

My Dog Ate My Book Report

Episode Eight Transcript

Brandon

My name is Brandon. I can't tell you my last name; that'd be too dangerous. We're recording this episode of My Dog Ate My Book Report so that more people will know the truth. The truth about what happens when two weirdo thirtysomethings force each other to read formative books from their childhoods and then talk about them. Today is Animorphs #1: The Invasion by K.A. Applegate.

Wren

Well, I'm Wren, and I think this is all nonsense, and I don't want to be a part of this...and...I don't know. Why did I go to Marco? Marco's the worst.

Brandon

Yeah, you've decided to be the Marco. Yeah, so this is a me pick. I know that shocks everyone.

Wren

I have questions about how you are not damaged?

Brandon

What makes you think I'm not damaged?

Wren

Fair.

Brandon

I have like...a lot of mental illness diagnoses. Yeah, so. And, of course, was one of my things as a kid. I was very deeply into it for a couple of years there. Because it's the best. But yeah, I guess I'll synopsise some stuff. But there's some content warnings. Not because this is an...not because this is a book for adults that I read as a child, but because this is a book for children that has a lot of content warnings in it. And feel free to jump in if I've missed some thing. But contained within this book, I feel I need to mention blood, gore, body horror, death of various kinds, the '90s, slavery by aliens-slash-mind control by aliens, which is unpleasant. And Marco is in it.

Wren

I think I would also say that it does have the, you know, very '90s level of ableism in terms of saying that things are lame, or things are crazy, you know, that sort of thing. Because, you know, they didn't know better, I suppose at that point. I suppose there's also mention of sort of, like, dysfunctional home life?

Brandon

Oh, yes. Yeah, there's...this book does not get into it, but there's definitely over the course of the series. So Animorphs is a series from Scholastic of young reader sort of novels. They are pretty quick reads.

They were even when I was reading them for me and I was not a very fast reader, because they clock in around 150 or 200 pages with relatively large text. And they just, they just go, they just...they're fast. They just start going, and they don't stop until the end. Animorphs is the story of five teenagers, Jake, Rachel, Tobias, Cassie, and Marco, who, while taking a shortcut home from the mall one night find a dying alien, and are basically drafted into a war against an invading alien force of a species called the Yeerks, who are slugs that crawl into your ear and take over your brain, so the fact they're invading is not obvious to anyone because they just seem like normal people. The weapon they are given to do this, to try to hold back the invasion long enough for other interstellar aliens to come help, is the ability to morph into animals. They are able to turn into any animal that they are able to touch for a little while to like record their DNA. And they proceed to make use of that to a variety of purposes to undermine and fight the Yeerk invasion that they quickly find is a much more dangerous and massive threat than they first expected.

Wren

And much more...much more personal.

Brandon

So this book, this first book, The Invasion, is told from the point of view of Jake, and details how they acquire their powers...

Wren

Sloppily.

Brandon

...from a dying alien called an Andalite - Prince Elfangor, in particular - and narrowly escape capture by a group of Controllers, which is what you call people who are taken over by Yeerks. After getting away and then taking a little time to experiment with their powers, some of the group are much more gung ho about like trying this morphing thing as soon as possible, and some of the group, mainly Marco, are just like, let's just not let's just all pretend nothing happened and go about our lives. We didn't see a dying alien get eaten by a different alien. Let's just not worry about it. But Tobias and Cassie in particular are both like really like, oh man, animals...turning into animals is great. But over time, they realize that the Yeerks are really looking for them, including, sadly, Jake's older brother Tom, who Jake really, really, really didn't want to admit, was acting strange, but was clearly acting strange.

Brandon

The moment they mentioned Tom, and that Tom had joined a new club called the Sharing, I wrote a note. "The Sharing: this is absolutely the origin of the Yeerk infiltration." I wrote that the first time the Sharing was mentioned. It's not like it's hard to figure out, but I...it was, yeah, it was obvious.

Brandon

And so they spy on them, via Jake morphing into his dog who he had acquired earlier, and listening in and indeed discover that not only is Tom definitely a Controller, so is their assistant principal, Assistant Principal Chapman. They learn that the Yeerks have a base called the Yeerk pool beneath the school. Yeerks have to go there every now and again to like soak up rays from their native sun from a device. I

thought this would be really easy to synopsise and I find I'm just rambling. So they go get some like combat morphs from the zoo so that they can attack the Yeerk pool. But yeah, they realize at the end that this war is only beginning because, you know, the Yeerk presence is going to be harder to defeat than they expected. So it's kind of a downer ending, but also kind of a like, "Oh, man. How are they going to stop the Yeerks?"

Wren

I mean, that wasn't the most downer part of the ending.

Brandon

Yeah, there's all kinds of good things that happen. But really, kind of the crux of the series as a whole, I think, is the five Animorphs, which is what Marco suggested they call themselves. So as I said, this book was narrated by Jake, but one of the things that is kind of neat about the series as a whole is that it rotates who the narrator is. So there are books narrated by each character at regular intervals. But Jake is the first one. Jake's kind of the nominal leader of the group. Besides Jake, we have Rachel. The way she's described initially kind of sounds like she's going to be the sort of resident "girl who likes girl things" character, but she's really not. She's got a very aggressive streak and a competitive streak.

Wren

She's vaguely sporty. She's more like the jock in this whole situation.

Brandon

She's Jake's cousin. We have Tobias. (I'm going in the order of like what order they narrate books in.) Tobias is kind of the school misfit. He's quiet, and everybody thinks he's weird, and Jake is the only person who gives him any time of day.

Wren

Which makes him the best character.

Brandon

Yep, he was always my favorite. Still is. He's got some ambiguously very bad home life. The books do go into it, but the first book does not really explain. It just says his home life is really bad. Tobias is like the most gung-ho about morphing. He pretty much immediately goes and Cassie helps him acquire a red-tailed hawk morph, and then he just spends as much time as possible as a red-tailed hawk in the book because he really likes flying and he feels very free, and...

Wren

I mean, it definitely makes sense. It's kind of like, he didn't have a whole lot going for him, and now he has a purpose.

Brandon

He doesn't describe it as feeling more himself as a bird, but that's kind of how I read it. One of the big takeaways for me coming back into reading this now - I have reread this book before about 10 or 12 years ago, but that was also when I wasn't particularly consciously questioning things like my gender

identity, et cetera - but now I look at Tobias and I'm like...I don't know that he's on purpose meant to be kind of a queer allegory character, but like, I do think you can read him that way. If just, you know, the metaphor is that being gay is like wanting to live as a bird as much as possible.

Wren

Crap, no wonder I like him so much.

Brandon

Yeah, yeah, right? Then there's Cassie. Cassie is Rachel's best friend, I think, and Jake maybe has a crush on her. And she's the one whose mom works at the Gardens, the resident amusement park-slash-zoo.

Wren

Cassie is the horse girl.

Brandon

Cassie is the horse girl. She lives on a farm. They have a wildlife rehab. So like, for instance, the hawk that Tobias acquires has a broken wing and is at the wildlife rehab. But yeah, she's also like the best at morphing. When everybody else morphs, their body just changes seemingly at random as far as like what parts change when and how fast and so forth. Cassie can kind of control the progression of her morph. She's also the most empathetic. She is like, very much the heart of the team. She's the most emotionally intelligent. She's the most knowledgeable about animals. Basically, here's the thing: I never really liked Cassie much as a kid, and I think that was just mostly because I found her a little too goody-two-shoes, but now Cassie is is top of the list. Like, I think I connect with Tobias's angst a little more, so I think he's still at the top, but Cassie is number two. I really like Cassie now. Finally, there is Marco, Jake's best friend, the resident wisecracker, because you have to have one of those...but he is like he is very much the adult tries to write what they think the funny teenager in the friend group sounds like. And for K.A. Applegate, that means Star Trek references - which I'm okay with, but even as a kid I was like, "This isn't real. I don't know anybody my age that likes Star Trek besides me." Because Marco even "um, actualys" Jake on a Star Trek point at one point. It's kind of silly. Marco is the one who is like, "I don't want to turn into an animal. I want to go home. I want to just forget that we saw any of the things we saw and just not, you know, do this." And that's partially because his mom is dead - this book doesn't go into how or why or when - but clearly Marco's dad is still like barely functional after that tragedy.

Wren

Yeah, his his priorities are very understandable, and he's very, very concerned with the mental health of his father. And he...like it made it very clear that he was worried that if he did this whole animorph superhero thing, he was really afraid that he was going to die and that it was just going to destroy his father. So I understand it. He's a dick about it, but I definitely understand it and I think it gives him some good some good depth.

Brandon

Yeah, because it would have been really easy to just have him be kind of the coward or whatever. Basically everybody but Tobias at some point is kind of like, "I don't know, like dying sounds bad, this is really dangerous." But when the other characters have all kind of become convinced they should intervene, even at the risk of their own lives, Marco is sort of the holdout because he's concerned about his dad's well-being. And, and that's, that's the, that's the five. That's the five Animorphs. They are new to this saving the world thing, but they're gonna figure it out as they go. One of the things that I still really like about this series...this book does a really good job of giving you the rules of its world. And I feel like that is important for a thing like this, because otherwise I think your world...A, it becomes trickier to sort of like communicate stakes. And B, if you don't have a certain sort of set of established rules and limitations that are pretty clear and relevant, I think that's kind of when settings just feel very samey and generic. But but this this world, there's a lot of rules that we get hit with immediately and that are important to the plot, and then continue to be like important foundations of the way that things happen over the course of the series. So the Morphing Power has a few rules: to be able to morph, they have to acquire an animal which requires them to be able to touch it for a few seconds and kind of focus on it. But once they've done that, they can morph that animal anytime thereafter. There's not like a number of charges or anything.

Wren

But as you said, it's it's DNA based. So it's like that specific animal. So like, Jake turns into his dog, but he couldn't be seen by Tom because he knew that Tom would recognize that as the family dog. It's not just like generic dog.

Brandon

Yeah. If you stay in a morph for longer than two hours, you're stuck. You can't demorph. So that's bad. So right up front, we know...we know how the characters can get like new forms - and, you know, figuring out what forms they have available and how to get forms they need to do a thing is immediately kind of like a relevant piece of stuff and continues to be - and two, they always have a time limit. The Yeerks also have, in particular, one very key thing that they need: they have to, every three days, return to a Yeerk pool, which is basically a big pool of sludge that is set up with a device that mimics a special form of radiation from their home sun called Kandrona rays that they use as essentially sustenance. So every three days, each Controller has to go to their local Yeerk pool and hang out in the pool for a bit while they lock up the host. So that then also creates the situation where like, we know that this is a situation that is true of anybody that's a Controller. Oh, we know that we follow Tom at such and such a time, we'll probably be led to the Yeerk pool.

Wren

Yeah, but one of the most, I think, sinister little details about needing to go back to the Yeerk pool and locking up the humans is that there are some humans who did it willingly, who just like go and watch TV while the Yeerk regenerates. And that's messed up. But also, I super believe it.

Brandon

Their empire immediately sounds pretty scary and sinister, which I think is solid also from a world building perspective. Obviously, a lot of the characters we deal with are Human Controllers, because we're on Earth and it's, you know, the '90s, and not...this isn't a world where like, Earth knows there are

aliens and spaceships come and go. It's like, you know, it's just the '90s. Nobody knows that there's alien mind control slugs trying to conquer the world. Apparently humans are relatively plentiful on Earth, relative to presumably other species elsewhere, because they're just like, we want to take over this planet because there's a ton of humans, and we can have like, a ton of bodies for Yeerks. Because the Yeerks, if they're outside of the body, they're just a slug. They'd have no special capability or defense mechanism or anything, so they're extremely vulnerable. Even just a human body is a big upgrade for them. So yeah, while a lot of the humans that are Controllers are unwillingly enslaved, there are some that apparently agreed to help. The Yeerks have also brought some Controllers of other species. The two big ones here are the Hork-Bajir, which are these big reptilian creatures who are like seven feet tall and have claws and blades all over their bodies. They're just like, they're...they're the bruisers of of the Yeerks. If you want something dead you send a Hork-Bajir Controller. Obviously they keep them out of sight of things, and they're kind of the big reason that when the Animorphs need to do like a combat mission, they need to find really good morphs to do that. And then there's the Taxxons, which are like giant centipede creatures and they apparently are also willingly in cahoots with the Yeerks. They're not necessarily great in fights, but they're gross. So those are like the three kinds of Controllers we really deal with very much, but then there's the boss. The leader of the invasion is Visser Three, which is a rank, and he is the only Yeerk who has an Andalite body. The Andalites are the Yeerks' main enemy, and the ones who invented the morphing technology. They're like blue space centaurs with eye stalks and scorpion tails, and only one of them has ever been enslaved by a Yeerk, and it's Visser Three. So he's the leader of this invasion. He has acquired really dangerous alien creatures from all over the place. So he's, he's the final boss, oftentimes, and he's also just like, you know, he's, he's been fighting Andalites for a long time, so he's very prepared to fight anything that these random teenagers can throw at him. And he's like the main reason that they only managed to save one person from the Yeerk pool in this book because he turns into an eight-headed fire spitting creature and just starts setting people on fire as they try to escape.

Wren

And he also turns into..so the very...hmm. I was told that these books were...violent, but I just kind of assumed it was violent *for kids*. But the first time you meet Visser Three, he turns into some monster and just chews down the injured Andalite, yeah, in a scene that was pretty graphic. It describes, you know, chunks of the Andalite fall out of his mouth, and the Taxxons eat the scraps of dead Andalite, and I'm just like...this is a *lot.* For children!

Brandon

Yeah. Yeah, and like, it doesn't stop there. Especially during the attack on the Yeerk pool at the end... So Rachel gets a an elephant as her combat morph, and there's a relatively detailed description of her just like trampling a Taxxon into just goo, basically. It's graphic.

Wren

I had mentioned to Brandon right after I had read that scene, like, wow, this got this got a lot more, you know, graphic than I thought it was going to, and then Brandon's like, "Just wait, there's some body horror with the morphing." And the first morphing scene happens and they're like, Oh, it doesn't hurt. It's fine. And I was like, okay, cool. And then Jake turns into a lizard. And eats a spider. And I was pretty grossed out about that. I'm not the biggest fan of spiders, and I definitely don't like the idea of eating

one. But that wasn't the most upsetting part of that scene. The thing that like made me actually set the book down for a little while was when the lizard's tail got stepped on, and ripped off. Anyway, and then I was like, "Oh my God, is he going to unmorph and be missing an arm or something?" He wasn't, luckily, but I...

Brandon

Yeah, the eating the spider is definitely like...probably the most shiver-inducing part of the book for me. One of the key parts of morphing is that, when you morph, you gain a lot of the instincts and stuff of the animal, and so especially when it's a new morph, they sometimes have to kind of gain control of the animal instincts. Jake morphed the lizard to spy on Principal Chapman. His lizard brain was just like, "Oh, there's food over there. Oh, man gonna eat it. Mm-mm!" So Jake was not happy that that happened, and was like trying to get over it later with junk food, which I am like, okay, yeah. This book didn't get into it specifically, but one of the advantages of morphing is that when you morph, injuries don't persist. So that's why he didn't like have a piece of him missing because of the tail. And although there wasn't really an instance that they really lingered on in this one, that also means that if the Animorphs are injured in a fight, as long as they're able to get clear and morph back to human, they'll be fine. Which means that sometimes, some of them - not in this book, but over the course of the series - some of them suffer some like really grievous injuries in fights.

Wren

So the very important rule about staying in a morph for only two hours is something they drilled in so many times that I was like, oh, yes, somewhere in this book series, someone's gonna get stuck as something. I was not expecting it to happen in book one. But it does. Tobias is a hawk, presumably forever.

Brandon

Tobias is stuck as a hawk now.

Brandon

I mean, it's a pretty good hawk to be. He's a red-tailed hawk.

Brandon

Yeah. Since Visser Three did show up and they ended up having to escape the pool as quickly as they could with whoever they could take with them, Tobias got stuck in the pool for a while - in the pool cavern, not in the pool itself - for a while before he was able to leave without somebody noticing him. And so he is just unable to, uh...unable to go back. Fortunately, when they're morphed, they do have access to thought-speak. They can communicate telepathically. But yeah, it's a bummer. And Tom is still a Controller. They tried to save Tom while his Yeerk was in the pool but failed. They also mentioned that like the cop that they were pretty sure was a Controller...it just says that Cassie says he won't be a problem anymore.

Wren

Oh, right! Yeah.

Brandon

By the end of this book, this first book, we know for a fact that Jake and Rachel have 100,000,000% killed people. And Cassie and Marco and Tobias probably have, but we just don't get confirmation.

Wren

Yeah, it's uh...yeah. And you know how like, in a lot of kids media, they won't actually say the word "killed?" They'll just be like, "I will annihilate you! I will destroy you!" They just say it.

Brandon

They're also very blunt, sometimes, about the stakes as well. Marco asks Jake before the final battle, like, hey, if, if it looks like they're gonna take me, kill me. Right? Which is like, yeah, I get it. But also: children.

Wren

So I want to know, since this was your pick, you know, like...when you read it, how old were you?

Brandon

My best friend for a few years as a kid, he was he was a big reader. So I was already a big reader by the time I met them, and it just felt logical that we would share. And anyway, he turned me on to Animorphs. He loaned me the books of the had already, but it was only the first three or four books, and so by book four or five, I was just buying them as they came out myself. They were actually like, the first thing I can remember ever..."budgeting" is a strong word, but the first time that I recall ever having like a recurring expense that I had sort of planned for a bit. My parents gave me a modest allowance at that age, I don't remember exactly how much it was. But Animorphs books were five bucks at the time, and one came out about every month. I looked back at publication dates, and it kind of varied a little bit, sometimes there would be two in a month, but not in the following month or whatever, but they were almost monthly. And just I would always make sure that I had money for the Animorphs book. I would incessantly call bookstores in town to ask when they got it in, and as soon as they did, I would harass my mom until she took me to buy it. And then usually I would come home and read it in one, maybe two sittings. I was deep. I was deep into Animorphs. And honestly, all of the darkness didn't register for me. It made me feel like I was reading something more grown-up, but it didn't bother me. So...the course of me and like my major, ongoing fandoms - Star Trek is a special case, so I'm going to put it over there on the to the side. It's not...it's not relevant here - but um, as a kid the first thing that I really became like really into was Transformers, the classic 80s television show where good alien robots and bad alien robots come to Earth because they've been fighting a war and their war expands to Earth and they stay hidden by turning into something else. My next thing was Power Rangers, which is, you know, aliens come to Earth, and five teenagers are given powers by another alien that they can turn into forms that let them fight the bad aliens. And then when I grew out of Power Rangers, I started reading this book series about bad aliens that come to Earth and five teenagers who are given powers to turn into something else by a dying alien to fight the evil aliens. Except it's like...gritty. I don't think I consciously made that connection when I was younger, but I definitely made it now. I was like, wait a second; I had a type. But also I think that the stakes-setting, and especially the fact that like bad things happen immediately in the series is what really, really drove me to want to continue, you know, with with all of the other stuff as fast as I could, right? It was not a series where most of the books were just kind of like

these these one off status quo sort of episodes. Some of them would be; some of them are more inconsequential than others in the long run. But it did have a sense of continuity that was rare in my experience at the time. For a while I was like able to rattle off all the morphs each character had acquired and would debate with my friends sometimes about like, how a given character would be able to handle a certain problem based upon, you know, what morphs they have and stuff like that.

Wren

It took me a couple of chapters to get into it because I was really thrown off by the '90s lingo. I don't know if it's a matter of...I don't know, embarrassment that I definitely talked like that, or just, I just don't want to read text with that many 'likes' in it. But it took me a little bit to just stop cringing at the '90s speak.

Brandon

Speaking of the writing, something that I found pleasantly nostalgic is the way that various creatures are described. Creatures and ships. Because they're often descriptions that are repeated over and over again throughout the series, like the comparison of Hork-Bajir to Salad Shooters and things like that. And just like that stuff kind of really took me back.

Wren

So, for our listeners, if there are any of you out there, we have a rule where we don't talk about the book with each other, even though we talk every day, until we get to this podcast. But we had a couple of slip-ups this week where we started talking about it and then just couldn't stop. I was like, no, wait, we should stop talking about this. We gotta save it for the podcast. And then we would keep talking. It was bad. But I think we were both really excited. So I think that speaks to the book a little bit.

Brandon

Yeah. Yeah. And like, even then I didn't ultimately finish the entire series because it ran...it ran a number of years. It ended up being 54 main books long, and at, you know, roughly one a month, give or take, I think I aged out of it around the middle.

Wren

That was one of the questions I was gonna ask you is if you've ever read all of them.

Brandon

I haven't. The time that I reread the first few about 10 or 12 years ago, I kind of intended to, and I don't remember why I stopped exactly, but that was also like a very dark period in my life, and there were just a lot of things I stopped doing for reasons unrelated to the things, so I've never read the entire series. I am 99% sure the last book that I read was #29. Now by that point, many of the other books that were not numbered but fit into the continuity had also come out so I you know, it was more than 29 books, ultimately. But I do really want to finish the series sometime, because I...I think that it's one of those things that there's a lot of really good craftsmanship in it. And as a person who does written stuff in genre fiction, at this point (I mean, for games, mostly), but I think that there's maybe things I could learn from when it comes to, you know, successful ongoing IPs, right? It's, it's a different beast than like a

one-off novel. Like, do I think that any given Animorphs book is as good as From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler? No. But they're different beasts, right?

Wren

I'm interested by what you mean by you aged out of it. What do you think made you think you were too old for them?

Brandon

Part of it was that most of my other friends who had been reading them fell off before I did. I have historically been the guy who tends to be the last one to give up on a thing that I was enjoying with my friends. I've always kind of stuck with a thing a year or two after my peers, enough that there would be times that I would be like, embarrassed to admit. So I think some of it was shame. Some of it was, I think, being a little tired of the standard like, like teen drama elements. I think also...I think it was a patch where I felt like the books were less often being as exciting or momentous as they used to be. And I discovered that book 25 was the first book to be ghostwritten. But from that point on, most of the numbered books were ghostwritten. So, it...I didn't know that at the time. They didn't hide it. Apparently, the ghostwriter is thanked in the book itself, because K.A. Applegate actually got her start as a ghostwriter on Sweet Valley Twins, which is a spin off of Sweet Valley High. She did all the outlines and stuff for the books. She apparently had intended to write the entire series, but it was around that point where one of her other series that she was doing was taking more of her time than she expected, and also she had just had a child, and ultimately the decision was made that a pretty substantial chunk of the latter half of Animorphs would be ghostwritten based upon outlines by Applegate and with her like editorial role. She did still write all of the non-numbered books during that time, as well as the last several books, so like the very, very end is her. Honestly the main reason I want to read the whole thing is because K.A. Applegate's famous - or infamous, depending on who you are, I'm gonna go with famous because I think it's cool - open letter to the fans following the ending of the series. Which you should not go look up if you do not want spoilers for the end, she explicitly talks about several things in the ending, but: when the series ended, some fans were...unhappy with the nature of the ending. And, in her open letter...I'll read a part that's not spoilery: "Animorphs was always a war story. Wars don't end happily. Not ever. Often relationships that were central during war, dissolve during peace. Some people who were brave and fearless in war are unable to handle peace, feel disconnected and confused. Other times people in war make the move to peace very easily. Always people die in wars. And always people are left shattered by the loss of loved ones." There's a lot more to the letter, but as I said she does specifically talk about some of the controversial elements so don't go looking for it unless you're okay with like finding out some of the major elements of the ending. She was very vocal at that point that she'd never intended to have the story be one that is like everything is nice at the end, after a final confrontation where all of the enemies are defeated and peace reigns forever. Sadly, if...if readers were expecting that that was never the series that she was writing, and it's easy to see that, I think, in even the first book. Like, bad stuff happens immediately.

Brandon

The characters absolutely have PTSD and Applegate knows it, and doesn't hide that fact. And that's just an example.

Wren

Yeah, I feel like this was not pulling any punches or...and definitely wasn't giving me any sort of impression that everything was just going to be super easy.

Wren

So I spent a little bit of of my time reading this book, wondering why I didn't read it when I was a kid. But I know exactly why I didn't read it when I was a kid. Because the covers are ugly. Covers are ugly, and I feel like they gave me the impression that it was just like some silly story about kids who could turn into animals and the hijinks that ensue. Nobody ever recommended it to me or told me that it was anything deeper than that and I just wasn't interested in that. I was off reading, you know, Stephen King and books about the apocalypse. But I would have absolutely been into this had I known that it wasn't just silly animal hijinks.

Brandon

I don't think I would have picked it up myself either. Like, I think I only got into it because I had a friend who was like, "No, here's what it actually is. Here are the books. Go read it. You'll like it." And he was correct. I don't think I would have just like chosen it off of off of the shelf at a bookstore or a book fair or whatever. But I'm super glad that somebody made me read it.

Wren

The redos of the covers are also bad. I don't know why the Animorphs can't have good covers.

Brandon

I think the redos of the covers are like atrocious. Like, they are hideous. I don't love the original style either though I do have a certain amount of like nostalgia for it, so I'm kind of predisposed to be like, well, that's how they were. Like, do I remember sometimes feeling like if people saw me...if like adults saw me reading it, they would look at the cover and think that I was a weirdo? Yes, I thought that a lot as a child. but yeah, but like the new...no. No, I don't care for them.

Brandon

K.A. or Catherine Alice Applegate is a person who has written a lot of books. She started as a ghost writer, as I said, and would go on to do a lot of other YA series. Animorphs was not her first, though it is the one that is I think best known of all of her stuff. Prior to Animorphs, she had done some some of her other series, which were generally under the name Katherine Applegate, were like teen drama kind of things. Making Out is one which is apparently set in Maine, and it's just kind of like teen drama stuff, et cetera. She wanted to do Animorphs because she had this like personal interest in animals and how animals see the world and wanted to kind of write a story that would put kids in like the heads of animals and the ways that animals relate to the world, and especially like the differences in the ways that they like perceive everything, right? And the book - even this book does like do a lot of talking about like hawk eyesight and dog sense of smell and, you know, yeah, the lizard's absolute panic and then voracious hunger for spiders. Animorphs is as K.A. Applegate because of course Scholastic was like, "We don't think boys will read a book written by a woman. So we're going to go with K.A." It's also sort of a pseudonym for both K.A. Applegate herself and her husband, Michael Grant. So the series was written by the two of them together, and I believe other times that you see K.A. Applegate on

books, that's still maybe the assumption. They also wrote various other kinds of things under various other pseudonyms at the same time and since, including Katherine Kendall, which is both of them writing Harlequin romance novels, and the other one I bothered to write down was Pat Pollari which is the author of a kid's sort of comedy book called Barf-O-Rama.

Wren

Ew.

Brandon

Yeah. And there were other series, like Everworld started during Animorphs and that was a series that that is also attributed to K.A. Applegate, which is also somewhat ghostwritten, et cetera. Both Applegate and Grant have have continued to write both together and separately, mostly YA but not exclusively, over the course of the of the years since Animorphs. Like I said, Animorphs from book 25 onward were often written by ghostwriters, with a handful of exceptions; it's possible to find them they're all publicly known, it seems. I made mention of the series being some books besides just the 54 numbered books. So in addition to those books, there were several other books. One of them was the Megamorphs sub-series, which does fit into the mainline continuity, wherever...basically wherever they were published between mainline books, but were not themselves like in that numbering. They were numbered as Megamorphs one through four. Megamorphs books were longer and would switch around who was the narrator, chapter to chapter. So they were sometimes kind of bigger stories and would pop between the various Animorphs. Those were all written by Applegate. Then there were the Chronicles books, which were books like The Andalite Chronicles and The Hork-Bajir Chronicles which followed other characters elsewhere in the universe. Many of them had at least partially sort of prequel kind of content. Just books that sort of gave us a look of like what Andalites are like, and and how the war began, and what what did Elfangor get up to before he died in a construction site on Earth?

Wren

So Nik, who gave me the box, sent me the recommended order, which is: you read Megamorphs #1 after Animorphs #7, Andalite Chronicles after book #13, Megamorphs #2 after #18, etc, etc.

Brandon

Yeah, they, they basically, while the Chronicles books are largely essentially stuff that happened beforehand, some of them do have like revelations and things that it's arguably best that you learn them when they were published relative to the rest of the series. There were also a couple Choose Your Own Adventure books, called I think Alternamorphs...

Wren

Alternamorphs!

Brandon

...which, as I recall, were sort of like, what if you were friends with the Animorphs and were with them in the construction site, or whatever.

Wren

I would have got eaten by a Hork-Bajir.

Brandon

Yep, would have been bad. So...so that...it's a lot of books. They are very fast reads, generally speaking, but it is still a lot of books. The rest of the Animorphs empire kind of didn't go super far. There was a Gameboy Color game that was reportedly kind of bad. I never played it. From what I've seen, it looks like it's sort of like a very basic Pokemon knockoff, which doesn't sound like a terrible idea for how to do an Animorphs game, but it wasn't very good apparently. I remember they had action figures that were essentially Transformers. I think they might have even had the Transformers branding on them. So like, it was a decent attempt, I suppose, but like they also didn't look human when they weren't in their animal form, right? Nickelodeon aired an Animorphs TV series, starting in September of 1998. It ran for 26 episodes over the course of two seasons. I watched the pilot when it came out and pretty quickly stopped bothering. But the Animorphs TV series, they were half hour episodes. They were live action. As you might expect, they couldn't adapt very much. It's clear they made one Andalite puppet and it's just the Andalite from like the shoulders up, it's just the head. It has a little bit of like animatronic movement to some degree, but like not a lot. They keep recycling the same shots of like hoof legs walking in slow motion, but it's like just like the bottom six inches or so of the leg, so it's like for all we knew, it was just like a guy with like two sticks that had hooves on the end. So that they reuse a ton of shots of their of their puppets and stuff because the puppets are not very useful and they just like they'll maybe slo-mo them or like light them slightly or put a color filter or something on them. The morph and the eating of Elfangor was just we saw the shadow of it on the wall of a construction building. And this kind of thing continues throughout the throughout the show like when when they morph it's just a very basic like computer effect of like, morph Jake to Tiger, and then you'll have like a shot of like, they got an actual tiger to like walk across the soundstage while some extras acted scared for about two seconds, and then you know, they'd cut away to somebody else. And they always seemed to like spend as little time and morphs as they could.

Wren

Well there is a two hour time limit, you know.

Brandon

I think in the TV show they have about a 90-second time limit, tops.

Brandon

I had a discussion question. Assuming you had access to your average American zoo, what would your combat morph be?

Wren

That wasn't quite the question I thought you were going to ask.

Brandon

What did you think it was going to ask?

Wren

I thought you were going to ask if I had to get stuck in animal form, which one I would have picked.

Brandon

I assume a wren.

Wren

No.

Brandon

You're allowed to be wrong, I guess.

Wren

Wow. It would be so useless to get stuck as a wren. I would just get eaten.

Brandon

I know. It would just be convenient.

Wren

So my answer for if I got stuck at something would be an ermine. But - and that would not be a terrible combat morph - but I feel like I would need something a little beefier for combat morph. So I'm going to go up to a fisher for a combat morph because they got some good claws. Good teeth. Very squirrely.

Brandon

Yeah. So you're going for like, quick and hard to hit more than just like muscle.

Wren

Oh, yeah. I'm like an, uh, an agility fighter. Hide, slice, hide, slice, jump up a tree.

Brandon

Yeah, yeah, that makes sense.

Wren

But if I were to get stuck or something, I would want almost the same amount of combat capability but be a little bit cuter and be an ermine. What about you?

Brandon

Um, so I do, I do find it difficult to argue with, you know, Jake's tiger selection or whatever, even though I don't really care about cats. But I don't know. I think like Komodo dragon or something could be cool. You know, not every zoo has one of those. But assuming it did. I have certainly seen some. Because they're...cause they're strong, and they're fast, and they have a septic bite.

Wren

They're not that fast.

Brandon

They're fast. Not ermine fast.

Wren

That's true. They're fast-ish. I feel like all reptiles have a speed limitation. And I know that when I'm playing a video game, and I'm playing some sort of fighter type that's like slow and bulky, I get so agitated. I just wanted to be something fast. So I feel like even a Komodo dragon, I would just be like, I'm too slow.

Brandon

Yeah, I don't feel like I would want to be like an elephant or whatever. I don't think I wouldn't be in that class for sure. I was thinking about also like things that would be sort of agility fighters. But I don't think I would want to go all the way down to a fisher necessarily. You know, a canine can also be useful.

Wren

Yeah, but canines can't get up trees.

Brandon

That's true. Yeah, I mean, I can't...I can't fault any of the Animorphs their choice. I mean, I find the usefulness of a hawk in a fight a little dubious, but he does obliterate that guy's eyes.

Wren

I mean, hawks legs...their claws are like basically spring-loaded. The amount of force in a hawk's grip is...I mean, it can break the spine of a rabbit instantly. It's, it's...I wouldn't choose a red-tailed hawk, because they're on the smaller side of, of, you know, raptor-type birds that one could be, but...yeah.

Brandon

I could see going for some kind of, for like a horse or something like Cassie does, right? Like, because that adds a certain utility. I feel like I'm a person who I wouldn't necessarily want to be the frontline fighter or the frontline tank, but I want to have some utility to the group. So like, hey, I'm a zebra. People can jump on my back. And I can also hit things with my hooves. Because here's the other thing: I kind of feel like I would be weirded out by biting stuff. I guess I would get used to it if it was you know, biting something and like my mouth getting a little icky, or, you know, Earth becoming subjugated by an alien empire, but I do see some appeal to being like, "No, my power is kicking. I kick things real hard with with these hooves and they just...just get kicked real hard."

Wren

Yeah, well, I'm I'm excited that I finally got around to reading these books. I think it was a really good pick. Thank you for showing me the wonder that is teen trauma.

Brandon

Yeah, so I waffled about how many giant peaches this gets. I think it gets like four.

Wren

I was gonna say four.

Brandon

I think it gets four.

Wren

It's hard to get past some of the '90s grammar, and...you know, I can't give something a five that has so many uses of the word "lame." But it was really compelling.

Brandon

I mean, I'm very seriously considering, you know, beginning my reread-slash-first time read of the latter half of the series.

Wren

I'm continuing to keep going, so I have no judgment here.

Brandon

So that's, that's our rating. Animorphs #1, thumbs up. So what are we reading next?

Wren

Well, I thought that since I made us read Stephen King, and you allowed us the pleasure of reading this, we still might want a little bit of a palate cleanser. And this book that I'm going to have us read next is about animals, but it is just a cute, fluffy little thing that I read more times than I can even remember as a child.

Brandon

I desperately hope that you're about to say something like Watership Down. Carry on.

Wren

That'll happen. But we're going to read The Cricket in Times Square by George Selden. It's got crickets. It's got mice. It's got cats. They're all friends. Everything's fine. No trauma.

Brandon

Do they fight aliens?

Wren

Find out when you read the book.