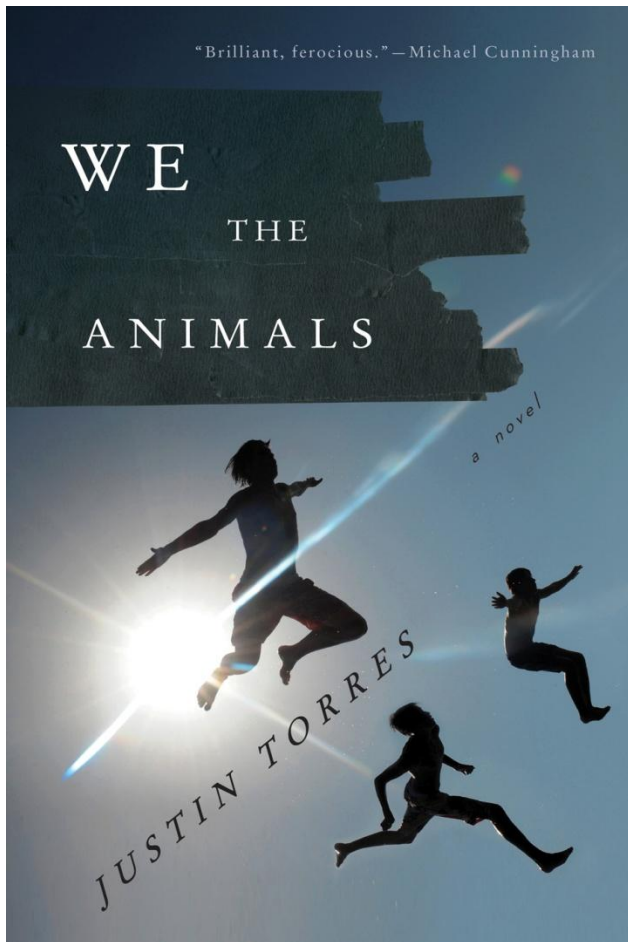


About the Book



We the Animals by Justin Torres is a novel about family and the often-unexpected struggles and joys of life. In this book, a young boy discusses his life in an unorthodox family group living in upstate New York. His parents, a Brooklyn-born mother and a Puerto Rican father, began having children in their early teenage years and were barely able to raise them. Regardless, they now have three boys -- seven, nine, and 10 years of age -- who call themselves the "Three Musketeers" and "The Animals" and enjoy the intense ups and downs of life with one another.

About the Author

Biography:

Justin Torres grew up in upstate New York. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, *Tin House*, *Glimmer Train*, and other publications. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, he is a recipient of the Rolón United States Artist Fellowship in Literature, and is now a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford. He has worked as a farmhand, a dog-walker, a creative writing teacher, and a bookseller.

Awards:

Winner 2012 Cabell First Novelist Award
Nominated for NAACP Image Awards
Finalist for the 2012 Indies Choice Book Awards

Writings:

We the Animals (novel) 2011

Interview with Los Angeles Review of Books (by Daniel Olivas):

DANIEL OLIVAS: It's now been a year since your debut novel, *We the Animals*, was published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and the paperback edition comes out this month. Since then, it has received the type of critical acclaim and press coverage all writers dream of including raves from *The*

New York Times, The New Yorker, Esquire, Kirkus Reviews (starred review), Vanity Fair, NPR, to name several. But I wanted to ask you about Rigoberto González's review of your novel in the Los Angeles Review of Books which ends with this observation:

It's sad indeed that *We the Animals* — like most literary works with homosexual content, aside from Greek mythology — will not make most high school reading lists without controversy, if at all. But even if it's kept off reading lists and library shelves, Torres's book will undoubtedly find an audience in a number of other communities, including the Latino, LGBT, and both young adult and adult readerships.

What did you think when you first read that observation? Has he been proven right?

JUSTIN TORRES: Rigoberto González is an excellent writer and it was such a treat to find out he'd reviewed the book. I do remember reading the review, but don't remember this line. But then, I don't read reviews of my own work too closely. I can't. My eyes are near shut from wincing in anticipation of a vicious take down.

I can say, anecdotally, that quite a few high school teachers have found me on Facebook, or tracked down my email, to let me know that they were indeed teaching the novel. But I've also heard from those who say they wish they could teach it, but the adult content is too heavy, or serious, or explicit, etc. Or they teach certain chapters and not others. On the whole, I'd assume González is probably right. Adolescent sexuality is generally considered dangerous material for high schools to address in literature, which makes queer adolescent sexuality near toxic. He's also right about the book finding an audience through word of mouth in queer and Latino communities, and many undergraduate and graduate college writing classes, and these are all my people, and it makes me damn proud.

DO: *We the Animals* centers on family life of three brothers and their often bickering parents (Puerto Rican father, white mother) where money, food and hope are in short supply. The youngest brother is struggling and attempting to hide his sexuality even as he sneaks off to public restrooms looking for partners. You've said that your novel is loosely autobiographical. How have your family members reacted to it? Have you been surprised by their responses?

JT: Ha! What a question! Are you asking if my parents think I'm a toilet freak? I don't know. We've never talked about that part of the book. I do know that my family members have been variously hurt, amused, bemused and delighted. I know they're proud of me and I know they take issue with certain aspects of the book I've written. I have felt humbled and honored by their grace, by both the questions they ask and the questions they don't ask, and surprised by the support they've shown. I created a fictional family with major similarities to the family I grew up with, and yet this is a profoundly different, profoundly fictional family. I wanted to say something true about familial love and familial failings, and I felt the best way to reach that truth was fiction. I think, I hope, they get that.

DO: *We the Animals* just won the 2012 Cabell First Novelist Award which honors an outstanding debut novel published during a calendar year. I am told that you are the first Latino writer to win this prestigious award which will culminate with you being honored in November at a festival held at Virginia Commonwealth University, the sponsor of this award. Since you will be participating in various panel discussions and workshops during the festival, are you doing anything to prepare for it? Do you have any thoughts about being a "first"?

JT: The list of finalists and semi-finalists for the VCU Cabell Award included just magnificent writing. I never expected to win, and man it felt great when I did. I have done nothing to prepare, as of yet, but in general I'm pretty terrible at prepared remarks. I much prefer spontaneity and interacting with audience questions. Also, I'm more frank, and crass, and honest, if I'm not given time to prepare. As

far as being a “first” goes, I always hope that whatever success the book has makes it easier for other writers, and other books, that may be marginalized from the literary center to find publishers and audiences.

DO: You’ve attended the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and you were a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. How did participation in two prestigious writing programs shape *We the Animals*? How did your fellow students react to your writing?

JT: Iowa and Stanford are very different programs, but they share utter devotion to the written word — the faculty, the students, the administrators, everyone cares deeply about literature, and the primary goal of both programs is nothing more than to support and nurture young writers. This is incredible. One could argue forever about the workshop model, and people love to talk about whether or not to get an MFA, and whether MFAs are ruining literature, but I know that in my case I was 28 and desperately broke. They paid me to write. Enough said. And this is not to mention the mentorship, the fellowship, the drunken, sincere, conversations about similes and structure, the melding of tastes and the necessity to constantly articulate and defend my own literary tastes and choices.

DO: How long did it take you to write *We the Animals*? How did you place your manuscript? Did the process surprise you?

JT: The book took five or six years to write, I say five or six because I never sat down and thought, I’m going to write a book. I started slowly. I actually finished right before arriving at Stanford, and was lucky enough to have published some stories by then, and through those stories, my agent found me. So I handed the manuscript off, she sent it out to editors, I met with a bunch, and clicked with Jenna Johnson, my editor. I dread talking about this side because it was easy for me, I had choices all along the way, and that is just not how it usually works. There are so many brilliant, successful authors who suffered through years of rejection. Rejection is the norm.

DO: Did you work closely with an editor at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt? How did that experience compare with the workshop setting?

JT: Jenna is phenomenal, and we’ve become very close. She had key insights, but the book was short and tightly written, there was no major overhaul or anything like that. I was the same in workshop, by the time I handed something in, likely it was going to be as polished and near finished as I could manage. I’ve never been one to let people near my early drafts, not editors or classmates.

DO: I found heartbreaking your narrator’s plight of being deeply in the closet to his family. When did you come out to your family? How did that experience influence or inspire you as a writer?

JT: That’s a long, rather tragic story. My “coming out” was different than the narrator’s, but similar enough that to go into specifics would be too much of a spoiler, I think.

DO: You’re now in a position to share knowledge with budding writers. What advice would you offer a young person who has the drive and passion to write fiction?

JT: You know, I hate giving advice. And the young person you’re describing who “has the drive and passion to write fiction” needs no advice. Go for it. What I think you mean is, do I have any advice on how to get published? All I can say is that I had no expectations when I started writing, I wrote out of passion, or obsession. I wrote to break my own heart. I did not write to get published, I’d never heard of Iowa or the Stegner Fellowship. I didn’t know such things as literary agents existed. I took a writing class, and I loved the teacher and the other writers, loved reading my words aloud. I read a lot and I

wrote more. I tried to break other hearts besides my own. I had fun with the work, and sometimes it felt like torture. I tried to be honest. I tried to write with beauty.

DO: You've had many jobs on your road to becoming a published writer including working as a farmhand, a dog-walker, a creative writing teacher, and a bookseller. Are you still doing odd jobs, or do you now have the luxury of being a fulltime writer?

JT: Right now I am a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies at Harvard. They give me an office and stipend and the only expectation is that I spend the year writing. It is the oddest, most gloriously luxurious "job" I have ever had. After this year, I'll have to get a real job.

DO: Are you working on a new novel?

JT: Yes. Slowly.

DO: All right, for my last question, I want to note that Salon named you one of the sexiest men of 2011, noting in part: "The intense, soulful gaze on his author photo, one that had literati across Brooklyn dreaming of meeting those empathetic eyes, earned Torres a second MFA — as our Most Foxy Author of 2011." Will this honor be noted in the paperback edition of *We the Animals*?

JT: I don't think it's on the paperback but thank you for bringing this up! I try to work this into most conversations, but it can be awkward. Like someone will ask, "Do you want anything from the fridge?" And I'll respond, "I was voted fourth most sexiest man of 2011, after Thom Yorke." See what I mean? Awkward.

Reviews

Library Journal

In punchy, energized language, the narrator of this dark and affecting little book relates life with his two brothers and their too young, just-making-it parents. The boys play and fight, with the first sometimes blending into the second, and though the parents can be loving with each other and with their sons, there's often trouble. Ma stops going to work when Paps briefly takes up with another woman, for instance, and becomes spiteful when he brings home a new truck with no seat belts or even backseats. The narrative moves in a straight line but is not straightforward, with the story and the texture of this family's life disclosed through a string of telling incidents. The narrator reports it all in a dispassionate, almost starry-eyed youngster's sort of way, frequently in the first person plural—"we were allowed to be what we were, frightened and vengeful-little animals, clawing at what we need"—but a creeping tension is in the air. When real anguish bursts forth at the end, you almost think it comes un-deserved—and then you applaud first novelist Torres's genius ability to twist around and punch you in the gut. VERDICT Highly recommended. --Barbara Hoffert

Booklist

Told in the form of linked short stories (some very short no more than three pages), Torres' first novel is an impressionistic examination of a family of mixed race and ethnicity: the mother is white; the father, Puerto Rican. Though originally from Brooklyn, the family now lives in upstate New York, though the setting is seldom site-specific. The stories focus on the family's three boys Manny, 10; Joel, 9; and the narrator, 7 and are often elegiac accounts of fighting over blankets or flying trash-bag kites, but because the parents' marriage is contentious, some are tinged with violence. The title is a

reference to the narrator's view of his brothers and himself as being animals; readers may think of puppies but sometimes of something wilder. And that something wilder comes to prevail as the boys grow up and the narrator realizes he's gay. This will lead to an uncharacteristically operatic, almost melodramatic ending that seems to violate the book's tone. But be that as it may, Torres is clearly a gifted writer with a special talent for tone and characterization. His novel is a pleasure to read.--
Michael Cart

Publisher's Weekly

Three brothers and a dueling husband and wife are bound by poverty and love in this debut novel from Stegner Fellow Torres. Manny, Joel, and the unnamed youngest, who narrates, are rambunctious and casually violent. Their petite "white" mother, with her night-shift job and unstable marriage to the boys' impulsive Puerto Rican father, is left suspended in an abusive yet still often joyous home. Nothing seems to turn out right, whether it's Paps getting fired for bringing the boys to work or Ma loading them in the truck and fleeing into the woods. The short tales that make up this novel are intriguing and beautifully written, but take too long to reach the story's heart, the narrator's struggle to come of age and discover his sexuality in a hostile environment. When the narrator's father catches him dancing like a girl, he remarks: "Goddamn, I got me a pretty one." From this point the story picks up momentum, ending on a powerful note, as Torres ratchets up the consequences of being different.

Discussion Questions (www.litlovers.com/)

1. How does the opening chapter, "We Wanted More," serve to introduce the rest of the novel? What do you learn about the narrator and his brothers?
2. Now look at the brothers individually—who is Manny, Joel, the youngest brother? What sets them apart? At what point do you begin to see them separate? What separates them? Why doesn't the youngest have a name?
3. Look at the three brothers as whole—the "we" of the title. What characterizes them as a whole? How do they operate as one unit? Why is it important that there are three?
4. What exactly is the animalistic nature of boys in general, and of these boys in particular? What are the different ways throughout the book that Torres compares the boys to animals? Are the other characters in the book—their mother and father—likened to animals, too? In what ways? Are we all animals?
5. Look at all the different names for the boys—from the ones they give themselves, "Muskateers," "monsters," "the magic of God" (p. 24-25), to the ones others give them, "invaders, marauders, scavengers...hideaways, fugitives, punks, cityslickers, bastards... sweets, babies, innocents...Animals" (p. 35, 37)—and discuss the truth of these definitions, what words mean to these boys, how they come to discover who they are.
6. Look at the chapter "Never-Never Time." Do you see a connection to Never-Never Land in Peter Pan? Compare the brothers in *We the Animals* to the Lost Boys in Peter Pan. What other elements and characters of the Peter Pan story are here?
7. "That's how it sometimes was with Ma; I needed to press myself against something cold and hard, or I'd get dizzy" (p. 13). Discuss the mother's role in the story. What effect does she have

on the men in her life? How does she operate as the lone female? What is her power? How and when does she choose to use or not use it?

8. "Never-Never Time" and "The Lake" both end with the celebration of life. Are the lives in *We the Animals* joyful? Precarious? What makes life precious to them? In what ways are the characters living in extremes and what are those extremes?

9. Hunger is a theme throughout the novel. What are the different characters hungry for?

10. In what ways does violence appear and do work in the novel? How is violence related to the human and the animal? How is it tied to love? And does sex enter into these relationships as well? How are sex and violence intertwined?

11. How do the members of this family love each other? What is at stake in their loving and how do they show their affection and connection?

12. What separates the family from the rest of the community they live in? What prejudices do they experience?

13. "I used to believe we could escape," (p. 84) Manny says in "Trash Kites." Paps had resigned himself to the same in "Night Watch" (p. 60), saying: "We're never gonna escape this." What do they want to escape, exactly? And who else wants to escape? Why? And which, if any of them, can actually do it? What other books can you think of that deal with this kind of struggle?

14. How does *We the Animals* both resemble and defy the classic coming-of-age novel?

15. Were you surprised by the ending? What do you think is happening in the last chapter? What does it mean that the other animals "crown me prince of their rank jungles" (p. 125)?

Read-Alikes

Chad Harbach, [*The Art of Fielding*](#) (2011)

The Art of Fielding is a novel from debut author Chad Harbach. College shortstop Henry Skrimshander seems poised to start a major league baseball career following his graduation from Westish College, but one bad play leads to disastrous results for five individuals. Henry's time at the quaint Wisconsin school is coming to a close, but a crisis of self-doubt might prevent him from achieving the goals he's always dreamed of. College president and longtime bachelor Guert Affenlight has fallen madly in love with little regard to the consequences. Henry's best friend and team captain, Mike Schwartz, has devoted too much time to Henry's future and not enough to his own, while Henry's gay roommate, Owen Dunne, is nursing an injury and a dangerous affair. Meanwhile, Guert's adult daughter, Pella, has returned to Westish after a heartbreaking divorce and she has her sights set on two baseball players.

Rudolfo Anaya, [*Bless Me, Ultima*](#) (1972)

Seven-year-old Antonio learns about life, nature and death, in rural New Mexico. Through his relationship with Ultima, a curandera, the story takes place during and immediately after World War II,

a war in which three of Antonio's brothers fight. Ultima, a wonderful curandera, is an aging mysterious healer who works magic among the people of the rural countryside. This story describes evil, violent deaths, religious awakenings, and cruelty in childhood, but is also about life's funny twists and memorable characters.

Ernesto Quinonez, [Bodega Dreams](#) (2000)

Chino and Blanca are a young Puerto Rican couple living in East Harlem and hoping someday to move out. They're working their way through college and a baby is on the way. Blanca is deeply religious and wishes that Chino would walk away from his street friends, especially Sapo. But Chino can't turn his back on his drug-dealing friends, so when Sapo asks for a favor, Chino goes along to meet Willie Bodega. It seems that Bodega, a drug lord, has a mission. Bodega is seeking respectability through wealth and needs Chino simply because he's related to Willie's old flame, Veronica. Willie lost Veronica long ago, but now he feels he's rich enough to pursue her.

Sandra Cisneros, [The House on Mango Street](#) (1983)

In this novel, young Esperanza Cordera searches for identity and community in her Latino neighborhood of Chicago. As she reaches adulthood, Esperanza examines violence, oppression, and friendship through writing, narrating the story of her life and the lives of other Mango Street women. The novel covers one crucial year in her life.

Victor Villasenor, *Thirteen Senses: A Memoir* (2001)

Victor Villasenor is well-known for [Rain of Gold](#) (1991), a memoir of his family's turbulent history. In this sequel, he tells the dramatic story of his parents' marriage, travels, and eventual settlement in California. The story begins with a remarriage ceremony at the couple's fiftieth wedding anniversary, during which Lupe, the author's mother, refuses to obey her husband Salvador. Returning to their first wedding fifty years before, the author addresses the problem that has plagued all the years of their marriage: Salvador's refusal to give up bootlegging. Villasenor also examines the complex relationship between Lupe and Salvador and tries to determine whether or not they loved one another.

Watch-Alikes

[The Fighter](#), Paramount (2010)

Micky Ward is a struggling boxer long overshadowed by his older brother and trainer, Dicky, a local legend battling his own demons. Their explosive relationship threatens to take them both down. However, the bond of blood may be their only chance to redeem their pasts, and, at last, give their hard-luck town what it's been waiting for: pride.

[A River Runs Through It](#), Columbia (1992)

Academy Award-winning director Robert Redford captures the majesty of the Montana Wilderness and the strength of the American family in this acclaimed adaptation of Norman Maclean's classic autobiography. Craig Sheffer stars as the young Norman, and Brad Pitt also stars as his brother Paul, an irresistible daredevil driven to challenge the world. Growing up, both boys rebel against their stern

minister father. While Norman channels his rebellion into writing, Paul descends a slippery path to self-destruction. Co-starring Tom Skerritt as the Reverend Maclean and Emily Lloyd as wild-hearted Jessie Burns, *A River Runs Through It* is "destined to become a classic. It's a knockout."

[*Brothers McMullen*](#), Fox (1995)

After their good-for-nothing father dies and their mother leaves to be with the man she really loves, brothers Jack, Barry and Patrick are left with only each other as they struggle with their relationships. Married Jack is tempted to have an affair; Patrick isn't sure his fiancée is 'the one'; and Barry can't deal with the fact that he is actually falling in love.

[*Brother's Keeper*](#), IFC (2003)

Brother's Keeper tells the story of the "Ward Boys," four eccentric brothers who shared the same dilapidated two-room shack for over 60 years. Living in isolation, without heat or running water, these elderly bachelors had virtually no contact with the outside world--until one was found dead in the bed he shared with his brother. By day's end, Delbert Ward "confessed" to suffocating his ailing brother as an act of mercy, but Munnsville believed Delbert had been framed. Was Delbert, an uneducated hermit with a low IQ, an innocent victim of police abuse? Was it a mercy killing--or was there another motive?



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