



# The Cows

*Lydia Davis*

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## The Cows Lydia Davis

"You read Lydia Davis to watch a writer patiently divide the space between epiphany and actual human beings by first halves, then quarters, then eighths, and then sixteenths, into infinity," says *The Village Voice*. Indeed, Lydia Davis is mathematician, philosopher, sculptor, jeweler, and scholar of the minute. Few writers map the process of thought as well as she, few *perceive* with such charged intelligence.

*The Cows* is a close study of the three much-loved cows that live across the road from her. The piece, written with understated humor and empathy, is a series of detailed observations of the cows on different days and in different positions, moods, and times of the day. It could be compared to some sections of Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" or to Claude Monet's paintings of Rouen Cathedral.

*Forms of play: head butting; mounting, either at the back or at the front; trotting away by yourself; trotting together; going off bucking and prancing by yourself; resting your head and chest on the ground until they notice and trot toward you; circling each other; taking the position for head-butting and then not doing it.*

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*She moos toward the wooded hills behind her, and the sound comes back. She moos in a high falsetto before the note descends abruptly, or she moos in a falsetto that does not descend. It is a very small sound to come from such a large, dark animal.*

## The Cows Details

Date : Published March 29th 2011 by Sarabande Books

ISBN : 9781932511932

Author : Lydia Davis

Format : Paperback 38 pages

Genre : Poetry, Writing, Essays, Fiction, Animals, Short Stories

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# From Reader Review The Cows for online ebook

## Heather says

The front cover of this chapbook features a cow in a field, looking stolid and a little bit curious: ears wide apart and forward, one front hoof planted a little ahead of the other. The grass is green, and so are the trees behind it. The back cover is a continuation of the same picture, with another cow ambling off, away from the camera. There are black and white photos by Lydia Davis, Theo Cote, and Stephen Davis throughout the book; the titular cows appear alongside the text about them, and it works. This is a really great little book, worth reading and then re-reading. Davis's writing is concrete and elegant and smart and engaging: this book is about looking at cows in a field, but it's also just about looking, about paying attention, and then about piecing a scene together in words. I was enchanted from the first two sentences:

Each new day, when they come out from the far side of the barn, it is like the next act, or the start of an entirely new play.

They amble out from the far side of the barn with their rhythmic, graceful walk, and it is an occasion, like the start of a parade. (7)

The book is a series of vignettes, a scene of cows and another scene of cows and another scene of cows. Sometimes Davis's writing is funny; sometimes it's just matter-of-fact; throughout, it's wonderfully precise. There are moments, which I love, where there's both precision and abstraction, something very concrete but also making a leap, like: "When they all three stand bunched together in a far corner of the field by the woods, they form one dark irregular mass, with twelve legs" (11).

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## Amy Snodgrass says

"The third cow could not be bred because she would not get into the van to be taken to the bull. Then, after a few months, they wanted to take her to be slaughtered. But she would not get into the van to be taken to slaughter. So she is still there."

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## Dana says

This book is about the cows that live across the street from Lydia Davis. The cows do not stand for anything. They are not metaphors. They are cows.

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## Bettie? says

Int booker award 2013

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Opening: **EACH NEW DAY, when they come out from the far side of the barn, it is like the next act, or the start of an entirely new play.**

Studded throughout with black and white photographs.

Hard to know how to rate this 32 page (that is mainly image filled) exercise in bovine observation. If I was a fellow contender for this prize I would probably be very miffed with the result.

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### **Tess says**

The first time I heard about this little book was from a video on Youtube that's an artistic interpretation of a moment in the book. The video is enchanting and dreamlike. Then I purchased, Can't and Won't by Lydia Davis. I rushed through The Cows wanting to only consume the book. Terrible. I didn't experience The Cows at all. I've done some reading about slow reading and I was encouraged by a friend to slow down. I purchased the chapbook, The Cows which includes black and white photographs of the cows. I sat on the deck and let my legs dangle over the edge on a sunny afternoon, and read it slowly. It was lovely. It is now one of my favorite books.

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### **Rachel says**

This is a very strange, very little book about cows. I like cows. I like this book. 4 stars bc it's strange, about cows, little, somewhat insane, somewhat boring, oddly bold, and very precise.

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### **David Dixon says**

Last night:

"Check it out."

"Oooh."

"Lydia Davis. Looking at cows."

"That must be the best thing in the whole world."

This morning:

"Goodbye. I love you."

"I love you too. Have fun."

"You're having a moment with Lydia Davis."

"Yes. She's looking at cows."

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## **Tony says**

When a cute girl gives you Cows as a birthday present, it is likely appropriate to cook her a good steak the next time the two of you have dinner together.

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## **Joey Comeau says**

This book is in some ways very unassuming. The language itself is straight forward, but unfortunately its straightforwardness can at times feel pretentious. In a book that is essentially a close-reading of the cows that live across the street from Lydia Davis, pretention is always going to be a worry, though. It's too experimental a concept and implementation to read it with the simplicity that it deserves.

Another story of hers (which I like better,) is a similar close-reading of cockroaches in autumn. It was included in a collection of her stories, and that context made it much easier to lose myself in the idea. It was startling and fresh, in that context. Here, printed on its own in a not-entirely-attractive chapbook, I think it sometimes feels like an awkward experiment.

BUT, all that is the context of the words. The book itself, once you can get past the worry of how pretentious it feels, is often really beautiful, and sometimes quite wise. Lydia Davis is a writer unlike anyone else, and this book is one of a kind.

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## **Cheryl says**

Too short.

Of course.

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(okay, that was a bit of a cop-out. I love short books and short reviews.)

I liked that she just captured the serenity of cow-gazing. Gazing at cows, being gazed at by cows.

It is all very in the moment, "mindfulness" I think is the current term. It was a literary equivalent of a prescriptive nature exposure -- being out 'in nature', such as a park etc., for even just a few minutes a day, is good for the mental health.

It was a good and restful piece to read at lunchtime in the office.

It reminds one that just zoning out and enjoying our surroundings is something to do more often.

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## **Ton Hof says**

Met een zucht sla ik de laatste e-bladzijde om van Lydia Davis' The Cows: wat een pareltje! Een chapboek waarin Davis een jaar lang drie koeien observeert, die tegenover haar huis in een weiland staan, weer of geen weer.

Ze hebben inktzwarte lijven, wit gevlekte koppen en zijn erg innemend. In prozapoëzie schetst Davis hun leven & leefomstandigheden, die ik allerminst als beklagenswaardig omschrijven wil; integendeel, de dames lijken zich uitstekend te vermaken.

Door de handel en wandel van de koeien scherp en in een op menselijk gedrag toegespitst idioom te beschrijven, zonder daarbij tot antropomorfisme te vervallen, laat Davis het onderscheid tussen mens en dier in zekere zin vervagen; je raakt begaan met hun lot, en zij tonen plotsklaps interesse in jou:

‘Hun aandacht is onverdeeld, als ze naar de overkant turen: ze zijn stil en kijken ons aan. En omdat ze zo stil zijn, komt hun belangstelling als filosofisch over.’

Gaandeweg het bundeltje werd ik steeds nieuwsgieriger naar wat de koeien eigenlijk aan het doen waren, voelden, dachten. En soms kreeg ik medelijden met ze:

‘Als het sneeuwt, valt de sneeuw op dezelfde wijze op hen als op de bomen en het veld. Soms verroeren ze evenals de bomen of het veld geen vin. Op hun ruggen en hoofden hoopt de sneeuw zich op.’

Aandachtige waarneming, een gericht gadeslaan, kan de basis vormen voor een ethisch luisteren naar en zorgen voor andere aardbewoners, levensvormen.

‘Eentje heeft er een kalf gekregen. Maar haar leven is er niet ingewikkelder door geworden. Ze staat stil om hem te laten drinken. Ze likt hem.’

Ook koeien zijn gevoelig, actief, reactief & onzeker. Boeken als dit dragen bij aan de vorming van een realistischer beeld van wat en wie dieren in het algemeen en koeien in het bijzonder zijn.

PS Sinds oktober vorig jaar volg ik de Official UK Chapbook Chart, die wekelijks wordt geüpdatet. Hoewel reeds in 2011 uitgebracht, bevindt *The Cows* zich al maandenlang in de top tien. Ik wilde weten waarom en schafte het 32-pagina dikke chapboek via Kindle aan. Er is ook een papieren uitgave beschikbaar.

<https://tonvanthof.com/2019/01/22/11061/>

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## **Jim says**

Lydia Davis ruminates on ruminants. Sorry, couldn't resist that. It is an accurate description of the chapbook however. Thin and in overly large print it reminds me in more than one way of one of Beckett's late prose pieces although my copy of *Worstward Ho* probably has more words in it than this piece. In fact he could well have written it. He famously wrote a play where "nothing happens, twice." Well, this is a book where very little happens other than three cows being observed and in the observing they become something else, something meaningful:

They come out from behind the barn as though something is going to happen, and then nothing happens.

There's no story here. Davis doesn't name them which doesn't mean their owner hasn't named them—maybe Clarabelle, Gertie and Ermintrude—but if he or she has then either Davis is unaware or keeps that to herself. She realises that, to the cows at least, names are meaningless:

They do not know the words "person," "neighbour," "watch," or even "cow."

Nor does she make any attempt to anthropomorphise the beasts, to imagine what they're thinking. She does wonder why they do certain things but she leaves us with her human suspicions:

The third comes out into the field from behind the barn when the other two have already chosen their spots, quite far apart. She can choose to join either one. She goes deliberately to the one in the far corner. Does she prefer the company of that cow, or does she prefer that corner, or is it more complicated — that that corner seems more appealing because of the presence of that cow?

Davies is a novelist though and not a naturalist. She observes and records her observations for a season simply because the cows are in her line of vision:

I see them most often out the kitchen window over the top of a hedge. My view of them is bounded on either side by leafy trees. I am surprised that the cows are so often visible, because the portion of the hedge over which I see them is only about three feet long, and, even more puzzling, if I hold my arm straight out in front of me, the field of my vision in which they are grazing is only the length of half a finger. Yet that field of vision contains a part of their grazing field that is hundreds of square feet in area.

I don't think she would've travelled to the other side of the world like Jane Goodall to study chimpanzees for the best part of her life. Cows aren't that interesting. But then it's not really the cows we're reading about; it's the woman who's become preoccupied with them.

Needless to say *The Cows* is a quick read. Even if you resist the urge to read at your normal pace it still won't take you long. Interestingly the work reminded me of another Davis, William Henry, who famously wrote:

What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.

No time to stand beneath the boughs  
And stare as long as sheep or cows.

We don't see things like we used to. We don't take time over things like we used to. To get the most out of this book you have to treat it like the cows it describes and really look at it. Only then it'll dawn on you how little we look at anything nowadays.

There's a video of Davis reading and talking about *The Cows* [here](#).

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## **Nikki says**

They are not metaphors. They are cows.

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## **Jim Elkins says**

Accurate Text Paired with Inaccurate Images

Another absolutely precise exercise in writing and observation, this time on an intentionally undramatic subject, three cows across the street from Davis's house. For me, the interest is in observing the faint ghosts

of other kinds of writing hovering around the nearly clean skeletons of her descriptions. A touch of surrealism, of anima rights, of detective stories, of transcendentalism... no paragraph is pure in the sense that a haiku can appear pure. (Appear, not be.)

I am not as happy with the pictures, simply because they are too loosely correlated with the text. Why can't a writer as exacting as Davis demand the same of her images? On a page where the prose insists that she sees the cows only from a great distance and through a restricted angle of view, we get a photo of cows taken from the edge of their pasture. The difference is not made into a theme, either in the text (which doesn't acknowledge the viewpoint of the photos), or in the photos (which shift without rhyme or reason from telephoto to close-up). It makes images seem weak: it appears it's not right to request too much of them. I think the opposite.

(Update: in 2012 I talked to Davis, and she read this note; she said the images were true to the way she'd observed them. We talked in her house, looking at the cows in question. I don't doubt what she said, but I wonder about how precision is to be understood when it varies so widely from text to images. A relative looseness in the treatment of images, in authors very exacting about their prose, is a common trait in contemporary writing with images.)

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### **Kevin says**

A meditative little essay (with photos!) about her neighbor's cows, Lydia Davis's newest little oddity is actually pretty sweet...and dare I say, CUTE!

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