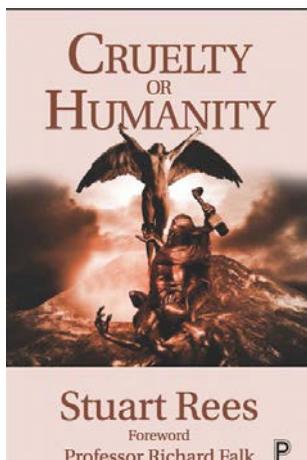


Cruelty or Humanity

Cruelty or Humanity: Challenges, Opportunities and Responsibilities by Stuart Rees. Reviewed by Richard Falk. Published by Bristol, UK: Policy Press in September 2020



Stuart Rees is such an exception. His *Cruelty or Humanity* has the courage to portray reality in all its degrading ugliness without taking refuge in some specious bromide. His book addresses the range of cruelties that befall those most vulnerable among us in myriad specific circumstances. With an astonishing command over the global and historical landscapes of cruelty, Rees leads us through the wilderness of the most evil happenings, which have been enacted individually and collectively. And yet through it all he manages to guide us toward the light of hope without indulging sentimentality or embracing false optimism.

What gives this perilous journey its defining originality is the degree to which Rees brings to bear the knowledge and timeless wisdom of poets both to depict the intensities of the darkness but also to instruct readers that the disciplined and lyrical insight of a poet can better than the rest of us find shafts of light that illuminate paths leading to empowerment, transcendence, and liberation. Rees has actually written two parallel interacting texts brought together in a single fully coherent book: on one side, a fearless and comprehensive reportage of the facts and figures of human cruelty in many distinct settings of place and circumstance, stressing the plight of those most victimized, ranging from asylum-seekers to indigenous peoples tortured in their homelands, and extending to the horrifying torments endured by animals and a variety of thoughtless encroachments on our natural surroundings; on the other side, this depressing litany of cruelties inflicted on masses of people is simultaneously refracted through prisms of light offered by a multitude of poets who share the agony while intoning the most vital truth of all, that hope is not futile, that human society has dreams, aspirations, and untested anthropological potentialities. Rees shares with readers extracts from dozens of world famous, and relatively unknown poets, in this parallel form of narrative that interacts with the gory reportage of cruelty to offer a creative tension between entrenched evil and its transcendence.

Rees' undisguised autobiographical engagement with this inquiry gives *Cruelty or Humanity* a quality

We are living in an anguishing historical period. From one direction come dire warnings about human future if the challenges posed by climate change and ecological instability are not addressed within a rather tiny window of less than twelve years. From another direction come depressing indications that peoples around the world are choosing by their own free will, extremist autocrats, even demagogues, who are extinguishing fires of freedom, building walls to keep the unwanted out, and stigmatizing the stranger. In such an atmosphere, human rights are in retreat, empathy for the suffering of others is repudiated, international law is all but forgotten in the annals of diplomacy, and the United Nations is often reduced to the bickering of irresponsible governments seeking nothing grander than maximum national advantage, and in the process, let the common public good of humanity be damned. Facing such reality with eyes wide open is a challenge that few acknowledge, and even fewer have the stamina, insight, compassion, wisdom, and imagination needed to discern a brighter alternative future for humanity.

of urgency and sincerity that it would not possess if confined to the scholarly canons of ethical and political detachment. The fact that Rees cares so deeply about choosing humanity over cruelty is evident on almost every page. He conveys his concerns without ever diluting the profound difficulties of overcoming the evil being done by humans, mainly men, to others stigmatized and rendered inferior, punitively instrumentalized to serve ambitions, manipulate fears, and satisfy sadistic urges of those in power.

In personalizing his immersion in this difficult subject-matter Rees' residence in Australia becomes evident in the manner he treats the severe cruelties over centuries inflicted on the original natives of the land, and currently reproduced in the manner that Australian asylum-seekers have been sequestered in an isolated island and often driven to suicidal desperation, a horror show that is mostly hidden from the world, but shocking when disclosed in all its ferocity. It casts doubt on the ritualized apologies that some liberal Australian politicians offer to the aboriginal people and their forebears for past wrongdoing. As a leader of Palestinian solidarity efforts in Australia, the cruelties of Israel toward the Palestinian people receive deserved attention from Rees in depicting the cartography of cruelty.

Rees advances a strong case for the positive side of the human condition, resting on the rock of shared humanity. He quotes these arresting lines from Maya Angelou, which really captures the essence of his ethical message:

*“In minor ways we differ
In major ways we're the
same.”*

The political implication of this affirmation is a strong embrace of the spirit and substance of equality, which implies a rejection of hierarchy, as well as making positive use of the interplay between the unity of

humanity and the many differences evident in the way individuals and collectivities choose to live. Another poet, William Stafford, is quoted approvingly in words intended to repudiate hierarchy and its companion, stigmatization of 'the other' deemed inferior:

“I can't eat that bread.”

In the end, Rees manages to nurture hope, which he rests on what might be best identified as 'the transformation-to-come.' This radical departure from the present will be recognizable only when political leaders begin to articulate their programs and policies in what Rees calls 'the language of common humanity.' Of course, a humanistic worldview naturally follows such a linguistic trope. It draws its normative direction from existing traditions of international human rights, international law, and a rising respect for nature. Whether such an axial moment, if and when it comes, can be operationalized in the form of humane patterns of governance will be the ultimate test of whether equality can become a way of life for the human species as well as an uplifting slogan.

In the end, we should be thankful to Stuart Rees for providing us with such an inspiring reading experience, which contains within it a roadmap that could help humanity escape from the species eco-ethical slide toward extinction. This will only happen if enough of us are responsive enough to Rees' damning diagnosis of the present and then heed his liberating prescriptions for the future. R

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