



Lenin narrates wild stories of her love and other interests

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Popular green writing in India ceased to be popular with the passing away of M Krishnan, the pioneering wildlife photographer, writer and naturalist whose essays on wildlife photographer in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and *The Hindu* still guide many a budding writers. So it is a surprise to see Janaki Lenin's short pieces written for a newspaper appear as a collection in *My Husband and Other Animals*.

Lenin is a wildlife documentary filmmaker turned natural history writer who is serious about not appearing to be taking herself or her husband, herpetologist, wildlife conservationist and founder of the Madras Snake Park Romulus Whitaker, too seriously. Her book is infectious in its playfulness. Unlike most of her contemporaries in the media, Lenin is not easily sentimental and deals more in humour than sermons. The readability of her book has the potential to revive a stagnating genre. It is conversational, personal and intimate – almost to a fault, but can still excite readers not deeply into wild things.

Following her devotion to animals, Lenin moved in with an assortment of wildlife, including frogs, ants, snakes, monkeys and a husband, at a wild farm. This 'naturalisation' of a city woman entails a series of petty but unusual challenges. Naturally, Lenin is not short of stories.



Being part of the 'Page 3 crowd' of the conservation circuit, she enjoys access to a range of experts and taps that knowledge base well. Most of her quests are esoteric and yet intriguing enough to keep the reader hooked.

Her interest ranges from 'immaculate animal conception' to body odour. She explores the connection between sambhar, the south Indian dish, and sambhar, the Asian deer, examines how different animal potty habits reflect on Indians who relieve themselves outdoors; and learns to flog trees that do not flower easily.

Of course, *My Husband and Other Animals* is a lot about the husband. We learn a lot about Rom's early life, adventures, quirks, mischievousness, determination and achievements. Lenin seldom uses qualifiers to describe her man but the numerous stories she narrates portray "the dude" as "the king of cool" whose voice often "trails" and who is possibly vulnerable to bullying at home. Lenin's breezy style stumbles on occasion, when she attempts to address less esoteric issues such as relocation of villages or releasing hand-raised animals in the wild. Even otherwise, not all essays conform to the general flair that marks *My Husband and Other Animals*. Also, like the Gerald Durrell-inspired title, some ideas explored in the book are not particularly original.

She is at her best when not encumbered by a brief or purpose. "Why do they (animals) play?" wonders Lenin in an essay. "To me, that's a silly question. Why do we play? It relieves stress, builds camaraderie...and mostly, it is just sheer good fun." She could well be explaining why she writes, or why one must read her book.