

Trusting the body

We take our human nature for granted. What it is. What we are. And we take our bodies for granted. What it means to have a body. How we move it.

In this book, I'm inviting you to question what it means to be human and to have a body by using your moving body as a tool of inquiry. How can we become more aware of our biased perspective of the human story? How does that perspective shape our body and the way we move? How can we trust the wisdom of our feral self and unleash its untapped potential? How can we soften the fixed idea we have of our boundaries and let the non-human permeate us?

These are not easy questions to ask; they shake up the very foundations of what we believe it means to be human. They encourage us to confront the truth that our bodies and our ideas of ourselves are largely shaped by cultures and societies we live in. At times these questions may even dismantle beliefs which we thought to be stable and true. It can be a very uncomfortable process and yet the journey I'm inviting you to embark on offers incredible treasures. It is a potent path to face and unlearn all that inhibits us, to meet our authentic selves without the filter of social and cultural conditioning, to dissolve separation between nature and culture, humans and non-humans, ego and the rest. The truth is we have no idea how much of what we believe to be our own individual ideas and ways of being are, in fact, programmed by culture and the wider society we've grown up in. The human body is a beautiful tool of inquiry, through which we can unpack with greater awareness these layers of conditioning that shape us; providing us with the opportunity to make different choices

about who we want to be. Allowing ourselves to be feral is a journey of discovering who we really are.

This book is born out of my own journey of searching for my feral self. From a very young age I felt oppressed by the imprint of culture and the way it has shaped my being. As a child I knew the rules and explanations that adults gave me were questionable, and yet I was not welcome to question them. Much like everyone else I learnt to repress my body, my spontaneity and my emotions to fit the societal mould. I learnt it wasn't safe to be myself, yet deep inside I longed for a true expression of my being that didn't have to be repressed to fit in.

This has been a very long journey of searching, not knowing where I'm going, or who I really am. I wish I had been told to trust my sovereignty and my ability to be my own teacher; that there is a different way than patriarchy and western academic knowledge; that the body has its own voice, that I can learn to trust and follow; and that I'm not separate from what surrounds me. I didn't know any of this. I had to learn it the hard way, walking in the dark, banging my head against walls. I didn't know where I was going and yet, despite all the doubts and layers of conditioning that kept me in the dark, I kept faith that there was more than the story I was told to believe. I slowly learnt to let my body guide me, failing many times at fully trusting it and yet never really giving up on it. I eventually learnt to trust it and wrote the book I wish I could have given my younger self, being the parent I wish I had had. There is so much locked potential in us screaming to be free. This book offers some practices to help give it voice.

Writing this book has been an experiment in letting the body lead. Academically trained as a social anthropologist to doctoral and post-doctoral level, I was very aware of how much my mind and writing were shaped by academia. It took some time at the beginning to de-condition my academic mind, to let go of the form and format that had shaped me and to re-learn how to write so that I could let the voice of my body speak. In this piece, I'm attempting to break free from this tradition. I kept asking: How do I write from body? Not just from mind? How do I trust my body to guide me? Really trust it? How do I let that wildness speak without filters, without trying to control it? How can I find language to talk about that non-verbal rawness without making it disembodied? How do I keep the freshness of embodied experience alive through writing? I often moved my body as a way of thinking to feed the

writing process, moving questions, experimenting with ideas that came to mind or just reconnecting to my body and remembering its active role in the process. I also took notes after my movement sessions in Hackney Marshes over the years and although they were not intended to be read or published, some of them became useful material when thinking about this book and eventually found their way into the text. The book that you're about to read is the result of this inquiry, of letting the body lead the writing.

Reading this book — and moving through the practices it offers — is also an experiment in letting the body lead. For the reader/mover this book is an invitation and a permission to explore, to play, to dare to be, and to listen to your body, to connect to your inner wildness, to push the limits of what it is to be human, to trust your 'body's intelligence', to let go of old habits, to disrupt your automatic pilot, to carve your own path, to make things up as you go along, and so many others (just add your own!). What you make of this book is entirely yours. It is your own journey of letting the body lead and you do not yet know where it will take you. Enjoy the journey and the not knowing!

Feral calling

In February 2017, I enrolled on a psychodrama weekend course where I re-enacted moments of my life with the support of other people in the group, and I supported them in doing the same. I liked it but it wasn't what I was looking for. To the woman who was running it I said something like 'Could you recommend something a bit like this which doesn't involve words and talking, which is just movement?' She gave me Sandra Reeve's contact and the next thing I knew I was enrolled for her next course in May of that year. It wasn't her beginner's course but it didn't matter, I didn't want to wait. I couldn't. I needed this and I was ready.

This is where Feral was born. It popped out suddenly and without effort all ready to go. I was surprised and not surprised. It had been ready to come out for a very long time, it just didn't quite know how to. It didn't know it was possible, nor that it was that simple. It just needed to find a place that allowed it to be and to be heard, and it is exactly what Sandra offered.

I had a memorable dream at the time. I was like a very pregnant cow who had been waiting to give birth for way too long. I was enormous. I could hardly walk and move because of it. Instead of a baby, my body was filled with eggs so that I looked like a flying balloon puffed up with hydrogen. The surface was uneven and covered with small bumps made by the vastness of eggs stuck in there, yearning to push themselves out. As I was looking at this new version of me, impregnated with thousands of eggs, I saw my eyes change to a bright green colour exuding life and delicious malice. ‘Who is this part of me with these green shiny eyes?’ I wondered. ‘I have never seen her before. And when will the eggs come out?’ The next day ‘Feral’ was born and it hasn’t left me since.

I had never given much thought to what the word feral meant. It screamed itself out of my body when I was asked for a title for the movement piece I had chosen to do in the forest. I usually hate finding titles. I’m not particularly good with words and I can spend far too much time thinking about which ones to use, often killing their spontaneous utterance. Not this time, it came from deep within. My body spoke the word, not my mind. With this book, I would like you to approach my musings and my movement invitations with your body first, letting the mind and what you know, or think you know, drop or fade, to give space and a voice to the body for once.

Before we delve deeper into the world of feral, notice and feel how your body responds to the word (thirsty, disgusted, transfixed, troubled, curious, etc.). Notice whether a gesture wants to express itself (a twist of the head, a shaking of the foot, a dropping of the pelvis, etc.), whether you let it happen or resist it. Notice if your breathing changes or something else. It doesn’t matter what it is, as long as you allow yourself to notice it, to feel it and, if you can, let it happen — without projecting, without censoring, without judging, without giving meaning. It doesn’t matter how insignificant it might appear. It doesn’t have to sound like my version of meeting feral. You don’t need to have words for how you respond to this word. It doesn’t have to make sense. Actually it is much better if it doesn’t as it means you’re allowing yourself to drop into the space of not knowing.

I certainly didn’t have a clue what I meant at the time the word feral first came out of my mouth. I intentionally left the mind out of this for a very long time. I needed to let the body speak and be heard for once, as opposed to all the times it wasn’t listened to in my life. The intention of

this book is not to set the body and mind in opposition to one another but to acknowledge that the mind, which often dominates, needs to make space for the body so that the two can work more synergistically together and not against each other. It is about reclaiming space for the body and what it can teach us that we have forgotten.

Four years after that first encounter, I started the process of digging deeper and inviting other bodies to explore their own feral. My feral wanted to share itself so that other bodies knew there were doors they could open themselves. My feral wanted to express itself so that other bodies could give themselves permission. By inviting you to be feral I'm inviting you to challenge your idea of being human and the underlying assumption, one that is so internalised that we rarely question it: that we're the most intelligent species, which knows best, and is at the top of the pyramid above all living organisms on this planet.

I do invite you, however, to ask the question with your moving body without the pressure of trying to find an answer. Intentionally stepping away from the art of the mind talking, I am focusing on the potential of the question when it is asked with the moving body. How it teaches us to drop comfortably into not knowing, not to remain fixed and to just receive. Trusting our bodies while sitting with the unknown invites us to imagine beyond, to open ourselves up to what we don't know we don't know, and what we'll miss by sticking to what we know we know and what we know we don't know. This can make it an uncomfortable journey and the mind will often cringe at the prospect. That's good. Don't shy away from it. Welcome it.

Feral as a gateway

Just as I'm asking you to drop your knowing of what you think it is to be human, I'm also asking you to drop your knowing of what you think it is to be feral. The two are intertwined. What we see and understand to be feral is inevitably shaped by our human-centred and therefore biased perspective of what it means to transgress this image that we have of the superior human being. Feral, in human terms, is often presented as a derogatory term that implies a lack of civilisation in other humans; a regression into a wild animal state from our top position in the

evolutionary hierarchy; a trance, or a mad state where we are lost in the moment with no awareness of what we're doing.

I'm inviting you to welcome feral as having little to do with this conventional idea. Because feral is at the edges of our secure attachment and understanding of humanity, when approached with the moving body as a tool of questioning, and an open mind, it offers a potent liminal space where we can open up to our potential, and an unknown future. This book does not suggest going back in time or regressing; it is an invitation to look forward, to find and open doors that are masked from our consciousness by human exceptionalism. To be feral is to explore the possibilities of a future human who is not so clearly bounded by the self and the human species, a future human who is not scared to be fully themselves.

Although it might feel paradoxical at first, I'm inviting you to be feral with more awareness, not less, and to consciously explore your feral side in order to become aware of what is buried deep inside of you, underneath layers of normative behaviours, that you had forgotten. Being feral is allowing yourself to deeply feel what you are repressing in the body without judgement and to invite the body to playfully unpeel this conditioning through movement. Conceptually we understand our conditioning but often we find it hard to drop into how it actually shapes our moving bodies in action. How we sit, how we walk, how we eat... all are seen as common daily human activities that we've 'naturally' acquired by growing into a mature human being. We don't see them as being worth our attention. We don't think much about them — or not until life circumstances force us to: as we might experience when we get an injury, or a disease that limits our movement and impairs our ability to carry out simple daily tasks, or when we are visiting a different culture and have to eat with different rules and apparel, or no apparel at all.

By inviting you to be feral I'm inviting you to disrupt what you take for granted about your humanity and your body. In practice, this means allowing your body to speak and be heard by gently observing the social and cultural conditioning that shapes it and by finding ways to ask this conditioning to take a step back at times. This is harder than it sounds. Conditioning is so ingrained in us that we often don't even realise it is there. That's why it is important to invite feral with awareness and compassion, to nurture a state where you become more and more aware of how your body needs and wants to move and to practise

letting it happen without judging or censoring. To slowly open yourself up to the neglected needs of your body with open eyes and mind, with compassionate awareness. To let how it wants to move unfold naturally without repressing it. To refrain from labelling it, keeping it fresh and new, focusing on the sensations. Learn to be with and let what needs to arise come to the surface as you would if you were watching a leaf fall off a tree. Being feral is practising being part of everything that surrounds you rather than being separated from it. Learning to feel and see the world and everything around with your full body as a three-dimensional, shapeshifting, sensory frame, which is not limited to the eyes.

Because being feral is consciously opening to that wild side in us we have repressed through conditioning, it is much more than simply being animal. In that sense, it is not an invitation to get loose and wild or get lost in a trance state without presence and real awareness of what is happening. Although the state of being feral through its spontaneity, trust of the unknown and non-attachment to the ego and control can have a quality of being animal, it also requires a conscious act of will and presence. Without choosing to face the constraints of our minds we cannot release the feral side they repress.

You will therefore find in this book that what I mean by feral takes many forms and shapes: being like an animal, being like a plant, shaping with the landscape, tuning in to nature's rhythm, widening your spatial awareness, moving with your condition, and many others. It might not always seem obvious to you what it means to be feral in some of my suggestions. This is because I'm intentionally challenging a stereotypical idea and image of the wild, which is separated from us and culture. I'm inviting you to leave behind what you think you know of what is feral and be open to explore it from a blank canvas with your moving body. Find out for yourself with the freshness of a child's curiosity. Feral is a place to rediscover what has been forgotten in ourselves and of our deep entanglement with the natural world. It is about reclaiming what is already ours.

The book is divided into two main sections. The first part 'Disrupting the Human' focuses mainly on the human body and invites you to challenge human-centric ideas of how a body should move in order to reconnect with your feral abilities to move your body. The second part 'Being Environment' goes beyond the human body and challenges the story

of separation between ourselves and the rest. It invites you to explore your fuzziness, how we are not so clearly separated from everything else, by softening your boundaries and to experience being part of the environment.