

Animal Behaviour

Amanda McLeod



Praise for Animal Behaviour

“Bold in voice, rich in metaphor, daring in approach, *Animal Behaviour* is a startling debut. In these very short tales, Amanda McLeod demonstrates an uncanny understanding of life and the living. By turns strange, beautiful, aching, and transcendent, these stories and the humans who inhabit them will leave their mark on your mind and heart long past the final page. Highly recommended.”

- Kathy Fish, author of Wild Life: Collected Works from 2003-2018

“The playful prose in flash collection *Animal Behaviour* will make you smile, nod along with recognition, then unexpectedly punch you in the gut with superb final phrases (see *A Captive Octopus Will Eat Its Own Arms If Bored or Stressed*). McLeod’s use of animal facts as titles is a clever mechanism to allow the reader to see human experience in a new light. Take each flash at a time, don’t gulp them in one go. Each reading of this collection shows a new layer of interpretation... You will recognise your family, your colleagues, yourself.”

-Stephanie Hutton, author of Three Sisters Of Stone

“I love the concept of *Animal Behaviour*, the way each story shines a light on an aspect of human behaviour which mimics, reflects or echoes that same behaviour in the animal kingdom. McLeod’s language is seductive and lyrical, she writes beautifully and with empathy, and every story in this collection is a gem.”

-Amanda Huggins, author of Collective Nouns for Birds and Scratched Enamel Heart

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Animal Behaviour by Amanda McLeod

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In Water

Goldfish Go Pale If Kept In Darkness

She doesn't notice it at first; it's so subtle, nobody does. By the time they do, it's too late.

At first, they think she's just turned a little glassy. There's a shine on her that wasn't there before. Under the office lights, she seems iridescent as she talks about him. Does the glow come from within? It's hard to tell.

A month later, as she walks through the office doors, she passes the reception desk. The receptionist compliments her on her new hair colour. As she rides up in the lift, she examines her reflection in the glossy black panels and tries to remember when she last had her hair done. She can't make Friday night drinks, she tells the girls. He's taking her out somewhere special.

She declines the annual beach trip as well; they're moving in together and she needs to clear some space for his things in her apartment. She wraps her fingers around her coffee cup, soaking up its warmth, and smiles a thin smile over the top of it. Later, one of the girls swears she could still read the writing through her hand.

As they all leave for Thanksgiving, someone asks her how things are, you know, at home. She forces the corners of her mouth upwards and pushes the word

fine through fading lips.

Christmas comes and goes and by then it's clear something is very wrong. Her hair has gone platinum, her eyes are so pale no one wants to call them blue anymore, and the iridescence has become opaque. She stands at the copier, ghostlike, a floating floral wrap dress. It's been so long since she came to Friday drinks, they've stopped asking her. She doesn't talk about him at work any more.

When everyone comes back into the office after Easter, they are shocked. She is already at her desk. His photograph is poking out from the waste bin, balanced atop the pile of other trinkets she'd used to build a shrine to him. She is wearing a shirt the colour of air, that matches the rest of her. The fine, clear threads of her hair float around her as though suspended in water. Her pale eyes bulge slightly and her fingernails are shiny oval scales. The girls wonder what's happened to her.

It's him, says Charlene from accounts. He's kept her in the dark. Happened to my sister. She was completely white by the end.

The girls, relieved to find expertise in their midst, ask about a solution.

Well, we start by getting her to Friday night drinks.

A Shrimp's Heart Is In Its Head

You always told me to decide with my head, not my heart. Like you do. But we are very different people.

Our first date was in a cheap seafood restaurant. The smell of fish and old frying oil clung to everything, suffocating any enjoyable atmosphere that dared peek through the long plastic strips flapping in the doorway. I tipped the crumbs off the plastic chair before I sat down. The menu was a piece of greasy laminated paper. When I knew you better, I realised this was a calculated move. Your first dates were miserly in case nothing came of them. When first dates became second or third dates, you brought out the slightly bigger guns. A logical approach.

I'm glad I didn't realise that until later. You sparkled, a piece of cut crystal in my otherwise matte beige life. I fell into an endless ocean of love for you, happy to let my lungs fill with intoxicating water. You were so full of life, so vibrant and confident; always making assured decisions while I spun in a whirlpool of internal turmoil about everything from which dinner I should make you to whether we should move in together.

The chicken goes off before the fish, so use that

first, you said. And moving in together makes sense. It'll halve our expenses.

You thrived in crowds, moving from group to group with ease, a fish darting back and forth, changing direction without effort. I felt like I was bouncing around in the backwash, always needing a moment to regroup before I was swept in another direction. I wanted to sink to the bottom, bury myself in the sand. Instead, I was swept along in your slipstream.

In bed, you were predatory. You devoured me, a hungry shark in a feeding frenzy. I never sated you, no matter how much of me you consumed. Some nights it felt like skeletal remains was all you left. When I spoke up, voice trembling, your smile was pointed teeth. *Of course I desire you*, you told me.

The first time you were away for work, I tipped my calendar upside down and emptied all its obligations into the seething water at the end of the pier. When you returned, confusion came with you; how had I missed you and not missed you at the same time? The second time you went away, I understood. Four days wrapped in a blanket, tucked into the best spot on the couch, free to eat as I pleased. I slept for days. Your absence didn't leave an empty space; I didn't feel hollow without you. The ocean of love became a desert and I could dry out, breathe again.

Now you are back from your third time away, and I am at the bottom of the stairs with a suitcase, my shell hardened. I tell you in a monotone, with expressionless eyes, that I am leaving you. You blink, laugh, deny this is possible; then your face drops as I place a hand on the doorknob. I watch you spin through the unfamiliar emotional waters.

We're so perfect together, you say. The world could be our oyster.

I tell you to think with your head, not your heart.