



## **Book Club Book of the Month July 2019**

### ***Finding our Humanity, Leif Cocks***

### **(The Orangutan Project)**

#### **Summary**

Using a seamless blend of personal anecdote, philosophical and psychological discussion and the gentle presentation of scientific evidence, *Finding our Humanity* convincingly builds the case for understanding our place in the broader mammalian realm, breaking down the faulty thinking and ontological barriers we have placed between us and other animals that has led to a new extinction crisis. Eschewing anger, stridency and the paralysing sadness felt by many in the face of the consequences of our destructive behaviours, *Finding our Humanity* instead charts a clear-minded and hopeful course back toward a deeper recognition of what really makes us human, and how we might act to protect those creatures who are unable to speak for themselves.

#### **About the author**

A former zookeeper at Perth Zoo, Leif Cocks is the author of the best-selling *Orangutans: My Cousins*, and the founder and President of The Orangutan Project, the Elephant Project, and the Tiger Project.

## Questions for discussion

- Describe the 'life journey' of Leif Cocks, and how he came to his understandings of what it means to be human. What were the 'turning points' in this life journey as expressed in his personal anecdotes? Have you had similar moments of epiphany or personal illumination and what have they led you to believe?
- It's a folkloric truism that as we get older, we can become stuck in our ways of thinking. Has this been the case for you, or for people that you know? What role does reading books like *Finding our Humanity*, and literature in general, play in keeping our minds open by exposing us to different subjectivities and ways of seeing the world?
- Orangutans live long lives. They gestate and care for their young similarly to humans. They largely use culture rather than instinct to teach their young. They have been known to use some 42 tools in adaptation to the challenges of their environment, and have knowledge of up to 2000 species of edible and medicinal plants. They share a significant proportion of our DNA. They use language to communicate complex ideas and form strong social bonds with humans given the opportunity. What is it about many human societies that has enabled us to construct and maintain a strong binary between humans and other primates? What has been the consequence of this binary? Is this binary inevitable or unsurpassable?
- *Finding our Humanity* is a non-fiction book. Why do you think the author has built the story using a structure that alternates between describing his lived experiences and other sections that describe the theory, history and science behind his beliefs?
- The genetics of *Homo Sapiens* has altered little since our ancestors lived as hunters and gatherers. What significance does this fact have in terms of our drives, instincts and behaviours and their influence on the health of the planet and its ecosystems?
- What do you think it is that makes us human? How does Leif Cocks use the customary definitions of what it means to be human to expand upon these definitions and so to complicate the customary distinctions between us and those creatures who share our planet?
- The human capacity for compartmentalisation and cognitive dissonance allows us to block off inconvenient truths and integrate contradictory beliefs. Can you think of examples of this kind of thinking from your own life, or the lives of others, and what has been the consequence of this?

- A large part of *Finding our Humanity* is spent describing ways and means to clearer thinking and feeling as human subjects. Did you find this compelling?
- Are you hopeful or pessimistic about the possibility of positive change occurring in your lifetime with regards to climate change, environmental degradation and species extinction? What steps need to be taken to achieve this?

## **If you liked this book, you may also like...**

*Orangutans: My Cousins*, Leif Cocks, The Orangutan Project

*The Future Keepers*, Nandi Chinna, Fremantle Press

*Stepping Off: Rewilding and Belonging in the South-West*, Thomas M. Wilson, Fremantle Press

*A Place in the Country*, Chris Ferreira, Fremantle Press

*Reaching for the Canopy*, Kylie Bullo, UWA Publishing