all edifying and propaganda literature is unreadable". Do you believe that art (be it literature, painting, drama, or music) can be an effective form of activism for animal rights without any loss of its esthetic function? How do you personally deal with the issue of "balancing" art and activism in your texts?

Regina – I could say a couple of things about *laissez-faire*, which is promoted by the author that you've mentioned, but I'd rather go straight to what interests us the most here.

When it comes to novels and short stories, there are not any forbidden themes in my view. But my main concern when I'm writing fiction is to do a literary work of art; it's not to do activism. I usually write works of narrative motivated by a theme that I'm passionate about. My theme this time was animal rights.

In my view the main reason for the existence of a novel is to make it possible for the author to express herself through her work. The author needs to have total freedom to express herself, whatever theme she chooses and whatever style she has. Such freedom allows her, among other things, to choose to write in a way that, in her view, could help to turn the world into a better place. She may, with her novel, manage to help to end some form of injustice, but this is not the main

purpose of a novel. This is (or should be) the main purpose of a theoretical philosophical or scientific book, or of educational essays and pamphlets. But exactly because a novel can express anything and is open to all formal possibilities, it doesn't have to have the scientific, ethical or political rigor that theoretical texts have to have. A novel *can* have such rigor (for instance, if it's a novel of ideas or a committed novel, etc.), but *it doesn't have an obligation* to have it.

In sum: I wrote *Humana festa* in order to express myself freely through a work of literary art about a theme that I'm passionate about; to boot, I tried to help to turn the world into a better place.

In order to balance representation, emotion and concept in the most artistic way possible (*if* there really is a consensus on what "artistic" is nowadays...), one of the resources that I used was humor. In parts that might sound more militant than literary (again: Is there a consensus on whether these two adjectives exclude each other? To what extent does it matter nowadays?), I sought to include some comic or ironic element.

But it was not very easy to work with humor and irony on a theme that is both delicate and terrible, as the theme of animal slavery is. I sought to use humor whenever I could, but I was careful to try to make sure that in certain moments (for example, the parts with Megan and Sybil) what's funny is perceived by the readers as restricted to the characters and the situations that they are experiencing, and not as a sign of a supposed condescension of the author towards the efforts of activists who are seeking to spread veganism in real life.

I also tried to use humor as well as other elements in order to make it as clear as possible for the reader that certain attitudes of certain characters correspond to attitudes that should be criticized in real life. In other parts of the novel I used subtle, ambiguous irony for the sheer pleasure of writing irony. And most importantly, I was very careful never to trivialize the horrific situation of animals.

Humana festa is a novel with many ideas and some characters who advocate for a cause, so another concern that I had was to have all the lines that are a little more "panfletary" come from the lips of these characters only, since they would say those lines anyway if they were real people. For instance, the characters Megan and Sybil are animal rights activists, so sometimes I allowed them to say lines that are a little more didactic. But even then I tried to use some kind of comic element in order to soften the didacticism. Another concern that I had was to use images.

I wrote every single letter of this novel doing my utmost to give pleasure to the reader. I always write having in mind the pleasure of reading. If I present terrible or unpleasant questions, I try to balance them with pleasurable elements: humor, surprises, unusual ideas, metaphors, an engaging narrative. And I always take

into account that after my novel leaves my hands to go to the public sphere, it will be read however the public sphere may want to read it...

I think that the problem of “edifying literature” that you raised can be discussed within the context of “art of commitment vs. art for art’s sake.” In fact, literature of commitment has been either valorized or dismissed, depending on the epoch, country and group of intellectuals that is predominant in the academic milieu where literature is debated. As a general matter, what is going on in the literary and academic milieu at the present moment in Brazil (where I was born and where I lived almost my whole life) is different from what is going on in the literary and academic milieu in the United States (where I live now). In Brazil those who are predominant belong to a group linked to Literary Theory that tends to reject committed literature *a priori*. In United States those who are predominant (and their number is increasing even more by the arrival of younger generations) belong to the Cultural Studies group, whose main concern is the ideological content of works of art.

But whatever the predominant current may be, one has always to ask the following question: Who decided (and why) what can and what cannot be part of a literary work of art? Who benefits from this decision and who is harmed by it? In the case of animal oppression, which practically nobody can see in the real world (which is anthropocentric) and therefore is practically invisible in literature (which is anthropocentric), who benefits from the “ban” on literature of commitment?

I don’t know very well what Mario Vargas Llosa means by “edifying and propaganda” literature. But I personally regard as edifying those works such as (and I’m discounting the speciesism of the majority of them): *Crime and Punishment* by Dostoevsky, *East of Eden* by Steinbeck, *Barren Lives* by Graciliano Ramos, *Death and Life of a Severino* by João Cabral de Melo Neto, *Mother Courage and Her Children* by Brecht, *Industrial Park* by Pagu, and so many other texts that bear a political or social concern. J. M. Coetzee gives much evidence to animal ethics in at least three of his books. Bach, Handel and Beethoven composed religious propaganda music. The painting *Guernica* by Picasso and Propagandhi’s punk rock are both forms of political protest. These are all works of great quality in my opinion.

And a more explicit literature of propaganda made for the use of advocates during their activism can have good artistic qualities too. It will have many limitations because it is educational and should be very clear, very directed and objective so that the message can be understood the best way possible. But within this limitation it can be made with talent and creativity, and it can be considered a work of art too.

Finally, a very important thing that artists and intellectuals ought to be really attentive to is the frequent outbreak of forms of expression where the line that

separates art from non art is displaced or even disappears, thereby constantly transforming the esthetic experience and challenging established preconceptions.

Alexandra – 6) In *Humana festa* and in stories such as “The Sanctuary” you make clear comparisons between forms of exploitation of all animals, both humans and *other-than-humans* (as in Marti Kheel’s words). In the last few years – from Marjorie Spiegel and J. M. Coetzee to PETA’s campaigns (“Holocaust on Your Plate” and “Are Animals the New Slaves?”) – the controversy surrounding the issue of comparing the holocaust and African slavery to the exploitation of other-than-humans has been increasing. How do you fit your work within this context?

Regina – That controversy might have occurred either because the animal advocates hadn’t explained very well, to the people who felt insulted, what speciesism is and what it means to be treated as a thing or as the property of others, or the animal advocates did explain it very well but those people didn’t accept their explanation. Perhaps it’s necessary to be more careful when explaining those issues during activism.

In either case, the reality remains the same. The reality is that we are all animals, some of us (white or not) have already been used as the property of others and treated as things with no interests, and some of us are still being used and treated that way. If we understand that nonhuman animals have as much dignity as human animals, we also understand that it’s not offensive to compare a human animal to another animal. But the question here goes beyond a mere comparison between human slaves and nonhuman slaves: it’s a means to explain the fundamental issue, that is, the institution of property of sentient beings.

Rafael – 7) In the 90s, before you went vegan, you worked as director for the children’s educational programs *X-Tudo* and *Castelo Rá-Tim-Bum* at the public television station TV Cultura -- São Paulo. What were the most important “messages” that you sought to convey to the children through those educational shows? Were you already concerned about including something that could address the treatment of animals? If you had the same job today, would you try to address more vigorously this issue also on TV?

Regina – Our main concern in those programs with respect to the children was to combine playfulness with an interest in learning. There was a group of professionals whose task was to make sure that our work fit a certain ethical and educational standard, asking us to eliminate or correct parts of texts and scenes that presented mistakes of any type or that were politically incorrect. Still, as I think about it all over again, I can see that we did many things that we shouldn’t have done.

With regard to animals, what mattered to us for the programs was their beauty, their behavior in the zoo and in nature, their “talent” (carrier pigeon, circus performer) and their welfare... besides their flavor and nutritional properties.

We even did stories in *X-Tudo* about a small organization that rescued and took care of homeless animals, and about a lady who pampered her dog with excessive attention and luxury. But we had no idea (at least I had no idea nor noticed that anybody else had) about veganism and the end of animal exploitation.

Today, if I were to work in a children’s educational program again, I would do things differently from what I did in those days, or at least would try to influence my colleagues to do so. I would very probably manage to do a story about vegan children, for example. But I think that the first thing that I would do would be to propose that the name of the show, *X-Tudo* [Cheeseburger-Everything], be replaced by a name that had nothing to do with a hamburger with cheese and an egg, nor with anything else produced at the expenses of animals!

Rafael – 8) Based on your experience and on what you can see regarding the present status of the abolitionist cause, how optimistic are you about the future? Will we actually get to witness the end of animal exploitation? How many years from now?

Regina – I never think too much about it. The future does not exist. The future will be what we are doing now. What matters is that we’re alive now, we can go vegan now, and we ought to go vegan and spread veganism now.

Fabiane – 9) What are your next projects? After your experience involving *Humana festa*, are you thinking about writing further on animal slavery and other social and political issues?

Regina – *Humana festa* has just come out and I’m waiting for the dust to settle... In the meantime I’m waiting for a new Brazilian edition of my debut book, *Arca sem Noé* [*Noahless Ark*, which was actually published in English as *Stories from the Copan Building*]. *Arca sem Noé* will be republished by Record as well and, despite its title, it doesn’t address animal rights.

It was great to participate in this interview with you guys: Alexandra, Fabiane, Rafael e Silvana. Thank you very much!

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