



At home in the company of strangers

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Walking around with a copy of Janaki Lenin's *My Husband and Other Animals* is a great way to start a conversation. An incredulous, "My husband and what?", and in the same vein, "Other animals? Means your husband is one?" and a completely different level of snigger, "Has your husband seen this?"

Oh yes, he has. The husband, who by his own admission, has spent a childhood swotting at the noses of street dogs with a cricket bat, purportedly to keep them from biting him. But bite him they did. Ever since he has got those canine teeth dug in, he's enjoyed a rather tempestuous relationship with dogs – he's spoiling for a fight with them and they, in turn, are out to get him too. Often, it means swerving the sedan towards the random street dog as a tease; equally malevolently, the dog runs in hot pursuit alongside, snarling and snapping at the car. Quite not the kind of husband Janaki Lenin talks about.

The legendary Romulus Whitaker, herpetologist, wildlife conservationist and founder of the Madras Snake Park, is clearly at the other end of the spectrum. Rom Whitaker, as Lenin recounts, is much bitten, not the least by a poisonous water moccasin. And yet, he bears no malice, his enthusiasm for the pursuit of all creatures great and small remains un-waning, and for the rest of us, fascinating.



Living with Rom Whitaker must certainly be interesting. As the book's introduction says, Janaki has always had an interest in animals, but living with Rom, *The Dude*, took it to the stratospheric level. "There's never a dull moment." If serialising, *My Husband and Other Animals* as a column in the Metro Plus section of *The Hindu* was a great idea, an even better one was to put it all together into a book.

Every chapter is a story of column length: short, witty, sometimes epigrammatic, always entertaining and consistently well written. Janaki Lenin's book, for someone who grew up on dusty, lending library volumes of Gerald Durrell and James Herriot, is a delightful harking back to an idyllic past. More the naturalist Durrell than the veterinarian Herriot though, as the book's title itself is fashioned out of the former's *My Family and Other Animals*. The iconic Durrell's wife Lee also writes the foreword for the book. Like Durrell, Lenin has a wry, witty style, often turning the joke on herself, and her husband.

Every kind of animal, bird or creepy crawly has stomped the pages of this book – tree frogs, Malabar Civets, monkeys, plenty crocs and snakes, deer, leopards, jungle cats, termites, even a 'smokey cat' the Pogeyan puli. Nearly in tow with these creatures, as if in beautiful symbiosis, walk Rom's conservation mates, Irula tribes people, Costa Rican gold miners, Indian evologists, birdwatchers, snake catchers and Arunachali liaison men.



A film maker on her second career as a writer, Lenin has the rare ability to make a narrative come alive as if it were a motion picture. Whether it is describing the couple's encounter with the long-nosed shrew, or her enjoying a meal of roasted termites with the Iruka people. She even speaks as the animal itself, the tree frog now, the dogs, then, though these are not the best stories in the book.

Encounters

The best stories are her descriptions of Rom's scrapes, her own encounters in the wild, and those of the couple together as a pair out there on their own, alone and part of the wild life they have chosen to live in. Anecdotally, the ones that really are delightful include the story of Rom's colour blindness, the nettle attack, tucking into instant noodles in a wet, wet forest, the hash-smoking animal dealer who vamoosed without a trace... Some of them are clearly from Rom's life before her, so we're tempted to conclude that her husband is probably as good a raconteur as Lenin is.

But that is not all. Sometimes subtly, sometimes obviously, couched in her stories are messages on conservation, tips on living in the wild, interesting random history, dabble with a bit of etymology (did you know the South Indian lentil sambhar was named in honour of Sambhaji, son of the Maratha warrior Shivaji?) and even some bizarre kitchen advice (the recipe for Irian mumu, cooked for a 100 people).



And to answer the question that is generally asked in many ways, but essentially means: Is your husband an animal? If you get asked that for reading the book, Lenin obviously gets asked that many times over for writing it. She too has met outrage over the apparent lack of respect for the legal male consort. But hey, we share 96 per cent of our DNA with chimpanzees. So we are all animals, first. Just that some of us love all kinds of animals, and some others clearly don't love dogs.