

Alice Walker's *The Chicken Chronicles*  
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Hello, Space Nuts? This book is insane. Thank god I came at it with a wide-open mind. This is one of the strangest books I've ever read—as much for form as content. First of all, it was adapted from a series of blog posts. OK. I haven't read *The Color Purple* or anything else by Alice Walker so shame on me but also I don't really know what to expect from her. This wasn't quite it. Here's an excerpt, just to give a brief taste of the weird: "Dear Girls," – wait, did I forget to mention that the book is written *to her flock of chickens?*—"Today it is a toss up: whether to write to you about the high quality (and tastiness) of your eggs, which Mommy can't believe she hasn't done before; forgive me! Or, to write to you about my experiments with 'meat.' I think because I tossed and turned so much last night attempting to digest four bites of lamb, I should write to you about the latter."

I actually have a huge fondness for this book. Somehow, Walker manages to make some fabulously profound statements and explanations while keeping the tone light and intentionally naïve, almost. She's just talking to chickens—but what she's talking about is life and death, the nature of heaven, discrimination and the way people treat each other. This book is *bold*, and I like that, though it's jarring at first. We're (we, readers; we, readers of English lit) not used to our authors leaping off the page and calling George Bush a bad "space nut," whatever that is. We're not used to middle aged women calling Ghandi her chickens' grandfather.

This book is the oddest blend of nature worship Christianity (can we call it that? she talks about loving Jesus), practical chicken-keeping, and almost allegorical philosophy. This book took me under three hours to read, I believe, and was really alarmingly fast-paced. Just as the hogs of Walker's childhood have finished copulating ("It was amazing to Mommy that the penis of the male hog, though pink, was shaped exactly like a cork screw; and years later, forty or so, she thought: *Oh, is that why it is called screwing?* She had wondered."), she launches into the bull's death ("Then there was the day, sadly, when the .22 was brought from behind the wardrobe, and Buddy was petted and stroked and talked to as if he were a person. Thanked for his offering to the family. Then shot while he was still dreaming and munching on fresh grass. His knees would buckle and he would look interrupted."). Somehow she strings short, direct sentences into sophisticated philosophy, all while talking about herself in third person as "Mommy."

This book in many ways defies definition, while Walker fills it to the brim with deceptively simple definitions: "Discrimination often means having a hard time finding a place to live or feeding yourself and your family. People could starve." This is a carefully neutralized way of talking about an extremely sensitive, serious problem, one that is intensely personal for Walker. She continues, then, in a (slightly) more lighthearted vein: "Like, for instance, some of you could starve if I gave food only to the Red Gang of Six (now five, actually) [a second group of chickens she tries to introduce to her initial flock] and very little or none to Rhode Island Reds, Barred Rocks, or Ameraucanas."

What I love about this book is how it doesn't shy away from emotional logic and from profound statements made in a chicken coop. This rhetorical style would brush many the wrong way; it would fail to convince quite a few, I'm sure. But it is a book full of simple rejoicing. "And Mommy waited for deer families to be reunited and return. She especially wanted to see a good-sized buck. And today, *hallelujah*, that is what she saw." The writing is far from formulaic, but

essentially she is following a formula. Concrete experience *plus* emotional response *equals* finding larger truth or meaning. Here, concrete experience: manages to reinvigorate deer population on her land. Emotional response: hallelujah! Larger truth? “For that is what seeing animals in the wild does to us, makes us feel we are alive in Life and living in a paradise filled with moment by moment wonder.”

This is where my soft underbelly is exposed and stroked, just a little. Secretly I’m a huge sap. One of the things that makes me happiest is the way my rabbit Tanya’s mouth is always open, just a little bit, especially when she’s interested in something. I love the way her upper lip is parted and her lips look slightly fuzzy and immensely delicate, like the skin of an unripe peach. Even when she grabs sticks and paper tubes to throw around, she’s so precise and sweet with her little rosebud mouth. *Hallelujah!* At home, I take the chickens on walks when my father’s at work. Sometimes I bring a book out to sit with them and read; other times I just sit or lie in the grass and watch their weird ambulation. Animals unconstrained and happy have a natural self-assuredness and purpose rare to see in people. I love that Walker recognizes this and doesn’t try to disguise her joy about the way chickens walk around. She revels in it, and that’s rare too.

Furthermore, critically, she is able to do more than remark on the joys of chickens. Plenty of people have written about how nice it is to see chickens pecking around in the yard—and yes, there is plenty of that here. Yet she also places meatier (pardon the pun) gems throughout this book. “Freedom is a big risk, as is loving,” she says, when she discusses the death of one of her chickens. She critiques slavery and prejudice; she argues against the inhumane treatment of people and animals—yet she does this through what is really a poem-letter to her chickens. Wow!

So yes, this is a very weird book, and for some people I’m sure it would not go over well at all. It’s also easy to completely dismiss her, as I almost did when I got to the part about space nuts. But her style is golden and light and the airiness of the book made me feel happier and peaceful just in reading it. Isn’t that something?