



## A Wild Life

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"I travelled with only those items that I thought necessary to relieve the tedium of a long journey: four books on natural history, a butterfly net, a dog, and a jam jar full of caterpillars all in imminent danger of turning into chrysalids." These necessities of life saw Gerald Durrell through the shift to Corfu, immortalized in his *My Family and Other Animals*. Had the naturalist been alive today, packing for a similar trip, he would have included Janaki Lenin's *My Husband and Other Animals*, a collection of her writings in *The Hindu*.

Who could leave out a book that tells you how to live with tree frogs (use extra spices in recipes to mask the scent of tree frog piss), how to distract a charging sloth bear, why egret guano isn't good for Travancore tortoises? Plus, Lenin is far more instructive than you would expect on the subject of transvestite snakes (and snake orgies). In her years as a wildlife film documentary maker, and the years she's spent married to snake expert Rom Whitaker, Janaki Lenin has honed an extraordinary ability to understand the natural world.

Her style is direct and conversational, and both the husband and the 'other animals' of the title receive equal space. Wildlife writers have an unfair advantage over other columnists: their subject matter is so fascinating that the usual risk a publisher runs into with a collection of columns – boring the reader silly with repetition – doesn't apply here.



The best Indian writers on wildlife – S. Theodore Baskaran, M. Krishnan, Steven Alter – combined a rare passion for the non-human world with the ability to bring their animal characters alive, and Lenin has these gifts in abundance. Birds don't just sing; when they imitate dishwashers and ambulance, she writes, they use the environment as "a living, vibrant musical alphabet". Snakes are mostly benign, and she has stories to prove it. Animals play – rhinos with barrels, lions and cougars push or kick balls around, belugas and dolphins have fun blowing bubbles. They play, she says, for the same reasons that we do (and elsewhere, she'll remind us that for all the separation we place between us and "animals", we are animals too, sharing our genes with the chimps).

A portrait of Rom Whitaker builds up slowly: his adventures transporting snakes on a bus, his "friendly...cuddly...loveable" python pet, the perils of dealing with escaping gharials and a croc called Jaws, the friends he makes among the snake-hunting Irula tribals. "In trying to define what it is to be human, we invariably turn our gaze to the animal world," writes Lenin. "Whatever it means to be human, my husband is, first and foremost, an animal. And so are you and I." For wildlife experts and conservationists, this book (and Gynelle Alves' playful cover as a bonus) will be gladly added to the shelves, another classic to place beside Krishnan, Baskaran and company.

And for the casual animal lover, amateurs like myself, you could ask for no better guide than Janaki Lenin to a world that contains far more interesting species than just us naked apes.