



Interview with Isa Leshko

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KENNEALLY: In Isa Leshko's book-length collection of photographs published this week by the University of Chicago Press, you will meet many intriguing characters. They share a quiet country lifestyle, and they are all happily retired. Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book.

The pastoral setting of *Allowed to Grow Old: Portraits of Elderly Animals from Farm Sanctuaries* comes in opposition to the harsh conditions where Isa Leshko's subjects earlier had found themselves. Abe the goat, Babs the donkey, and Teresa the pig all suffered abuse and neglect before they were rescued and given the chance to live out their lives unmolested. For the photographer, getting their pictures meant getting to know them at ground level, and when she got back up, she discovered she had a book.

Isa Leshko joins me now on the line from her studio in Salem, Massachusetts. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Isa.

LESHKO: Thank you for having me.

KENNEALLY: We're looking forward to chatting with you about the making of your new book from the University of Chicago Press called *Allowed to Grow Old*. It's a book with a 10-year history at this point. As I understand, it began to emerge – your interest in this particular subject as a photographer began to emerge after you had been caring for your mother who had Alzheimer's.

LESHKO: That's correct. My mom and actually my dad as well were in ailing health, and there was a span of a few years in which my photography had been largely put on hold while my sister and I were managing their care. I considered photographing my mom. A number of fine art photographers have gone that path. But it just did not seem like the right direction for me to move in. I wanted to be really present as a daughter and as a sister.

But I knew that it was going to somehow emerge in my work, and sure enough, I had a chance encounter with this beautiful blind old horse named Petey, and I fell in love with him. I didn't know why I was so drawn to him, but I knew I had to photograph him. I had with me a toy camera, a little plastic camera called a Holga that I ran into the house to get, and I spent the afternoon photographing him. And



when I looked at my film from that afternoon, I realized that I was exploring a lot of the feelings that had come up surrounding my mom's decline, specifically my fear of aging.

KENNEALLY: Since then, Isa Leshko, you have photographed a wide variety of animals in a similar situation as Pete's. You've photographed goats and ducks, chickens, turkeys, all manner of species, and that's been a fascinating adventure for you. And as I mentioned, you really had to get down to ground level. You see these as portraits, as kind of intimate experiences with your subjects. Tell us a bit more about that.

LESHKO: Yeah, it was important to me that I treat these images as portraits. I wanted to show viewers of these images that these farm animals are sentient, emotional beings with unique personalities. So it was important to me that I photograph them at eye level, even though it meant contorting my body in really uncomfortable positions for hours on end and lying in animal scat for hours on end, as well.

But I wanted to try to, with each image, show something unique about that animal. So it was less important that the image be a beautiful pig picture, for example, so much as a portrait of Teresa, a rescued pig that I had spent hours getting to know and trying to show something unique about her personality to viewers of that image.

KENNEALLY: And when you decided that you wanted to create a book, you had some very important steps you needed to take, and you realized that your interest in this advocacy piece of the work would mean you wanted to reach as wide an audience as you could. So you needed to generate some publicity even before the book was to be published. What steps did you take?

LESHKO: Early in the project, I felt that I needed to generate publicity for the book, because at that point, the dealers who were representing me were not enthusiastic about the work. And I felt this compulsion to create these images, and I knew I needed to create funding and an audience to support the creation of the work.

So I collaborated with a husband-and-wife filmmaking team, Walley Films, to create a short film about the project. It generated a lot of media attention and online visibility, and the print sales did indeed follow. And it opened a number of doors with regards to this project. As the work had gone viral, I had been contacted by a literary agent who had reached out to me. When we talked about the book, she had in mind the idea of a small gift book that would appear kind of – the impulse-buy section of bookstores near the cash registers. That was not the direction that I



wanted to go in for the book, but the fact that she contacted me inspired me to research and contact other literary agents.

As part of that process, I was connected with Elizabeth Kaplan, who, when we met, I just knew she was going to be the perfect agent to work with me. She actually cried when she saw the images, and she connected with the work at a deep, emotional level and respected my vision for the project.

KENNEALLY: And that vision got more fully realized when you chose to not do what many artists and many artistic photographers do these days, which is to bring some money to the table, sometimes on the order of \$20,000 to \$40,000, as I understand, and that sum is there to help essentially subsidize the publication of the book. You decided you didn't want to do that, probably because that's a lot of money, but also because it meant that it'd be a certain kind of book.

LESHKO: That's correct. Crowdsourcing has definitely been an incredible tool for a number of artists, but it is by no means guaranteed. And at that time, there were so many crowdsourcing campaigns for books that people were starting to feel a little irritated each time one would launch.

It also was important to me that my book not be published with a niche art publisher. I wanted the work to be seen by a wide and diverse audience, mainly because of the advocacy components of the work, but also because when the work had gone viral, my galleries and I had been flooded with print inquiries from people weren't art collectors. And most sadly, but not surprisingly, were unable to afford my limited edition prints. I wanted to be able to give something to people who connected passionately with this work who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford my prints. So that was another reason why I wanted to not go with a niche art book publisher. They produce gorgeous books, but the price point is still pretty high, even when funding is brought to the table.

KENNEALLY: Well, Isa Leshko, there's an expression in trade book publishing called comp titles, and that's an effort to identify which previously published books are at least like the book you have in mind publishing. You came across one, and that's what led to the publication for your book. You remembered a title called *The Oldest Living Things in the World*, a book by Rachel Sussman, and you did some research as to who published that book.

LESHKO: That's correct. What happened was Elizabeth Kaplan, my agent, and I had initially pitched the book to larger trade publishers, but it became pretty clear rather quickly that it was just not going to be the right fit for the book. And on my shelf for a while had been Rachel Sussman's book as an example of the type of book I



wanted to produce. I knew it had been published by the University of Chicago Press, but I didn't know who the editor was on the project. So I researched that, discovered it was Christie Henry, who is now the director of Princeton University Press. And my agent reached out to her, and it was an almost instantaneous response, which was very exciting.

For about a week, Christie and I had several in-depth email exchanges about the book, and it was really clear that I had found the right home for the book. My gut reaction to that proved to be definitely correct. It's been a joy to work with the University of Chicago Press on this project.

KENNEALLY: Well, congratulations on the publication of the book this week. What's been the response from critics and the public?

LESHKO: It's still pretty early. The book had gotten a really surprising early review in the London *Observer*, and it was a four-page feature in their print edition that also got published on the *Guardian* website. That was just a dream come true. It was just so surreal to see my images laid out in print that way. So that was a great first review.

It's just starting to ship, but this morning on Facebook, someone had posted a lovely review about the book. So I was very excited, because that was the first non-family friend member who read the book and contacted me about it. So hopefully, that's a sign of good things to come in terms of the response.

KENNEALLY: And the book has been meaningful to you not just as an artist but also as a person, because you've learned an important lesson. You had that fear of aging that set you out on the project in the first place. How has it changed your own view about what happens when we get older?

LESHKO: As I had mentioned, the direction of the work had changed, so that was not my focus as I worked on the project. But at the same time, being around these farm animals who had survived and endured so much, recognizing the fact that they were incredibly lucky to reach old age, that most of their kin die within the first six months of their lives, it kind of changed my perspective on aging, and it made me appreciate that old age is a luxury and not a curse.

I think I'm always going to be afraid as to whether I'm going to develop Alzheimer's disease, and I certainly don't know what the future has in store for me. But when I think about the grace and the stoicism and the strength that these animals showed in their final months, I'm inspired and hope that I can meet my old age in the same manner as they did.



KENNEALLY: Well, photographer Isa Leshko, the author of the new book from the University of Chicago Press, *Allowed to Grow Old: Portraits of Elderly Animals from Farm Sanctuaries*, we appreciate the chance to speak to with you and learn about your project. Thanks for joining me today on Beyond the Book.

LESHKO: Thank you so much for having me. It's been a privilege talking with you.

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