

BEST NEWSPAPER MAGAZINE Qantas Media Awards

canvas

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What's the big idea?

Radical thinkers
who don't care if you
call them cranks

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Images from
Auckland's
annual photo day

THE PRINCESS BRIDE
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Thinking outside the SQUARE

SARAH LANG meets three New Zealanders with radical theories or beliefs. Will they be dismissed as cranks and forgotten, or could they one day be viewed as visionary?

HERE HAVE always been people with radical ideas on the edge of society. And throughout history, countless "cranks" have been denounced as odd or, frankly, crazy, only to be proven right in time. Dr Oliver Holmes' belief that doctors should wash their hands before delivering babies was rubbish until his death. Charles Darwin was viciously attacked as a "monkey man" for believing humans shared ancestors with apes. Was the first person to suggest smoking was bad for you smiled upon? Even people who ate mainly organic or local produce were considered environmental fringe oddities until recently.

Sure, not everyone with a radical idea is vindicated as a visionary; some will always be seen as cranks. We all know a crank when we see one: someone who holds a belief which the vast majority of contemporaries would consider false, insists their beliefs are urgently important, dismisses all contradictory evidence and is often, but not necessarily, eccentric and bad-tempered.

Visionaries get an altogether different rap: as individuals with a clear idea of how to achieve a difficult or futuristic goal. But while there's a yawning gulf between the two terms, often the same person gets both tags, depending on who's doing the tagging.

Historically, it's been people with left-field, "cranky" ideas who've been agents of change. Shouldn't we at least consider their ideas before dismissing them?

Jeffrey Masson

IN THE tiny East Auckland inlet of Karaka Bay, where waves lap a few strides from front porches, a letterbox is canvas to a merry illustration of children and cats riding a pink elephant. It's an appropriate introduction to Jeffrey Moussaieff "Masson's" household. The unorthodox author, formerly a Sanskrit professor, psychoanalyst and Sigmund Freud Archives project director, is a vigorous 67-year-old. He stays young parenting sons Ilan (11) and Manu (6) with pediatrician wife Leila.

Jeffrey, Leila, and Manu are all vegan; Ilan, dog Benji and the family's two rats are vegetarian. The three cats are carnivores. "Given a choice, cats will eat meat. I feel you can't force any creature to do your will," remarks Masson, who's decidedly American in that brash, utterly unironic way.

In 25 years, Masson has penned as many books. On his computer screen is the final draft of his latest book, *The Face on your Plate: The Truth about Food*. Due to be published early next year, it argues there are three reasons why it's better not to eat animal products: for your health, the environment, and the animals. It'll be his 10th and last book on animals. Since 1995's bestseller *When Elephants Weep*, followed by million-copy-selling *Dogs Never Lie about Love*, his books about animals (many on their emotional lives) have been published to worldwide acclaim. As an ex-



psychologist, he looks at how humans use defence mechanisms to avoid facing what's involved in eating animals. "I also thought the question of happiness is an important one that hadn't been asked."

Don't go immediately writing these off as wishy-washy notions. Each book was meticulously researched: first colossal reading, then globe-trotting, hands-on study. For his third book, *The Emotional Lives of Animals*, he visited farms and animal sanctuaries in Europe, America, Australia and New Zealand, studying animals both raised for food and not. "I wanted to find out what makes a farm animal happy and by no stretch of the

imagination could you call any animals raised for food happy. And if they weren't happy and we were taking products from them — it was at best selfish and, often, cruel."

While researching, he visited Karaka Bay to meet a pig who would become the cover star of *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon*. It was a turning point. Seduced by our antipodean beauty, Masson moved to New Zealand in 2000 and also turned from being a vegetarian to a vegan. "What I knew about animal emotions meant there was just no excuse anymore for using animal products. I now believe eating animals is the equivalent of slavery."



In April, Masson gave a pro-bono talk on animal emotions at the SPCA's 75th anniversary. While there, he heard people talking about how horrible it was to see cat and dog being served in Vietnam. Masson finds deep hypocrisy in the attitude that it's okay to eat certain types of animals while cringing at eating others. "There's no real difference between a dog, a cat and a pig. The truth is these animals all want to live, have strong feelings, care about their lives and friendships." When he said as much at the SPCA event, tempers flared.

As they did when he brought up the question of whether any domesticated animal can lead an ideal life in the

company of humans. "Cats are perhaps an exception, they're really independent and wander freely." His justification for a pet dog is that living wild with a pack isn't a realistic option, so Benji's doing the second-best thing. "But fish [in tanks] and birds in small cages is terrible."

Hang on, aren't there two rats sniffing around half-eaten corn cobs in a cage downstairs? Masson, who's not ruffled, got them for his son but wouldn't do it again, and makes sure they get plenty of time out of their cage.

As any vegetarian or vegan who's endured years of being asked "why" knows, the onus is normally on Masson to

explain why he doesn't eat or feed his children meat. So he turns the tables. "Why shouldn't they [meat-eaters] explain why they eat it?"

He ruffled plenty of omnivorous feathers with his views, and has heard all the pro-meat-eating arguments. Economic necessity doesn't hold up: animals marked for slaughter consume more food than we do "and no, we don't eat grass, but those fields could be used for crops".

But our economy's heavily reliant on agricultural products, so what if New Zealanders stopped eating meat and even dairy? "New Zealand should go organic."

While Masson doesn't push his views

on anyone, if people ask he'll talk about them. And that's put a dent in his and Leila's social life. Recently a close friend didn't invite them to her barbecue: Masson believes it's because she thought he'd make people feel guilty about eating meat. What helps him handle such censure is emails from readers saying they've become vegetarian or vegan.

It doesn't bother Masson if people don't agree with his beliefs, but it does if people dismiss them off-the-cuff. "My aim is to influence people to take this issue seriously. One day, people will look back and be astonished and appalled we killed animals for food when we didn't have to."

ICONOCLASTIC:
Jeffrey Masson,
with son Manu, in
his home library
which holds
12,000 books.

PICTURE / GLENN JEFFREY