



# Our Hen House

CHANGE THE WORLD FOR ANIMALS

a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization

## Interview with Jo-Anne McArthur

By OUR HEN HOUSE

Published January 11, 2014

*Following is a transcript of an interview with **JO-ANNE MCARTHUR** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 209.*

JASMIN: For more than 10 years, award-winning photojournalist and activist Jo-Anne McArthur, has investigated and documented the plight of animals in captivity around the world. Aside from her work being published and exhibited internationally, Jo-Anne makes her photos freely available to animal advocacy organizations, including Igualdad Animal, Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, Toronto Pig Save, Animals Asia, Farm Sanctuary, and the Jane Goodall Institute. Jo-Anne has won multiple awards for her work and her activism, including the 2013 Compassion for Animals Award in Toronto, and the 2011 Canadian Empathy Award, Art category. Her life and work are currently on the big screen in the feature-length documentary, *The Ghosts in Our Machine*, by filmmaker Liz Marshall. And her new book, *We Animals*, published by Lantern Books, includes more than 100 photographs shot over the last decade in 40 countries. Visit [weanimals.org](http://weanimals.org) to learn more and to find out more about the book.

Welcome back to Our Hen House, Jo-Anne.

JO-ANNE: Jasmin, how are you?

JASMIN: I am so good! You're one of--

MARIANN: I'm here too, Jo-Anne!

JO-ANNE: Hi, Mariann.

MARIANN: Hi.

JASMIN: Jo-Anne and I were having a moment.

MARIANN: Well, stop it and include me in the moment.

JASMIN: Okay. Well, Jo-Anne--

JO-ANNE: Hello, you two. Don't fight. Talk to me.

JASMIN: Our entire--

MARIANN: I want Jo-Anne!

JASMIN: Anyway, Jo-Anne, we're such big fans of you and your work, and you've joined us before and you've talked about *The Ghosts in Our Machine* and you've talked about the amazing photography you do. And now, your book is out! We all heard about this book, *We Animals*, in *The Ghosts in Our Machine*, as part of your struggle to get your images seen. In fact, we were in that scene with you--

JO-ANNE: You were!

JASMIN: --in *The Ghosts in Our Machine*, clearly the riveting part of the film. I'm just kidding, the whole film was riveting. What an amazing film. And I love that from that piece of art, of the film, this other piece of art, your book, was born. So, tell us how it came to be that it was published.

JO-ANNE: Well, every photographer wants to do a book. We all dream of that, and that has been my goal for a long time, but I put that on the backburner because I realized that my work was far more effective when I worked with campaigns. Getting my images out to the different groups around the world meant they were being seen, even in a viral kind of way over the internet. So, because I'm an activist first, before being a photographer who wants to be published in a book, that's what I was doing. However, Liz, the director of *Ghosts in Our Machine*, really encouraged me to get on this and start working on it. And she's a forward thinker, she's a visionary and she was right. It was really good timing to get working on it again and to have the film and the book come out in the same year. There's just so much excitement about both right now.

MARIANN: Absolutely. I mean, it's great timing because of the movie, of course. But it's also great timing for both of them because just people's consciousness are shifting and I really think that they're ready to see your pictures, that is, in a new way. And putting them together will help them do that. But I'm wondering, when you take these pictures, what is your goal when you take the picture? Are you just thinking that you want to tell the truth about what's happening here, or are you consciously trying to tell the truth in a way that will allow people to see it, that will allow people to, say, allow themselves to look?

JO-ANNE: Yeah. Well, first of all, a lot of the things that I'm trying to photograph are hidden and completely invisible and ignored in our society, so first of all, it's actually getting into factory farms, getting into fur farms, looking at our use of fur and all these things. But a lot of the photography that's been produced over the last couple decades that is typical activist photography is shot the way we normally shoot things, which is far away or from the eye, typical human eye height, shooting downward. But better photography needed to happen, and it's great because organizations are really picking up on this, and photography that's being produced now to help the animal rights issue has really come a long way. So, you need good photos, and so that's what I'm doing is getting down and getting close and trying to go through the experience with the animal, whether they're sitting there in a gestation crate on a factory farm, or even the really, really brutal close-up stuff like being with cows if they die, showing what it's like to be a macaque in a cage before they're shipped off to be used for research.

Luckily it's not all the depressing stuff, it's the good stuff too that's really important to show. Some people are motivated to change by seeing the cruelty in the world, but people are equally motivated by seeing stories of sanctuary, and so I'm trying to do a lot of that too, show sanctuary and show rescue and show compassion.

JASMIN: One of the things that your photos really demonstrate to me, as does Liz's film, is the power of art. I'm not actually sure what comes first here, art or activism. I think it's activism, but then I think it's art, but then I think it's activism. I just don't know.

JO-ANNE: I go back and forth too.

JASMIN: Yeah, because it's a really -- and Sue Coe is similar too, in that you look at her images and her paintings, and you think, that is gorgeous, that is actually very beautiful. And then you think, that is harrowing and horrible and I want to die. And then you think, but yet there's hope in it. All of these three feelings I get from you, from Sue Coe, from Liz Marshall. What are some of your favorite, so to speak, images of yours that are featured in *We Animals* and what are the stories behind them?

JO-ANNE: Well, the art part is so important because art engages, and it's not just something careless, it's something finely crafted. So, with that, and to answer your question, some of my favorite images are... like, there's one of a rabbit who is next in line for slaughter. It's so strange to even talk about my photos in these contexts and the beauty of it. But I'm crouched down next to the rabbit and the rabbit is looking at me and at my lens, and looks just so scared. And you can see the other rabbits in the background who have just been killed, so a real connection is made there. That's probably one of my favorite images.

I have another one, and I wanted it for the cover, but people didn't vote for it for the cover, and that's okay. I'm over it, I'm totally over it!

JASMIN: No bad feelings.

JO-ANNE: It's a photo that I took a few years ago at the bullfights in Spain. And when people think of my work they often think it's about animals, but in a way it's really not about, it's about the human animals. It's about how we treat nonhuman animals. And so this photo that I love, it's one of my favorites, it's at the bullfight. And I'm in the audience, and in the foreground are two hands, and they're the hands of a man and a woman. And they're leaning, and they're watching the show, and the man has a big cigar in his chubby fingers, and the woman has a fan and she's fanning herself. And the photo is really about excess and entertainment, and the bullfighter and the bull are in the arena, but they're out of focus. They're way off in the distance. And the animal is figuratively and really here in this photo in an afterthought, just off in the distance, the secondary thing. And what's the most important to us in these places when we go for entertainment is how we're doing and how we're feeling and who we're seeing and smoking our cigars and being with our friends, and then the animal is just an afterthought. And we treat animals that way all the time. They're just an afterthought, if they're an afterthought at all, so I think that photo really represents that idea well.

JASMIN: It must be so odd to see these photos that you've taken. And for me, I'm just seeing that moment in time, and yet for you, you probably remember that day, you remember what it was like to get in where you were, and the emotions that came up for you, and yet here you are having a photograph and that's the moment that others are taking in. Is that a surreal experience for you?

JO-ANNE: I still like that you thought about that. Thanks. It is like that. This one photo that I just described is the culmination of days and days of work. But yeah, going in there, I'm often on my own. While I was shooting that story, I was on my own. And I didn't want to pay for a ticket, so I went into the back and knocked on the back door and said, "Hey I'm with the media. Can I just come in and do a story on this?" And so, they let me have access to everything, and everyone was very kind, and the men were very flirty, to have this Canadian English-speaking girl around. And they let me into everywhere, and it was a lot of work, and it's just putting on a front. You know, "hey, I'm having a good time," and obviously I'm not having a good time. I'm working really hard, and feeling really upset about the animals, but then the animals would get taken out of the arena and drawn into the back where they're slaughtered, and so I shot all of that as well. And so, I'm standing around in a pool of blood and chatting with the men while they're doing this. And yeah, there's really a lot that goes on behind each photograph, for sure.

MARIANN: Well, one of the things I love about the book that at least gives a taste of that is the commentary accompanying the photographs, and it gives a lot of context and depth to the photographs that you wouldn't otherwise have. Have you written for publication before, and what was the experience like writing these commentaries for the photographs?

JO-ANNE: Oh. I have written for publications before, and it's never been like this of course. This is a whole book's worth of writing. But often when the photos are published, it's short captions or a 1000-word essay. So, this was totally different, and luckily I had the best person in the world to work with, which is Martin Rowe. And he was my editor and the publisher of Lantern Books. I went to him like five or six or seven years ago introducing him to my work, and I was such a fan of Lantern, and always hoped that one day I would get published by them. So, my dream has come true, and he definitely did a lot of hand-holding with me in writing together and rewriting together. And what we did was craft text that wasn't really directive or too emotive. Like, my first draft was very much about telling people how cruel things were. And he said, "You don't need to do that. You can let people have their own experience with the photography. Don't tell them how to react. Like, they just will react, so just instead describe what was happening that day. Describe the smells. Give them facts." And we crafted the text as such, and I think it worked out really beautifully. I'm really proud of it.

JASMIN: What was the scariest situation in which you found yourself when taking the pictures in this book?

JO-ANNE: When I documented the macaque farming in Laos, that was with Karol Orzechowski, who's the director of *Maximum Tolerated Dose*, and we were very, very undercover doing that work. And that's probably about as much as I can talk about when it comes to that, but that was pretty uncomfortable and we were very happy to be finished with that investigation.

MARIANN: Have you ever had an opportunity in which you might have been able to remove an animal from the situation in which he or she was held, and were you ever tempted to take them?

JO-ANNE: Oh, everyone asks that question, it's interesting. And of course, the hardest part of my work is leaving, absolutely. I hate leaving, and I'm always tempted to free or remove every single animal. But the fact is that I've met at this point hundreds and hundreds of

thousands of animals. You can even imagine going into one pig farm and spending eight hours there at night. Sometimes I've met 30,000 pigs in one evening. So, logistically of course it's impossible to help all the animals. Having said that, I do recount something very briefly at the back of the book. There's a section called "Notes from the Field," and it's my journal entries, a small section of my journal entries while doing investigative work. And you'll see a photo back there, and it's a photo full of dead animals, of dead rabbits. And we always film inside the dumpsters 'cause they're always full of animals. And so, we were filming, and all the rabbits were in plastic bags, but then as we filmed we saw that one of them was still breathing. And this animal had already been thrown out; it had been injured, and they couldn't even kill the animal before suffocating the animal. It was really atrocious, so I did take that rabbit.

JASMIN: Do you ever talk to the people who have the animals, and what kinds of conversations are those like?

JO-ANNE: Ah, well, they're pretty genuine conversations. Sometimes I go to farms and to slaughterhouses or call ahead and say, "hey, I'm a photojournalist and people don't get the opportunity to see this kind of thing or see where their food comes from, so can I come and have a tour?" And quite often, people have said yes, so I have spent the day at their farms, and asking them about the production and where the animals come from and how they're killed. And it's the best way to get information about how these things happen because it's face to face, and I'm genuinely very curious about how all these things happen, so some of my work is done that way.

MARIANN: You're in an interesting position that you've talked to so many people who are in animal abuse industries, and you were mentioning the people at the bullfighting ring and how flirtatious and gracious they were. Do you find a lot, is it confusing that these people don't seem evil sometimes? Are they sometimes nice people, and how does that affect you?

JO-ANNE: They're always nice people, and I don't find it confusing because -- I mean, at times I do, but generally humans are really complex and most of us don't give a thought for the animals. And that will come, and people will do that more and more. But for people of a certain generation and older in these very traditional cultures, I don't expect them really to have thought that much about it. And I also can't waste my time or spend a lot of time wondering why people are the way they are because -- And I think I say this in the film too, like, I don't have the answers. And I have in the past driven myself crazy asking myself all the whys that are just so complex, so rather than -- and my energy is so precious, there's so much to do, and I have to stay really, really positive.

And I like people, so some questions, I sort of leave to the side and leave to the philosophers, and just do the work and present the work and show the world, well, this is at a bullfight and these are the people and this is what's happening to the animals. And I definitely don't encourage people to judge the people, encourage my audience to judge people, because we've all been there and most vegans were meat-eaters before they were vegans. And if we were vegans, we probably have grandparents who were farmers and who are wonderful people. My grandfather was a dairy farmer, and I don't know. I don't really have time for judgment; I just have time for helping to create change.

JASMIN: Yeah, Mariann's grandparent, I think, was also a farmer, right?

MARIANN: Well, yeah. If you go back far enough, we all come from farmers pretty much. It's pretty universal.

JO-ANNE: Yeah, exactly.

JASMIN: Yeah, definitely. Jo-Anne, we've been following closely the reviews from *The Ghosts in Our Machine*, and they've been like absolutely fascinating to read. I've really been enjoying them, because you've gotten absolute raves, raves from some of the biggest papers out there. And then every now and then, a doozy comes out, like the one for *Variety*, which we just discussed a few weeks ago on the show. And it just, it seems to me like a lot of what you're kind of forcing people to look at and what Liz is forcing people to look at is just really bringing up what we like to call rising anxieties in people.

JO-ANNE: Yeah.

JASMIN: And sometimes the reviews wind up just being about the writer rationalizing his or her own outlook as opposed to talking about your photography or talking about Liz's documentary. How has that affected you?

JO-ANNE: Well, I'm pretty sensitive.

JASMIN: Yeah.

JO-ANNE: I just try not to take it to heart, but I have also learned over years and years that with presenting animal rights issues to people, it's a double whammy. You're not only confronting animal cruelty, which no one wants to do because I think people are already compassionate, and everyone loves dogs and cats and don't want to see cruelty. But you're making them confront that, but you're also making them confront themselves because just by virtue of being in the society, we're all complicit, some more than others, in animal cruelty. So, you're asking them to do things, first to look at the cruelty and then to look at themselves. And that's a lot of work, and people are really busy, so...

JASMIN: Right.

JO-ANNE: People don't have time for that. So, we just have to keep chipping away and different tactics, and I think we're making our way there.

JASMIN: Well, we're making our way there largely because of artists like you and people who are out there uncovering what's going on behind closed doors for people who would not otherwise see, and doing it in such a way that, for those who are not necessarily willing to go there with themselves yet, they can appreciate the art for what it is 'cause it really is art. And I just want to know how people can find *We Animals* and how we can help to get your images to reach a wider audience.

JO-ANNE: Thank you. Well, right now the easiest way to get the book is through Amazon. Just type in "We Animals Jo-Anne McArthur." If they want more information on the book, they would go to my site, which is weanimals.org. They can order it on the phone from Lantern Books, which is lanternbooks.com, and actually a really great thing for people to do is -- a really good way to get the book into bookstores is to have people call their local bookstore and order it, because if those bookstores start getting a call or two, they might say, okay, well, let's get five of these, or let's get 10 of these. So, and then, if they do it that

way, they're probably paying the same price as Amazon and they don't have to pay for shipping, so call your local bookstores and ask them that.

JASMIN: Yeah, and you're getting it out there that way. You're really doing your own part too, so...

MARIANN: And give it to everyone you know.

JASMIN: Yeah.

JO-ANNE: Yeah.

JASMIN: 'Tis the season. Well, this is really exciting. Jo-Anne, I hate to even compare what we do to what you do because you're such a role model to us, and I don't mean to put us in the Jo-Anne camp. But when people tell us that they really love Our Hen House and that they really love what we do, the reason that I can accept that and be gracious that they're saying that is because I know that we are a vehicle for other people to get their stories out there, and to share their replicable tasks that they do to change the world for animals. And so, I feel good that Our Hen House is there for that. And I think in a similar way, I don't want to put words into your mouth, but maybe you feel the same way that your camera--

JO-ANNE: Yes.

JASMIN: --is your vehicle to get it out there and that's what drives you. Am I right, or am I completely putting off?

JO-ANNE: Oh my God, you're so right. And had you not said that, I would have said that, so good one!

JASMIN: Excellent!

JO-ANNE: And also, my camera allows me to elevate the really, really amazing work of so many organizations around the globe. So, by going with Sea Shepherd, or Igualdad Animal, or the Swedish Animal Alliance, and helping them get the best possible imagery of the work that they're doing -- and they've done way more work than I have. Like, for example, they -- for a Pink or Mink investigation, there might be a really big group of activists who have been on the road investigating for months, like three or four or five months, and then I come in and they take me to the places they want me to shoot. And it's interesting 'cause I get all the praise, and here are all these undercover investigators who are just quietly sacrificing so much, and no one even knows who they are. So, for any praise that I get, I'm very cognizant that other people are doing way more work than I am, so anyway, not letting it go to my head.

JASMIN: Yes.

JO-ANNE: I'm a vehicle, and so, then I become a spokesperson and people see my work and I get to speak to all these things, and that's good. I'm happy in that role.

JASMIN: Yeah, and it becomes about so much more than us. Well, Jo-Anne, thank you so much for joining us today in Our Hen House, and for once again sharing your story and we couldn't be more thrilled about this completely beautiful book. And we're just so honored to know you and to be friends with you because you inspire us all the time. And I know that

these photos that are now out there thanks to Lantern are going to change the world for animals, just as you've been doing for 10 years, so keep us posted and keep on fighting the good fight, and we're here for you if you want a hug when you get back from all those trips which are sometimes very grueling.

JO-ANNE: Thank you, and it's such an honor that you guys would have me on and support my work for all these years. Thanks so much.