



Animal Farm – Version 2

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If you are one of those who assumes that anyone who chooses to share her life with Romulus (Rom) Whitaker – herpetologist, wildlife conservationist, founder of the Madras Snake Park, and the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust, among other projects – just has to be one of those keen-eyed, explorer-adventurer types, striding about taking on Nature, you might be a little taken aback when you first meet Janaki Lenin. Apparently, intrepid outdoor-divas sometimes come in surprisingly small, petite packages.

Janaki Lenin, whose column, *'My Husband and Other Animals'*, is a regular feature in *The Hindu*, recently released a compilation of her pieces bearing the same title.

Your first instinct is to get to the back stories and the hows-and-whens involved here. "I grew up right here in RA Puram, in the Chennai of the late 1970s-early 80s – cycling all over a friendly neighbourhood of independent houses with gardens, with hedges you ambled through when you visited – no one bothered using front gates." She smiles, "Now everything is separated by compound walls and highrises. Vertical separation?"

After school, she joined the Film Institute at Taramani. Her father, documentary and other films maker, K.R. Lenin, who had very clear ideas about what constituted 'good cinema' ("He firmly believed anything made after 1945 was rubbish"), was against the choice of profession.



Opposition, she discloses, invariably makes her more determined to follow that particular path.

As it turned out, the Film Institute was not a very pleasant experience, with everything being distinctly "geared towards Kodambakkam." She did, however, complete her course in editing, and became a freelancer, making corporate and advertisement films. "I worked out of different studios. My work went from Lalgudi Jayaraman to films on mixies and transformers."

After a while, she decided that the "only way I was going to do anything creative was by becoming a director myself." While scouting for subjects, she heard of a group called SAMP, which was doing a film on snakes, planned to increase awareness among people. "I thought this was a good idea."

And, obviously, if you are going to do a film on snakes, whom do you meet? Rom Whitaker.

"I was not interested in making the usual fact-driven documentary, but in making one which included people's views and reactions to snakes that run the gamut from worship to utter fear and revulsion."

You're about to ask her whether this was the moment, when she cuts you short by grinning: "Rom 'palmed me off' to Harry Miller."

A little later, she happened to visit another set, where her friend was working alongside Rom on a film about rats. "She told me to drop by and hang out with her. I did, and there was Rom."



Inevitable next question: Was she always interested in Nature, in everything people normally associate with words like 'conservationist', 'naturalist'?

"I didn't even know Nature existed. Forests were remote. I was city-bred through and through. Nature for me was my garden and backyard. I'd never been on treks... all of it came later, and I learnt everything from Rom."

She did know she'd always share him with Nature, right? "The suspicion was there," she grins.

Being with Rom meant, no, not candle-lit dinners, but being in the camps all the time. "The first time he took me camping, it was to Agumbe, the wettest place possible. It was like being flung into the deep end of a pool. I remember thinking 'I don't want to be here!'"

Did Rom ever take advantage of her initial inexperience with Nature?

"Absolutely. Like we'd cook fish for lunch, and I wouldn't have noticed anyone going to the market. So I'd wonder where the fish had come from, and Rom would say that a school of flying fish had come winging by, and that he had caught a few as they whizzed past, and that's how we were having fish for lunch. I was naive enough to believe him. I now justify this by saying it was such a new world for me back then. Doesn't happen so much now."



Rom and she made good partners work-wise. "We formed a company called Draco Films. It was then that I began to put in hours of research. You have to get all your facts meticulously right before you can pitch your ideas to anyone, typically TV channels like National Geographic and Discovery. There is a very rigorous vetting process, with a team of fact-checkers."

While this helped build her knowledge base, Rom was, of course, her in-house 'ready reckoner'. "He even knew more than what had been published."

She is now no longer making films, she writes her column and works on other writing projects.

You are puzzled by the ease of the transition, though. How can a self-confessed, city-bred girl step out of comfort zone so quickly?

A liberal, non-traditional upbringing, perhaps?

"Yes, you could say that. I didn't grow up with too many dos and don'ts. That's probably why I found easy to adapt to a totally different life. But aren't all women like that?" she suddenly asks.

Yes, but this is a bit different, right?

For one thing, most women don't have 'in-laws' so heavily endowed with teeth, fur, claws and poison sacs... (I saw that look. Dear Reader, and I know what you are thinking!).

"My father made us think for ourselves. If I had questions, he'd say: 'Look it up'. Nobody taught me to judge anything as wrong. "I have no 'icky' quotient." So, yes, city girls can learn to share eesal rice with the Irula... much to the latter's amusement.



The Whitakers live on a farm 10 km from Chengalpattu, in the midst of scattered hamlets. "My life is a bit like a nature science class...but we do have other interests, like reading and music. I read everything I can get. Rom listens to rock 'n roll; I listen to Carnatic and Hindustani. We try to come to Chennai during the music season. Now, after more than twenty years, I am a visitor to the city. The drive back tends to neutralise any fun element – it really has to be worth our while to make that trip. I'd love to be able to teleport into the city."

What do Rom and Janaki do for 'ordinary' fun? "Oh, that's hard to answer. We have our own definition of 'fun'. Friends? We do have some close friends, but we are both very asocial people... it's easier to talk to a snake," she laughs.

Does she ever get scared for Rom? Her book speaks of times when things have got dangerous. "Yes, all the time. I trust he will be careful, and am thankful when he gets home safe. What else can I do?"

Janaki's domestic issues are a little different from merely running out of veggies and milk, you imagine. "Well, we have staff who are used to our lives. Otherwise, yes, it is a problem. Forget urbanities, even people from around the area can't handle our lives, or working in our home. They come, see our place, and flee within a month! They say it's a jungle!"

Yes, this particular 'Amma and Aiyya' are a bit different, given that, over the years, their ideas of domestic pets are just that little but unusual. Janaki admits that kitchen utensils sometimes share space with garlic... and tree frogs. In her book, she has an exact count of the number of tree frogs she had to once coax out of the house – 289.



Janaki calls herself 'a dyed-in-the-wool city slicker', but adds that "saying 'yes' to every opportunity was like opening a door to a possibility – adventure." There is after all "plenty of time later to wallow in your comfort zone..." So, grab every new experience, is her approach.

You hear her anguish when her "45-kg gorgeous German Shepherd, Karadi" died in 2006, mauled by a leopard. Given that there is a very violent side to Nature, does Rom's unique outlook make him accepting of Nature's ways?

"Yes, Rom has no issue with death; a nature lover's emotional perspective is different. I was far more emotionally invested initially."

The book gives you loads of information in tantalising bitezone (no pun intended) portions. Like, did you know that a crocodile is easier to handle than a King Cobra, and is as easy to train as a dog? Pintu (a mind-boggling cute name for what most people would consider a scary creature) learnt by merely watching others being trained, while 'Ally', 'whose brain is the size of a walnut,' is a star pupil.

You hope you never find yourself attempting to outrun a slightly irritable elephant, but if you should, "never run in a straight line". You learn of the truly scary 'toxó', the rat-cat parasite that messes with human brains; that some people believe 'beating and scolding' trees can make them grow; and that snakes are "supremely civilised creatures", with a very clear idea of territory.

Janaki obviously has an intensely curious mind, so the book is also liberally sprinkled with some non-animal-oriented facts, like the origin of words like 'seersucker', 'mithridatization', and even 'sambhar'.



(Certainly not – go buy the book and look it up. As well all she has to say about the world of Nature.)

Fun with the Dude

There are a host of fun facts that surround Rom Whitaker.

The 'dude' or 'my man', as she sometimes calls him, has had quite a Life – with a capital 'L'. He is a colour-blind, a fact he dismisses with a laugh, but is able to find brown and green snakes with greater speed than most people. Janaki explains: "He trusts shapes, not colours."

He is able to trace his ancestry back to 839 A.D, with 'Whitaker' apparently derived from 'de Quitacre'. Rom, nicknamed 'Breezy' by his family, is also a 'cuss word expert' apparently, and in 'several languages', including Pashto. (You can't help thinking that given the unpredictable nature of his favourite creatures, the opportunities to brush up that particular skill must be infinite.)

New York-born Rom has "always felt Indian" and, years ago, traded in his American citizenship for an Indian passport. Rom's stepfather is Rama Chattopadhyaya, so that makes Kamaladevi, his step-grandmother, and Harindranath his 'Granddaddy' – who rescued the child Rom from a rather miserable school experience, and also once wrote a lovely poem 'For Gale and Breezy', describing Rom as a scamp, who is so full of life that he is lit from inside, it would seem, 'without the help of long, electric wires!'