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## Anticipatory grief

Commentary on [King](#) on Animal Grief

### Tara Fox Hall

**Abstract:** This commentary reviews Barbara King's *How Animals Grieve*, delving into the controversial topic of the status of animals in our society, as well as the key difference between human and non-human grief: the ability to anticipate death.

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I expected Barbara King's *How Animals Grieve* to make me emotional, but I was also looking for evidence to support any conclusion the author would draw about animal grief. I was not disappointed in the least.

At times coldly scientific, King is very careful not to draw any conclusion about animal empathy or grief in the specific cases mentioned throughout the book, stating various possible reasons besides grief for the animal's actions in each case. While this is likely to offend those hardcore animal lovers who "know" that it must be grief or empathy the animal in question is feeling, I found this aspect of the book refreshing, not because I don't believe in animal grief, but because I do believe that reasoning and undisputed evidence is necessary before proclaiming "truths" about any given situation. In exploring those other options, King gives more weight to those instances where she concludes that animals grieve.

King also mentions some current controversies regarding animal status in our society, such as companion animal obituaries. While these "bring legitimacy to a pet as a family member," other humans whose human loved ones' remembrances appear near such obituaries are apparently sometimes offended that non-humans are being remembered along with their human relatives in the same space. If an obituary is a way to remember someone who has died, listing accomplishments and life milestones in a celebration of the person they were, is it right for pets to also get the same treatment when their lives were highly valued by the people that loved them?

Several points in this work were highly thought-provoking, compelling me to ponder them long after I finished reading. The most compelling one to me was the idea of anticipatory grief — something that animals do not experience — something I'd never contemplated before. I am

currently coping with my personal anguish that my two elderly cats, both in the last stages of terminal disease, who will soon be leaving me. But they can only see that spring has finally arrived, and rejoice at open windows, warm sunshine on their fur, and the closeness to one another, which they have shared for nearly eighteen years. Is it better to know what's coming, to prepare yourself for the inevitable parting? Or is it better to think until the last day or minute that everything will go on happily forever, as it has until now? King writes, "Only we look far ahead with dread or relief, or a mix of the two, aware that death is coming." Even after much thought every day for a week now, I'm torn in my decision of whether this aspect of my own humanity is more a burden or a blessing.

My overall opinion is this is a highly emotional, thought-provoking book that I will not only reread, but that I will strongly recommend for any animal lover. This is an ideal book for non-animal lovers too, as a source of enlightenment about animal capacity for emotion by way of persuasive reasoning and evidence.

## **References**

King, B. J. (2013) *How animals grieve*. University of Chicago Press.