Interview with Rachel (pseudonym) pet pig keeper

21st June 2022, phone.

Conducted by researcher [K]

K: To start, can you tell me about your pig?

P: His name is [Romeo]. I picked [Romeo] up from [the breeder] September three years ago. He was 9 weeks old when I went to fetch him. I actually took two pigs back with me because my friend was having one as well, so I brought her and [Romeo] back in the footwell of my car. He lived in the house originally, up until about a year ago, when I was having renovations done on the house and, so up until that point it didn't matter him being in the house at all. I've got a pig walking license, so I walk [Romeo] from my house there is a lovely park at the end of my street with marshland and everything, erm so I take him over there, so he's very well known. The kids from the playground are always on there when I'm walking, so they're all shouting his name...and people coming up to talk with him and stuff and he's very placid. He’s a very placid chap, erm he’s a huge part of... my eldest son still lives at home, but he is very much talked about and in the family etcetera. There’s a joke that he is my mum’s second grandson and things like that. So yeah, he was in the house but he is a big lad erm but then we bought an old wendy house for outside and put a plinth down and everything, so, he’s got a fenced off area in the garden now with a heat lamp. Very, very placid chap he is. He is lovely.

K: Why did you want a pig?

P: Right from being a little girl. I wanted pigs. Don't know why ,I can't explain the reason why I just always loved pigs and always talked about having a farm when I was growing up and everything … never actually thought I'd have one. Then realised when I was in my forties that people did have pet pigs and that you were allowed to keep them in homes and in gardens etcetera. So, I did lots of research from around the age of 48. Started really looking into it and then I made the enquiry at [the breeder] and put my name on the waiting list. I told myself I was having one for my 50th birthday.

K: lovely. Did you pick him out specifically?

P: Yeah what happens is you make contact and they tell you what you have to do, like apply for the CPH number and etcetera, you put a deposit down and then you go on a waiting list for the next litter. Depending on where you are on the list is how you will be contacted in order of who gets to pick first.

K: Oh yeah.

P: I think I was something like 6th on the list. So, when you are contacted they send a photograph of which pigs are left and ask you to circle the one you want and send the photo back. So there was about three pinks and three black and whites left when I picked, and [Romeo]’s little face was just... he was giving me the beady eye on the photo so that’s why I chose him [laughs].

K: Bless him. What were you looking to get out of having a pet pig?

P: I think from everything I'd read, I was expecting quite an intelligent animal that was up for being trained but was intelligent enough to … it’s very weird with pigs because whereas a dog will be trained and a dog will continue to do that even if they’re not given a treat because they are more subservient, a pig is almost like... it’s quite eerie really sometimes, I've taught him to sit and offer me a trotter and he will do a turn and come when I call him, he will follow me everywhere. He talks to me in his own little ways, in fact it’s fascinating when they start talking to you. But if you ask them to do something and they know you haven’t got a treat, then they won’t do it. It’s like, it’s almost like, “why you asking me to do that?” they look at you like “whatever, I'm not doing that because you aint got no food”. I do think they are that intelligent that they won’t be trained for just your entertainment, they will do things for food and that’s it. So, I did know I was going to get an intelligent animal, and affectionate too. You can’t sit down without a pig wanting to sit behind you. Or, literally on you, or at the side of you and trying to get their head on you. So they are very, very affectionate. Erm, I knew he was going to be a big lad because I know from research there is no such thing as a micro-pig, there are small breeds of pigs but erm, I'd met [Romeo]’s mum and dad so I knew he was going to be a big boy. Erm, I mean he’s not a huge farm pig by any stretch, but he is still, you know, I'd say at least 18 stone he’s got to be. He comes just above my knee, so he is very round but not a massive-looking farm pig. He’s out there now and he’s happy to be out there and sleep and eat basically.

K: Sounds like a good life.

P: Absolutely.

K: So how much of your daily routine is involved in caring for him?

P: Erm, I go out in the morning and fill his water bottles up and sometimes I'll give him a handful of grapes. If I go out and disturb him, they are very good at making you feel guilty for not feeding them, so I don’t go out empty handed, even if it is just two lettuce leaves or a handful of grapes before I go to work. So I'll just climb in his pen and say good morning to him and stroke his head and rub his snout etcetera, so that’s five or ten minutes. Then I go to work, when I get home, I go out and fill his bowls up and do his food, then I sweep his area if he’s thrown stuff around, then I'll pick his poop up. Then again sometimes I’ll sit out there while he is eating with a cup of tea and if it’s nice out there I'll let him out in the garden. Then he comes and sits on the grass with me and has a doze. So it can be anything from 10 minutes to an hour, if I walk him up the park we can be gone for an hour up the park. I’d say on average each day between one and two hours a day.

K: And how do you communicate with him?

P: I just talk to him like I'm talking to you. So, if I got out now and he’s lying down, he will hear my coming and he grunts and then he barks, like a deep bark noise. I call him like, my baby, “hello baby” and he starts making these noises. He will look at me and I'll say, “hang on a minute!” and he’ll stick his nose through the rails and say he wants to come out. So yeah, I just talk to him normally. I’ll tell him to wait, or that his food is coming, or tell him he’s a good boy, and he responds. If I shout at him he will lift his head and look at me. He definitely knows his name.

K: How would you describe your relationship with him?

P: I think he knows that I'm the boss. I very quickly figured out with [Romeo] that he is extremely placid. The only time he ever tried to side swipe me was, and I now know this, you never go near a pig when they are rooting because that is the only time they’re in like a trance when they’re doing that, and if you go anywhere near their head to move them or interfere with them, they will swipe you away. Obviously, he has got tusks now so, you don’t want one of those in the back of your leg or your arm or whatever. So, yeah, I think it’s also very similar to a dog, there is definitely a relationship there and he knows who I am. He knows who [my son] is as well. He is very responsive to us, but very nonchalant with everyone else. So, when he is in the park and kids are talking to him, his tail is wagging and he’s paying them no mind really. They will come up and tap him on the back. Then if the dogs come up, dogs want to play and then, he will get excited and start running in circles and start running with the dogs. After a couple minutes he’s fed up with that as well, so he carries on eating grass. So, similar to a relationship with a dog I'd say. Erm, but probably not so friendly with everyone else as he’s just not bothered. He sees me and [my son] as the people who look after him and the people he recognises really.

K: How do you think he does perceive his relationship with you?

P: I think he thinks that I'm his mum. He thinks I'm the person … I know he misses me. If I go away for the weekend and my son looks after him, when I get back and I go out he is almost whining at me like he’s missed me, like he is getting really excited and then he’s nudging me and trying to... “i’ll say give mummy a kiss” and he will put his snout in my face. Then if I let him out, he goes a bit crazy like running up and down the yard and running around me, nudging me. He’s really excited to see me. So I think he sees me as either his mum, or whatever pigs perceive that to be, but I think he definitely perceives me as that one that there is affection for.

K: Yeah, so does he demonstrate an emotional connection with you?

P: Yeah definitely, like I say, if I'm sitting in the garden and I let him out... I've tested the theory, so if I sit on the grass, he will automatically come to me and lie with me, like literally wants to get on top of me its like he must be touching. So I've got up and moved somewhere else and he can be really comfortable, but he will get up and come and move to where I am. Erm, yeah. Like I say, if I get the pig board out to move him and he’s in the garden and he doesn’t want to go in his pen, like I say, a pig won’t move if they don’t want to. So, I have to shoo him in and he’s trying to tell me off and I'm trying to tell him off back, but eventually he will put his tail between his legs and walk in and does as he is told. So, it is about letting him know that I am the boss as well.

K: So do you do training with him?

P: Yeah. He is very good at sitting and will offer both trotters if you ask him. As long as he knows you have a treat. His favourite are wine gums, he loves wine gums as a treat. He will turn and he will give me kisses. If I talk to him he goes quiet and then he would talk back. I’ve got a video where I'm asking him questions and he will be quiet, then when I'm finished talking he will talk back, and it’s hilarious, it’s like we’re having a conversation. He talks to me.

K: So when you got him did you actively work on building up a bond with him?

P: Yeah. I mean, I was obsessed with him. I still am. When we got him I had a couple weeks off work so I was with him all day, every day. I was picking him up, erm, so he was used to being handled and even like from the minute we brought him in, teaching him to be gentle when he was taking food, and he still does that now. He is so gentle the way he takes food off you. Yeah, training him right from the minute we got him and constantly just with him and walking him. It was me who always took him out to do his business. He was potty trained within a week of being home. He would go to the back door. But I would always make sure that it was me who did it. He would do things for me. So yeah, it was a very obvious bond there with us. When my mum and dad came round, they go out in the garden and Mr [Romeo] comes out and follows me everywhere.

K: What kind of feelings do you associate with him?

P: For me personally, erm, I find it quite... I've not had an animal for years. I had animals as a child, I've had dogs and I've lost dogs and things, and I find it so devastating so I said I wasn’t going to have another animal. So, getting [Romeo] and... I did have another pig, my ex-partner who moved out had a female Kune Kune pig and she died when she was a year, she choked to death and it was awful. [Romeo] and her shared a pen outside and they were like best mates, and his reaction was awful. When she was choking he was running at her, he was headbutting her, it’s like he knew she was choking and he was trying to do something about it. He was getting a bit nasty because he didn’t know what we were doing to her, and it devastated me. I was inconsolable for a couple of days. She wasn’t even really my pig, she was my ex-partners. So, the thought of losing him, I do love him, I love him very much and the bond is very strong between the two of us. I just, yeah, I'm frightened of that day coming and I'm frightened of anything happening to him. I just think you’ve got to enjoy them while you have got them.

K: Yes. I know there are different laws about what you can do when they die, do you have any plans for what might happen?

P: yeah, so obviously we experienced it when Pebbles died. So, erm we rang the farm, the guy who picks up animals from farms that have died. He said he could come and fetch her and you can have her cremated, or you can have her cremated on her own and pay to have the ashes and do what you want with the ashes. I didn’t want that. I don’t like things like that, I don’t want to keep the ashes anymore. To me it’s not the person or the animal anymore. So, I think it would be a case of him being picked up. They have to be picked up quite quickly as well. I mean, Pebbles ballooned in size in 24 hours with gas. We had to put her in the shed, it was awful. She was bleeding from every orifice as well. So when they fetched her it was a bit of a mess. I will just do the same with [Romeo], erm, just have him arranged to be picked up and cremated, but I will remember him in my own way. I won’t want ashes and things, I'm not into that.

K: Do you think you would memorialise him in a different way?

P: Yeah, I mean I've got his photo in the house anyway where he is wearing a pair of glasses. And there is another one of him wearing a COVID mask. I’ve got a friend who does paintings on wooden slices, and she did me, had him painted on one of those. He’s got his own Instagram page and Facebook as well. So, he will be memorialized in those ways.

K: That’s lovely. Has he ever been unwell at all?

P: He’s had an upset stomach when he was poorly and went off his food for two days. We thought he ate something, I took him down the marshland and he disappeared under the fence, I could see him and I was calling his name but he was really going for something, his tail was going ten to the dozen and he wouldn’t come out. I managed to get under the bushes to him and he was messing around with a dead rat. Because obviously pigs are meat eaters, even though we aren’t allowed to feed them meat. And I think he’d eaten something that upset him, he was sick when he got back and off his food for a couple days but other than that he has been a really healthy pig.

K: Have you ever needed to contact a vet?

P: No, never, no. His skin is wonderful and … well I pamper him, I give him a bath and buckets of warm water out, I buy sort of baby shampoo and he gets pig oil all over him and has a brush. I buy a wonderful cream, like a gloopy Vaseline that you put on when they get nicks of bites and that cleans them up. So he does get pampered a lot and I'm always checking him over, so yeah, he is a really healthy pig.

K: And where do you look for information on where to care for him?

P: Mainly the internet. There are thousands of pig forums out there now and a multitude of information. On the forums sometimes you will see someone will post “oh my pig is doing this, is it normal? What should I do?” and all these people start commenting, so it’s quite a supportive network of people.

K: Oh right. And how does he fit into your family?

P: Like I say, he is classed as the seventh grandson. Up until last year, well until COVID started, for the first two years I could still get him in the car and he’d like to go for a car ride. We all went to my sisters for Christmas dinner and he had his Santa hat on and we put some veg out in his bowl and he had them outside while we were having our Christmas dinner. This year, he did it too. When I go to my mums they will as “how is [Romeo]?” and people at work will ask how he is. Yeah, he is just one of the family.

K: How has your life changed since you’ve had him?

P: Erm, I guess I’m not surprised by anything, I sort of set myself up for what it was going to be like. Obviously, it’s not like having a dog that you can put on kennels when you go on holiday. There are pig sanctuaries out there that do take them for the holidays but the trauma it can do for a pig, obviously they have to be picked up in a trailer. Pigs suffer with depression when they don’t understand why they have been moved from a family, they don’t handle it very well. That’s why they say when you rehome a pig make sure you are doing the right thing because it is so traumatic for the pig. So I wouldn’t want to put him through that. There is always that consideration with holidays that someone has got to come and look after him for me. But, other than that, I'm not surpised by how he is because I did plenty of research. I think it’s when people don’t do that they have a bit of a shock. You know, the rules around what you can feed them and what you can’t, and pigs can have a very temperamental digestive system and.. Well, I've been lucky in that respect as he hasn’t given me any grief at all. On the pig forums I’m on, there are people every week saying that there pig isn’t well again, or a bit off today. But I don’t get any of that, I’m really lucky.

K: And what is so special about having a pig as a pet, I know you said you have dogs in the past so does the relationship differ at all?

P: yeah so they are more intelligent. They are loyal in a way that they will recognise you and respond to you personally but I don’t think they are, they’ll only do things to benefit themselves.

K: Right, yeah.

P: They will only do things for themselves, not just because you asked. They say they are as intelligent as a three-year-old child and three-year-old kids can be very manipulative, so it is quite similar to that. Like I say, they can be, it is all about them. A bit like how people perceive cats to be. The cat will only do what suits the cat. So yeah, I still absolutely adore him and feel like I've got something completely different having a pig rather than a dog or a cat or a rabbit. I wasn’t, never been a massive meat eater, but I gave up bacon a year before I got [Romeo], and since having him I've become a vegan.

K: Yeah.

P: So, whereas people have dogs and it doesn’t change their perception about the meat market, having [Romeo] has made me appreciate that farm animals should be, to us, just as meaningful and have a loving life just as much as a dog or a cat or a rabbit. And I get really upset... I mean I'm not one of those who will go preaching to people about animal rights, it’s a personal thing, but I get really upset now when I see cows in one of those lorries on the motorway, you know where they are going. So I think that’s the difference to having what people perceive a standard, domesticated animal or pet, to then something different. I think you just perceive the whole thing to be different.

K: I understand that I'm vegan too.

P: Oh, that’s great.

K: Do you think [Romeo] made you look at the food you’re eating differently?

P: Yeah, it did. I mean, I think most people are and I think it’s human nature, we just go into a supermarket and pick things up, we don’t think about the process of how things get on the shelf and how they are made. But then seeing how intelligent some animals are, pigs especially, how they know and how they sing to their young, how they cry, you know, pigs do cry, you can see their tears. When they know that they are having their young taken off them, or when they are going to the slaughterhouse. They know what’s coming. It's gut wrenching, I’ve seen videos of it. And I wished I hadn’t watched it, but I made myself watch it so I was aware of all of that. But it made me, now, I started looking into the big chicken processing plants where they don’t see the light of day because they are hatched, fed, killed, repeat. It’s quite alarming that up until a couple years ago, pork was the most popular meat, when they are such intelligent creatures. You tell people, oh I was in Vietnam and saw a dog being eaten and people are shocked, but mention a cow or a pig or a goat and people don’t seem too fussed by it, it’s just the norm for us that they are bred for meat, isn’t it? But yeah, massively changed my perceptions of like food production, and even drinking, I mean I'm lactose intolerant anyway, so I don’t drink cow's milk, but even taking that kind of thing, taking milk of cows, we are doing something that is not natural. So, yeah, I’ve become a different person in the last three years.

K: Do your friends and family understand the relationship you have with [Romeo]?

P: Oh yeah, they know I love him and they know how I talk about him. I can be walking to the supermarket and where I might pick something up for my sons, thinking they might like it, I do the same with him going down the fruit aisle, like I will get him a punnet of strawberries or something. My mum will say “is that for [Romeo]?” and I'll say “Yes”, then she will laugh and say “oh I'll buy them then, tell [Romeo] is ma-ma bought them for him”. So that’s the way it is in the family. My sister will ring up and say she’s got some melon for [Romeo] or whatever, things like that. So he is very much thought about and talked of.

K: And do you have a favourite activity to do with him?

P: Walking hum up the path is my favourite thing. I’m lucky because I'm on my own, I have quite a stressful job and I work in profoundly disabled palliative care, so it’s nice to come home from work, put my wellies on and walk him up the road. He gets on the green and goes crazy for a couple minutes before eating the grass, looking in the hedgerows and looking for things. I then just sit on this little wall or ledge down there and sit and watch him for three quarters of an hour, it’s unwinding. It’s lovely. It's my favourite thing to do. I love it.

K: Do you think he helps your own health and wellbeing at all?

P: yeah, he definitely has. He helped me this last... I mean I have a lot of health conditions, and going through a divorce, I do think [Romeo] has been my stress reliever, I’ve had somebody to focus on and erm, at times, when he was still living in the house, it was just bizzare having someone how can’t speak words to you, but just somebody in the house. Somebody to come show you affection in whatever form they show It in. Definitely, I wouldn’t go as dramatic to say he saved my life, but he definitely gave me something to keep going for especially with my health and everything.

K: That’s nice to hear. Can you tell any stories that might give me insight into the meanings he has for you?

P: Erm, I say there’s the one where he was talking to me and I was asking questions. He nudged my legs, so I spoke to him and he spoke back. I asked him questions and he was making these weird noises. And just the fact I’ve seen him move from fast asleep on the sofa, to seeing me sit on the arm chair, and sort of sighing and getting up and coming over. I say “[Romeo] there isn’t room for you up here” so then I have to get up and move to sit where he is because he wants to sit with me. If I go upstairs, he can’t go up them because their legs, but he stands on the bottom step but making this weird call [imitates pig noises] up the stairs to me sort of to say “i want to come up, what are you doing up there?” so he just sort of wants to be where I am really.

K: bless him. I think that’s all I had to ask. Was there anything else you wanted to mention about emotional bonds with pigs?

P: erm, just think it’s becoming more widespread and well-known about pigs. People will say to me at the park, “oh they’re more intelligent than dogs, aren’t they?” and people hear that fact, I've had people say they’d love a pig. There is one guy who comes over and when he sees me he will come over, when he has his grandkids over, he asks if they can have their picture taken with the pig. I then start poking him, so he collapses, they’ve got these points along their spines that make them do that. He will lie there and the kids will sit around him and have their photo taken. They are very placid creatures, very, very friendly creatures, so loveable, so intelligent. No drama really. I’m not saying the world is never going to stop eating meat, I always said that if I was going to continue to eat meat, which I won’t now, but if I was I would only eat meat that had a life, if you know what I mean, that had had some a year or two of living it’s best life before they er, decide to turn into meat. So, I just wish we had more knowledge and understanding of what we are doing really. Other than that, I mean I don’t think that will come for a long time. I don’t think it ever will.

K: Do you plan to have more pigs in the future?

P: well, me and my friend said if we were ever in a position to have a smallholding, we would do that. That would be one of the first thing I would do if I could move somewhere with a bit of land, I would definitely rescue pigs. I wouldn’t buy more pigs from babies, because there are enough pigs out there that need homes so I would do that.