

## Deer: Friend or foe? How about both?

'The Age of Deer,' by Erika Howsare, is a brilliant exploration of the complex ties between humans and deer

5 min

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Deer cross a street in a suburb of Lexington, Ky. "Far from tame," deer are "nonetheless experts at living with people," Erika Howsare writes. (Pablo Alcala/The Herald-Leader/AP)

Review by Michael Sims

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"Humans and wildlife are living in closer proximity now, in many places, than we have for generations," Erika Howsare observes in her new book, "[The Age of Deer](#)." In some ways, that's a good thing. But as many suburbanites can attest, white-tailed deer present a complicated case. The spooky-sounding "[zombie deer disease](#)" may be making headlines now, but deer have long been at the center of human experience, even when we weren't paying attention.

Howsare sets out to understand and explain the complex ties between humans and their fellow large mammal. Ever since I read the chapter about deer in Bethany Brookshire's excellent "[Pests](#)," I have hoped for an equally insightful book about our fraught relationship with this familiar neighbor. "The Age of Deer" is that book — and it is a masterpiece.

"Species like dogs have a special relationship to humans that has evolved over millennia, one based on mutual benefit," Howsare begins. "Others, like big cats and whales, would be much better off without humans in the picture at all. But deer — in their quiet way — occupy a middle zone between those extremes of domestication and wildness. Far from tame, they are nonetheless experts at living with people."

But this expertise has limits. Annually in the United States, hunters kill about 6 million deer. [Between 1 and 2 million deer and similar large animals are killed by vehicles every year, and about 450 drivers die in these violent confrontations.](#)

A poet and journalist who grew up in rural Pennsylvania, Howsare looks behind those numbers, at the deeper questions of human-animal coexistence. Her thoroughly researched and comprehensive book combines science, philosophy and history, delving into the role of deer not only as prey and pest but also as neighbor and artistic inspiration, from N'laka'pamux mythology to the Deer Lady on "Reservation Dogs." Deer, she writes, are "a single node where many of my questions — about damage, repair, myth, nourishment, and the things that divide us — might come together."

Howsare's hands-on approach keeps her storytelling vivid and personal. Her omnivorous curiosity leads her to a high-dollar "trophy" deer farm in Texas, a multi-hunter deer drive in Punxsutawney, Pa., a Virginia restaurant that serves gourmet venison from New Zealand while wild deer browse in sight, and a dawn outing with her hunter brother. She visits a woman who rehabilitates fawns. She

attends a women's hunting retreat in North Carolina, where she meets a 25-year-old Black woman who tells her: "There's a historical reason why you don't usually see Black people in the woods. ... It's not safe for us there." She journeys with Arkansas scientists studying "chronic wasting disease," a.k.a. "zombie deer disease." She tours a hunting trade show featuring banners such as "Where Faith, Country, and Firearms Matter" and camouflage-jacketed New Testaments. "On my way out," Howsare recalls, "a guy handed me a homemade CD with "How to Get to heaven" written on it in Sharpie."

Somehow this book about deer captures a wide swath of 21st-century America.

Howsare devotes a thoughtful, clear-eyed chapter to both human and animal participants in deer-vehicle collisions (DVCs). An expert notes that even deer raised near highways aren't biologically prepared to react to the speed of vehicles traveling down them. "This explains what can look to drivers like very stupid behavior — the classic blank stare into oncoming headlights, or the fact that deer sometimes run directly into the sides of cars, or leap off embankments onto a vehicle's roof," she writes. How might this toll be reduced? Howsare takes us to a Charlottesville tunnel designed to channel deer under rather than across highways. Such structures are the most effective ways to reduce DVCs, she reports, before concluding that "maybe the reality is that human beings have no particular right to move through the landscape as quickly as we do. ... We're just very, very used to it."

A lyrical but unblinking writer, Howsare doesn't have a soft-focus setting. She accompanies a team of cullers employed to reduce the deer population in Princeton, N.J. With empathy for each animal and person, she takes us through the professional hunt (held in the dark to avoid attention) and then rides with a carcass driver to the butcher who prepares culled deer for a Trenton food bank: "We stepped inside the shop and bright light flooded my eyes. Stainless-steel sinks. A large hacksaw hung from the ceiling. Flypaper. Red tubs full of hoofs, skinned bones, a pile of ribcages."

This outing demonstrates how the author keeps in mind the complexity of issues and her own response to them, as when she sees ground venison frozen and boxed: "I looked at those blocks of meat as distillations. Of deer, first: the bones and hides and caudal fat had been removed, and only the good protein remained. The deer themselves were distillations of Princeton's soil, air, water. Of genetics and the drive to eat and reproduce. And, at the last, that meat was a concentrate of human power. Our tools and weapons. Our force and our assertions."

Howsare ends her book by bringing it back to the beginning, by thinking again about what drew her to her subject and what she learned along the way. "I'd come to feel that deer were my relations," she writes. "I'm grateful that, after so many large animals have disappeared with the advance of human beings, there is still this one — an exquisite and mysterious creature — that I can see, often, in my Anthropocene life; one that, despite our caricatures, remains a survivor, a supreme example of life among the ruins."

*Michael Sims's books about nature include "Adam's Navel" and "The Adventures of Henry Thoreau."*

### **The Age of Deer: Trouble and Kinship With our Wild Neighbors**

by Erika Howsare, Catapult. 336 pp. \$28