



Animal Planet

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Prerna Singh Bindra

It's a fitting account of a life lived on the outskirts of Chennai with animals, says Prerna Singh Bindra. The title is catchy, crisp, witty... which, it occurs to me, is a reflection of what follows – an extremely readable, rollicking account by Janaki Lenin of a life lived in the outskirts of the metropolis of Chennai with her husband and other animals. Of course, the title, as they say in Bollywood, is inspired. As the writer is, not just by the classic *The title is catchy, crisp, witty... which, it occurs to me, is a reflection of what follows – an extremely readable, rollicking account by Janaki Lenin of a life lived in the outskirts of the metropolis of Chennai with her husband and other animals. Of course, the title, as they say in Bollywood, is inspired. As the writer is, not just by the classic *My Family and Other Animals*, authored by the iconic Gerald Durrell, but also by his life. Writes Durrell's wife Lee in the foreword: "Janaki, like Gerald, uses humour, storytelling and an easy gentle style to remind us about the links between humans and other species on the planet." The husband in question is 'Rom,' Romulus Whitaker, or rather India's 'Snake Man' as he is known, who established the Madras Croc Bank in Chennai. Life with Rom, amid crocs and cobras, toads and turtles, jackals and the occasional leopard, could never be dull – if you have the inclination for those kinds of pursuits. Well, Janaki does – at least, she loves animals, and while she may not have bargained for being embedded with snakes and scorpions, she took to her new 'wild life' with both exuberance and passion that sparkle in this little book. The book talks, with much affectionate humour, of creatures great and small.*



Janaki's menagerie embraces all, even the much-maligned creatures – the 'creepy crawlies' as we disparagingly refer to them.

I went back and forth on the stories – Janaki's stoic initiation of camping in the wet forests of Agumbe; the use of toads as cockroach dispensers; Jaws', the largest captive croc in India, encounters with curious bears; and, about the jaadu ki jhappi (hug) method of training for dogs (and husbands). Among my favourites is a chapter on the homing instinct of animals, a much debated subject in the context of big cats, and hence I was especially intrigued to read about Janaki's experiments with toads which showed how they unerringly found their way back 'home' when dumped even 750 m away. She also writes about Ajoba, Maharashtra's first radio-collared leopard and a remarkable animal who covered over 120 km in 75 days over ghats, through towns, across railway tracks and highway till a speeding vehicle did him in...as he travelled – one concludes – towards his original home, Mumbai's Borivalli National Park.

Janaki has that rare ability to see humour in all situations, and the rare quality to laugh at herself and her animals, including the husband. Every chapter is a story in itself – a bitte-sized nugget, sharp, spicy – and an easy read, though couched in them are nuggets of information, messages of our vanishing wildlife. Says she, "I was wondering about boundaries between humans and animals, and I realized there aren't any. It's a continuum."

The book is for all those who nurse a passion to be naturalist, who love animals...and for those who are unacquainted with the wild world, but may well be inspired to embark on the road Rom and Janaki travel.