The empathy explorer

Henry J Garret – philosopher, writer and illustrator

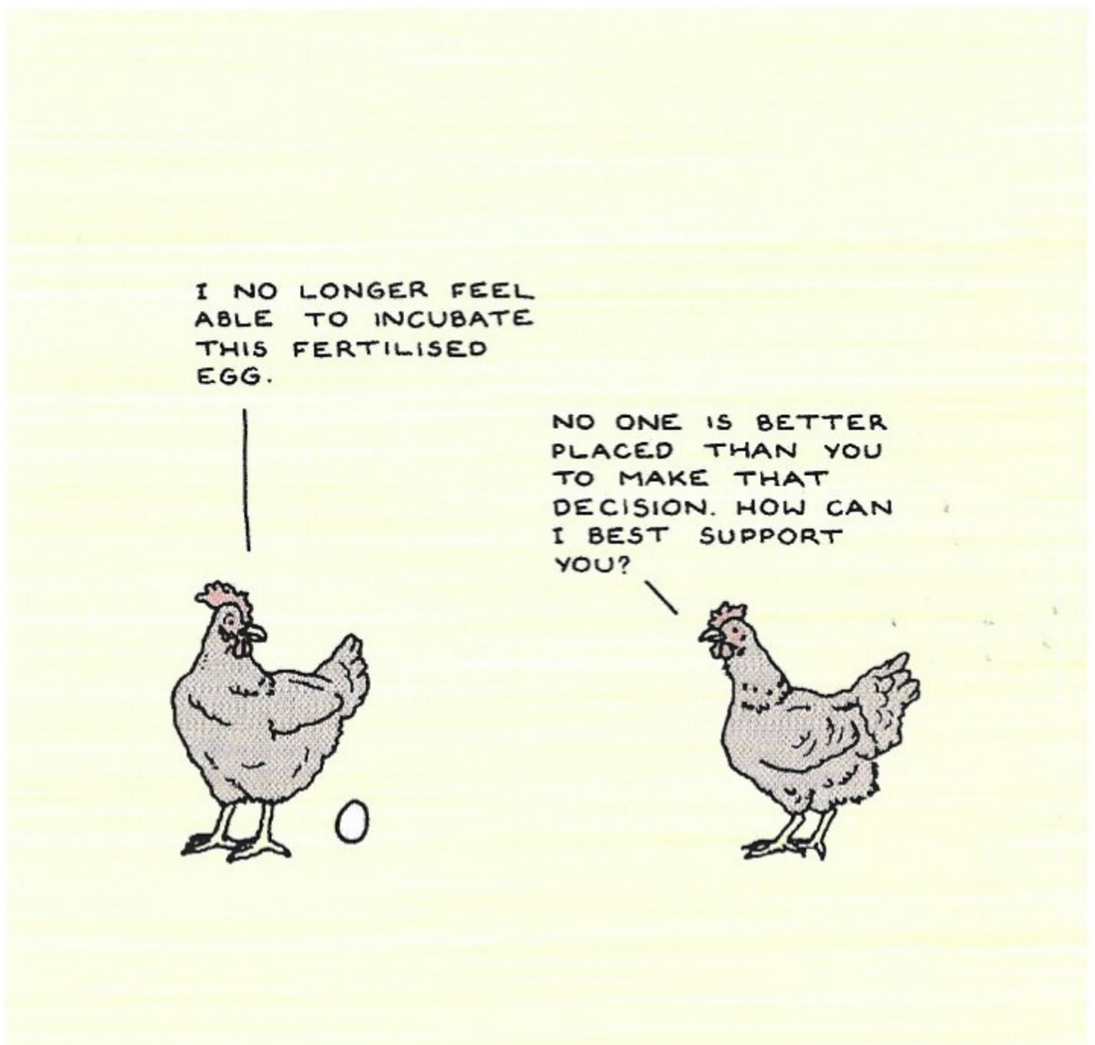
We talk to the author of This Book Will Make You Kinder *about equality, injustice and the power of humour to make us sit up and think (differently)*

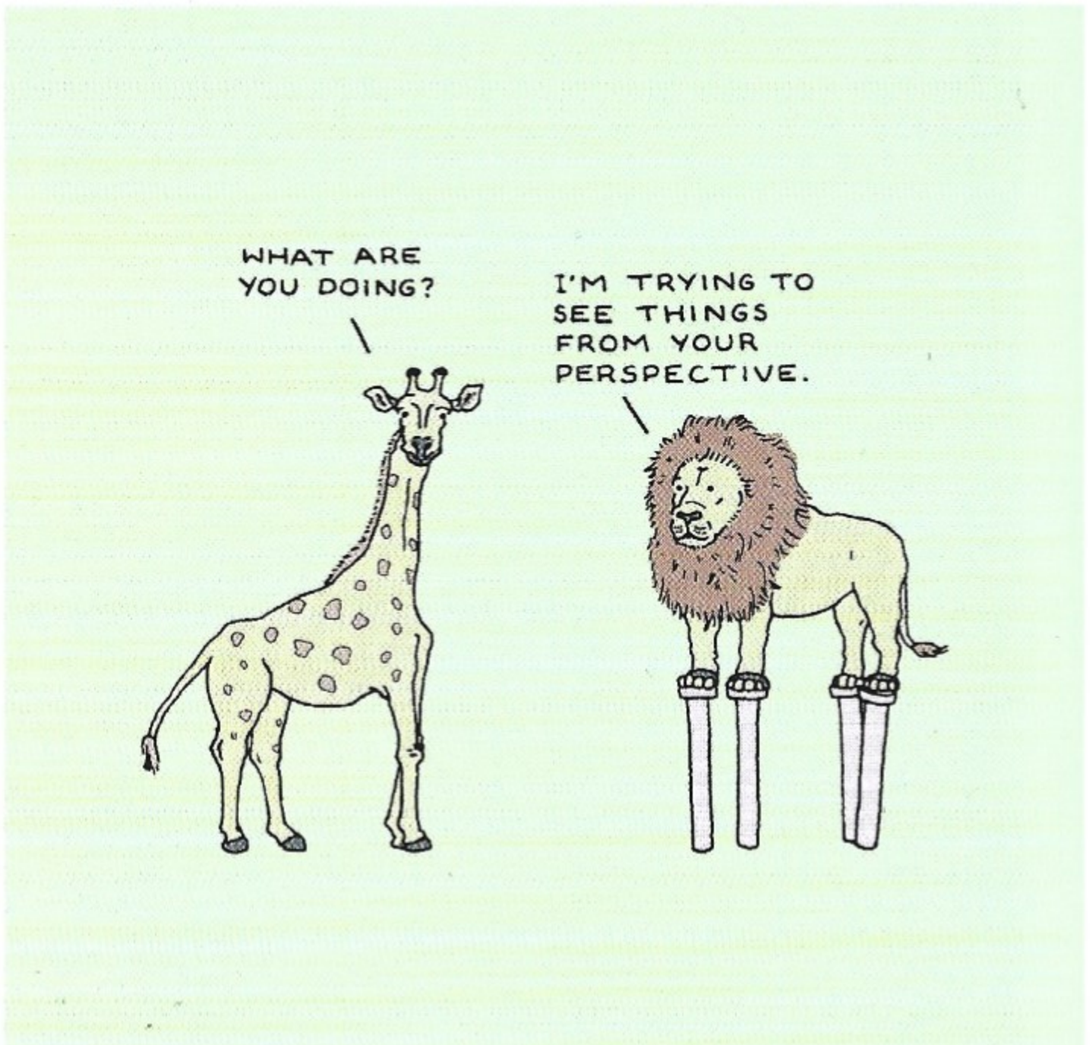
interview *Molly Bolding*

Our interview, conducted over Zoom in late 2020, is a refreshing window into a world of philosophy, empathy and home-grown joy. "My arrival at writing this book is a long path, and a weird path, where I never would have thought I would get to the stage of writing an illustrated non-fiction book for adults," says Henry J Garret. "I wouldn't have thought such a thing existed." Yet exist it does, and his small yellow-jacketed book, *This Book Will Make You Kinder*, is big on ideas, intentions and plans.

Since studying philosophy but dropping out of a PhD on meta-ethics due to anxiety, Garret's path to becoming a thinker and creator is pretty unconventional. However, he has seen success of his own measure, having "written and illustrated an op-ed for *The New York Times*; created alternative Valentine's cards for →


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The Fawcett Society; provided a feminist drawing of Meghan Markle's dog as a gift for her; cartooned for the *i* newspaper, Buzzfeed and London Pride; had solo exhibitions in London and a phone-box in Brighton; and built a beautiful, generous following of incredible humans." His latest creation is designed to challenge the root of our understanding of empathy and is the culmination of several years of deliberately and self-consciously political illustrations of anthropomorphised characters of all kinds.

The creatures take an abundance of forms – from inanimate objects to household pets and zoo animals – and employ a broad vocabulary, from political terminology to kindness language. There is a playfulness at the heart of Garret's work; a quality he recognises as a fundamental aspect of his ability to communicate messages that range from politicised truths to pithy puns. "Sometimes it comes down to tactics, and I definitely think there is a place for different tactics and different styles... some people whose work is rooted in activism and education have a public persona that is going to be hard all the time, and that works for some people: it's not my place at all to say 'Oh, you should soften up your approach'. But I think, as a white man, maybe it is my place to be soft, because that's not necessarily what people expect and maybe it's easier for me to be soft as well." Acutely aware of and enabled by his privilege, Garret's work takes advantage of the (generally speaking) more forgiving reception of white men's work to cut right to the heart of many of the key issues he sees around him; exploring sexism with hedgehogs, xenophobia with blue whales, and gender identity with talking cupcakes.

How do you mediate between softness and strength in your messages?

With the marrying of softness and strength, I'm going to come back to my partner Kitty a lot, who is the softest person I know, but also the strongest person I know, and they are difficult to marry, because I think if you are very sensitive to the world – if you feel other people's pain very keenly – that can be a real weight; that is tiring. So,

"Softness can either make you recoil from the world, or compel you to do something about it"

it does take a lot of strength to feel all that and to hold firmly onto your convictions and act on those convictions. But I think the other thing is that if you are that sensitive to the suffering of others, like in Kitty's case, it gives her the strength and the compulsion to support those who've experienced gender-based violence, because she has to. Softness can either make you recoil from the world, or compel you to do something about it.

Why did you decide to tackle empathy in the book rather than simply tackling injustice?
We know that buying books about injustice and inequality and doing the reading isn't enough, but lots of people aren't even doing that. Maybe I just want to soften people up a bit, so they will then read the right books with a bit more readiness, because the main thing is being ready to realise you're wrong. Maybe before people are ready to realise they're wrong you have to explain to them why they're likely to be wrong. It all comes down to, can you give a good account of why the way in which someone experiences and perceives the world is likely to be wholly inaccurate and how that's going to hide a whole bunch of injustice and cruelty from them? Once you have that account, can you then read the right books and actually take something from them? And then, you know, actually *do* something.

How did you reach this framework for your message?
When I was a kid I was asking my dad questions about what happens when we die and how do I know that other people exist, things like that. My dad told me that philosophy was where the answers to those questions lay. So I went and studied philosophy. From a very young age I wanted to write something that would make people kinder and morally better. So I went and did moral philosophy at university. I was going to do a PhD and then anxiety forced me to drop out, and then I started drawing, and that became more political after I dropped out because I thought "This is my way of making the world a bit better," and I somehow ended up back writing the stuff that had inspired me to study moral philosophy in the first place.

How do you manage your anxiety day to day?
Ha, ha, sometimes I don't! But when I do it's through a mixture of sertraline, avoidance and good habits and structure. Antidepressants were definitely a step forward for me and lightened the anxiety load a little. I experience a lot of anxiety, though, and often cope by basically avoiding the things that I find scary – something that my CBT therapist advised against. I find avoidance a balancing act; sometimes I have to avoid some anxiety-inducing stuff to save the energy to do something else. Good habits and structure for me means planning my tasks in a diary and trying to obey that diary, breaking huge tasks down into smaller ones, and just living good, helpful routines.

You started @drawingsofdogs in 2014 and you now have over 150,000 followers on Instagram. What's your relationship with social media like?
Social media is crap in so many ways but for me it has been incredible. I have lucked out – I feel really grateful that Instagram exists, not just because of the audience who've found me but also what I've found and learned on Instagram: a lot of my learning has come online. With the narrative I just told about the book, it would have been so different if I'd stayed in philosophy or someone had given me the chance to write this book at 18. I think →

"I like it when people say 'You've put into words something that I was trying to get a handle on'"

I had the meta-ethics or normative ethics position that I wanted to defend, but... the examples I use are all examples from feminism and anti-racism and LGBTQ+ rights stuff, and that's because of what I've learned since then, because I didn't just stay in a philosophy department – and again, mostly because I met Kitty. When I was starting @drawingsofdogs in earnest, Kitty was doing a Masters in Gender Studies at the London School of Economics and it felt like I was kind of doing Kitty's Gender Studies Masters via our conversations. I'm sure I wouldn't have got a very good grade if I'd actually done it, but I learnt a lot that year. The authentic insights we're privy to via social media - the truth of others' lived experiences - in this digital age is, I think, unprecedented. My experience of the online world, again, is a very privileged one – I'm sure if my cartoons were exactly the same, but then when people realised I wasn't a white man, that their responses would be more challenging. Yes, I get some cruel comments, but nothing like the scale of what I've seen directed at people who don't have all of my privilege.

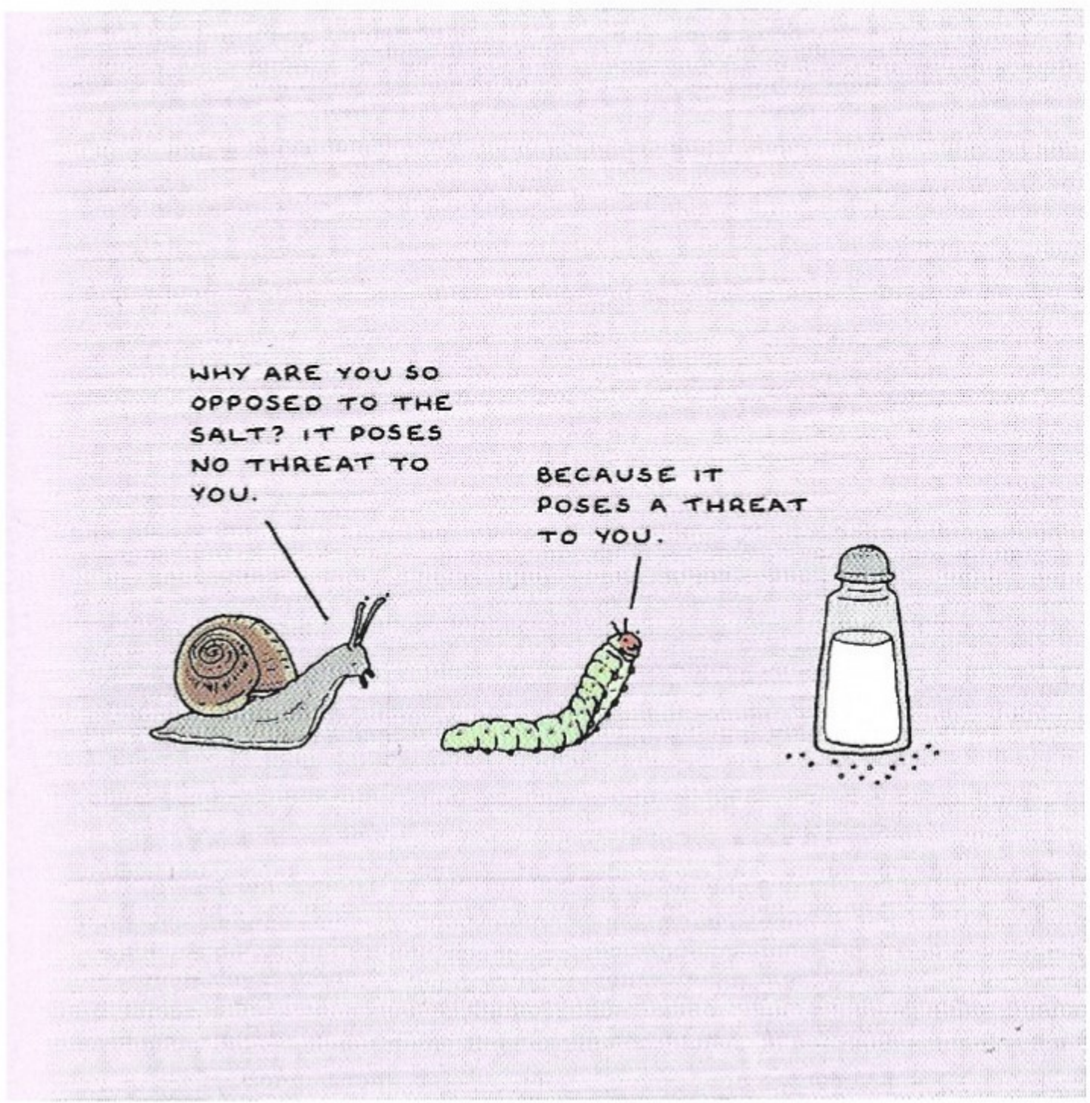
People have really gotten behind my work and that feels like a real honour. Particularly when people who are from communities that I'm not from take my work and say things like "This is a good statement of something". I also like it when people say "You've put into words something that I was trying to get a handle on" – that's a really nice compliment. So, social media? Broadly, society, bad. Me, specifically, good.

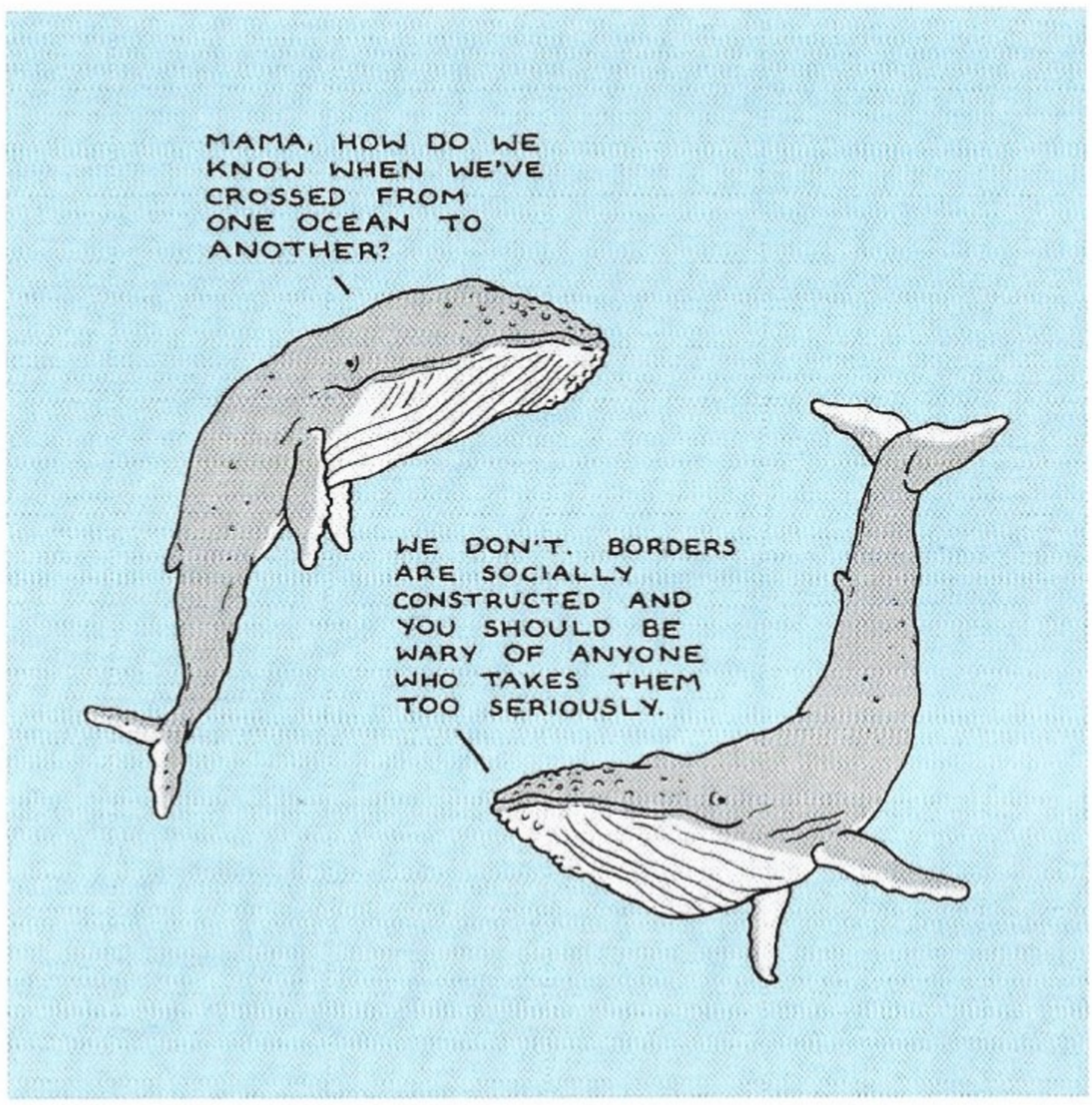
The book was published in October 2020 - what has the response been like so far?

The response has been really positive, and I have really enjoyed the extent to which people understood what I was trying to do. I think it would be really cool if it provides a few people with a lens through which to see the world slightly differently. I think what many of us need is conviction: maybe we already believe some of these things or think we believe some of these things, but our actions don't reflect that, and so we need the conviction to be able to do unreasonably kind things in the face of people saying things like "Oh you're being such a softy, you're being so wet... you're such a virtue signaller". Lots of us need conviction to carry on doing good, even when we're facing criticism, and if it can provide some people with that, that would be really promising... making people prepared for certain conversations that they're inevitably going to have, or hear. A criticism I have a lot of time for is the one that says that this book presents a very optimistic picture of human nature, and that maybe my optimism on that score has more to do with the way the world treats me. And that is undeniably true.

What should readers do once they've finished *This Book Will Make You Kinder*?

The problem is, everyone wants to be told what to do, and lots of the best people I follow online are like "I'm not answering that question for you". I think it's partly because if you were convinced of the level of injustice that there is in the world, it would be obvious what you should do and it would be very specific to your situation. It would be things like "My workplace is racist – I need to change that," you know? But at the same time, I think it's not unreasonable for people to want practical next steps, and you also want to give people an idea of what you're asking from them. Because of the language we chose for the book's title I worry that somebody might





finish it and think "Oh, I'm just going to be a little bit more polite in my day-to-day life." So, the practical actions I'm talking about are, like, the massive redistribution of wealth [he laughs]. My measure of success for the book is along the lines of: if you're upper middle class, are you going to redistribute a huge chunk of your income? Are you going to get involved in mutual aid work in your area? Are you going to call out your friends and family at the dinner table? Those are the sorts of things we need... but I don't know what people are going to do, it's going to come down to their specific situations. But if the action doesn't look unreasonable to the centrist [someone who holds moderate political views] then, in all honesty, it's probably not going far enough. The book also talks about listening a lot, and so even if people don't really leave the book thinking "Oh this is what I'm going to do next" but they just listen better the next time that someone they're being cruel to – inadvertently or directly – talks to them, then that would be amazing. ♦

This Book Will Make You Kinder (Souvenir Press)

A few of Henry's favourite things

1. What's your favourite of your own drawings?
The one I just auctioned off through Gendered Intelligence, the transphobia one, which went for £550.

2. Who is your favourite artist?
The UK illustrator and painter Ashton Attzs (@attzs_).

3. Who is your favourite writer?
I'm gonna say Roxane Gay right now, but it changes very regularly.

4. Your role model?
My partner Kitty.

5. Where is your favourite place?
I like being at home. I feel safe here with my hound Billie, and Kitty, so I feel very lucky that coronavirus hasn't affected us personally. So yeah, home. But that's a boring answer, isn't it?