
In his graphic novel *Laika*, Nick Abadzis tells the story of a small terrier mutt who dramatically altered the world’s perspective on space travel. In 1957, the Soviets sent Laika into space in an orbital satellite. Laika’s journey captivated the world, but Russian propaganda and government suppression clouded the truth about her death. Posthumous books and a statue honored Laika. Cigarette and bubblegum packages have used her likeness. Many of these tributes, however, seem to pay homage to Laika as symbol rather than as a dog. In Laika’s image, people have memorialized Soviet success. Laika has become a totem of human ambition. Abadzis’ central question is whether this human accomplishment was worth Laika’s sacrifice.

Abadzis tells the story in a richly colorful and painstakingly researched comic. Abadzis explains that Laika was found on the streets of Moscow and sold to the Soviet space program. Staff member Yelena Alexandrovna Dubrovsky took care of the dog and the two developed a close relationship. To beat the Americans in the space race, Premier Nikita Khrushchev insisted that a dog be sent into space. Khrushchev gave the engineers only one month to build an appropriate spacecraft. Because of the constraints, the engineers did not have time to develop a re-entry plan. The dog would be sent into space, given enough food for 9 days, and poisoned on day 10. When Dubrovsky learned that this was a one-way mission, she tried to save Laika. The dog’s fate, however, was in the hands of the Soviet Chief Engineer Sergei Pavlovich Korolev, who had already made up his mind. The Soviets declared Laika’s trip a success after the satellite launched. In 2002, however, it was revealed that Laika died from stress and overheating after only 5 hours in orbit (Whitehouse, 2002).

Abadzis tells the story of Laika by merging historical narrative and fictional flexibility. This enables him both to educate his readers about the historical significance of Laika and, through the character he creates, to endear her to them as a living, feeling being. *Laika* is not just a dog’s story, important as telling an individual nonhuman animal’s story may be. Abadzis explores deeply complicated theoretical and ethical issues. On the book’s final page, a quotation from Oleg Georgievich Gazenko describes these themes: “The more time passes, the more I’m sorry about it. We did not learn enough from the mission to justify the death of the dog” (p. 201). In 1988, Gazenko, a senior staff member at the Moscow Institute of Aviation Medicine in the 1950s and a central participant in Laika’s life, expressed his regret. In those two sentences, Gazenko encapsulates the theoretical conflict at the heart of Abadzis’ interpretation of Laika’s story: To what extent, if any, does human ambition outweigh a life?

Early on, Abadzis establishes thematic tension between Laika and Korolev, demonstrating through words and drawings how the destiny of these two beings intertwine. Both
Korolev and Laika endure imprisonment: Korolev in a Soviet prison (prior to his appointment as Chief Engineer) and Laika at the research center. Each finds solace and comfort in the consistent presence of the moon. In lush, colorful drawings, Abadzis depicts the lunar cycle as a shared symbol of freedom. This visual continuity reinforces an increasing notion throughout the book that there are unexpected connections between Korolev and Laika.

Abadzis is careful neither to depict Korolev as a caricature nor to demonize his perspective. However, he shows how Korolev’s life experiences sharpened his ambition and perhaps influenced his inability to empathize with humans and other animals. In a recent interview, Abadzis said,

Korolev was a massively determined man, damaged at some level by his experiences at the gulag during Stalin’s purges… In a way, the whole story of Laika is begun by the inhumanities that are done to Korolev; it’s a cycle of abuse that continues throughout the book. (Spurgeon, 2007)

A central theme of the book, therefore, is the perpetual cycle of abuse that Korolev’s life and actions represent. From Abadzis’ perspective, the abuse that Korolev endures in prison instigates Korolev’s stoic disregard for Laika’s impending death. Abadzis even seems to suggest that Korolev’s use of Laika is as much an abuse of power as the abuse Korolev experienced in the gulag.

Scholars have recently concluded that a strong correlation exists between violence against nonhuman animals and violence between humans (Arluke & Levin, 1999; Arluke & Lockwood, 1997; Randour, 2003). One kind of abuse begets another kind; this cycle can pass through families and cultures. In his portrayal of Korolev, Abadzis has vividly depicted an individual example of this theory. The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) reports, “Intentional cruelty can be an indicator that an individual is developing a pattern of seeking power and control by inflicting suffering on others” (HSUS, 2004).

However, were Korolev’s actions cruel or was he simply a man driven to succeed? Certainly, discussions of the use of animals in science have a long history. As bioethicist Rollin (2006) explains, the 1950s and 1960s were a time of unquestioned faith in the sciences; born out of that period was the query of how ethics played a role in science. Abadzis represents these combative perspectives through conflicts between Korolev and Dubrovsky, Laika’s caregiver.

Rollin (2006) points out that scientistic devotees have found it easy to dismiss the concerns of people who introduce ethics into science; they claim that ethics are not based on fact and therefore are the result of purely emotional (unscientific) responses. Dubrovsky, in some sense, is an exemplification of this emotionally driven perspective. In a moment of desperation, she begs Korolev to take another dog instead of Laika—an indication that her motivation is based on love.

Yet, Abadzis does not intend his readers to dismiss Dubrovsky’s actions. She is, after all, the caregiver and friend of the book’s namesake. Dubrovsky loves all the dogs under her care, but she has formed a special bond with Laika. She is in an untenable position; the situation forces her to make such a drastic proposal.

Throughout the story, the more Dubrovsky learns about the canine program in which she works, the more she is torn between her duty to her country and her duty to the animals. It is likely that Dubrovsky’s actions seemed irrational (or even anti-communist) to...
Korolev. In his view, the happiness of Premier Khrushchev, Russia, and the Communist party far outweighed the welfare of any animals.

At the climax of the book, Abadzis chooses one moment in which to draw Korolev’s face larger than he has in any other frame. Korolev says to his coworkers, “Let’s just say that the Premier has realized the propaganda value of satellite launches” (p. 136). Abadzis depicts Korolev as if the viewer were looking up at him, which visually provides the character with power and control. The artist draws shadows across the engineer’s face, which suggests the sinister nature of his pronouncement. Abadzis wants the reader to take note of the importance of this moment, in which Korolev reveals the strength of his ambition and his desire to please the Premier. The frame occurs just seconds before Korolev reveals to Gazenko (and the reader) a fact that clearly does not trouble him: Laika will not return home.

Rollin (2006) defines utilitarianism as, “what produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number…” (p. 58). It may appear that Korolev adopts a utilitarian view of animals. He is willing to sacrifice Laika’s life for the benefit of Russia. However, this is too simplistic. Korolev’s devotion to the Communist party is so unswerving that both his ambition and his use of animals are unlimited. After all, Korolev remains completely devoted to the same political group that originally sent him to prison.

Had Khrushchev insisted on sending a man in the spacecraft, it is not hard to imagine that Korolev—despite being unready—would have volunteered his own life for such a mission. Of course, this is speculation. The point is that this particular use of an animal is inextricably wrapped up in the personality of the man who ultimately decided her fate. In Abadzis’ view, although it is possible that Korolev was strictly utilitarian in his use of animals, he was utilitarian in every other sense as well—even in the gulag when it came to sacrificing his own needs for the Communist party.

Abadzis tells Laika’s story as a seamless narrative; yet, he infuses it with complicated ideas that are relevant in a much broader context than the story of one dog. Without explicitly stating his objectives, Abadzis weaves ethical questions into visual, historical fiction in a way that both adds to the story and contributes to larger, theoretical issues. In the story of Laika, Abadzis creates an opportunity for humans to rethink and question the sacrifice of nonhuman animals and encourages readers to consider the consequences of unchallenged human ambition.

Lisa Brown
Independent Scholar and Writer
56 Harriet Street, #2
Brighton, MA 02135
lisabrown@animalinventory.net

References

