



From frogs to crocs, author Janaki Lenin on all things wild

The Telegraph, Calcutta, March 14, 2013, REPTILE WRITER

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Come, water, stay, up, sit, turn, open your mouth

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This is not a dog being trained, but a crocodile. Did you know that crocodiles could jump? Or that there is a National Reptile Breeder's Expo in Daytona, USA? How about someone who is excited to get a baby King Cobra for \$350 while two adults (King Cobras of course) wait back home.... *My Husband and Other Animals* (Westland, Rs 250) by Janaki Lenin is a collection of short essays that makes the wild, wild world an easy trek. Each chapter deals with a different set of animals and experiences of the wildlife film editor-turned-writer. Married to Romulus Whitaker, herpetologist (people studying and working with amphibians and reptiles) and founder of the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust, Janaki tells t2 about her wild world ...

Falling in love with animals and Rom Whitaker...

My first real engagement with wildlife began when I fell in love with Rom. And when you are in love with a person like Rom, you have to love his world. I met him at the age of 15, when I went to visit the Crocodile Bank as part of a school group and there was a chap who seemed to be from another planet. While we were concerned with passing our school exams, he seemed quite frivolous, passing away his days with animals. The next phase was a series of meetings on the professional front as I was a film editor and Rom was a filmmaker. It was only much later that we got to know each other better and fell in love... there was no decisive moment.



How is it living with crocs, snakes, gharials and tree frogs?

The farm in Chengalpattu where we live today... it's like living in a zoo, a controlled environment. We would be out in the morning looking for eggs, finding the nests, starting the incubators, checking temperatures and the eggs that are already incubating or the babies that are hatching. Most of the encounters we have had are with animals who come into our house and decide that they are not going to move out.

Do any of the animals creep you out?

When I saw Rom being so calm and casual around crocs and snakes, my attitude towards them also changed. When you start off with reptiles, the complete wrong end of the spectrum if I may say, then mammals and every other animal looks really cute and cuddly.

Animal facts and trivia feature heavily in your book, but thankfully it is not like zoology...

Essentially it is storytelling, and I am writing for me or someone like me. Initially my experience in wildlife was also zero. So I try to see the story from an average reader's point of view and find things that would be funny and interesting.

Stories in the book that are particularly close to your heart...

There is this one essay called the Feckless Farmers, which sort of makes fun of us —Rom and I, and the conservationists of the world...



An encounter with the wild that you would like to share...

Dangerous situations don't generally happen in the wild, especially when you follow the rules... all the scary experiences I have had has been at the Croc Bank. Being in an enclosure with an animal where neither the animal nor you have much space to move around, that's when things go crazy.

Reptile facts that people do not know about and you wish they did?

Most reptiles are very shy and they won't go into a confrontation with you. The documentaries where you see people jumping around and acting as if the animals are dangerous are nonsense. That is part of the reason why I gave up filmmaking.