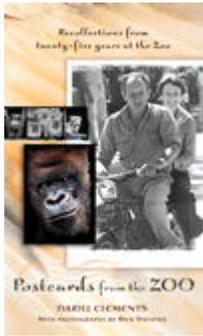


Postcards from the zoo: Animal tales from a 25-year zoo safari by Darrill Clements, photography by Rick Stevens. Sydney: HarperCollins, 2002, pp. 256, A\$29.95, ISBN 0732272394.



This affable book offers anecdote after anecdote of the author's time as media spokesperson for Taronga Zoo in Sydney from 1975 until 2000. Clements takes us through experiences with a wide variety of animals, and documents the many significant changes at the zoo in the last quarter century. Within the pages are all the commonplaces and contradictions of contemporary zoological gardens; progress and captivity, preservation and technocracy, order and wildness, myth and science. The melange of metaphors is visible in the space of two pages when Clements describes the transport of animals from Taronga to the wider environment of Western Plains Zoo, first in biblical terms – 'the animals began moving into the 'Ark' out west, two by two' (p. 207) – and then scientific ones, as '[t]he westward migratory pattern to Dubbo' (p. 209). The constructedness of zoo environments is manifested in this amusing reaction in Zimbabwe:

I got my first sighting of a herd of zebra wandering along a track and had the 'zoo thought': 'Gosh, they've escaped.' Then I spotted piles of elephant droppings and the zoo in me couldn't help thinking that the keepers here were a bit slack (pp. 47-48).

Given its insider's perspective, the book is rarely critical or analytic; rather, one is taken for a ride through twenty-five years of animal events. Still, the author is not a complete insider, with (at least originally) little knowledge of the animals and thereby speaks from the model narrational position. This does provide access to abundant information into the workings of a prominent zoological garden as it negotiates the concerns of preservation, welfare, education and exhibition.

There are some unfortunate tendencies in Clements's narrative. A colonialist stereotype permeates the narrative of the trip to a dangerous Africa to rescue endangered rhinoceroses back to the safety of Australia, while her description of a silverback as a (kindly) 'patriarchal disciplinarian' and his female partner as 'neurotic' (p. 4) reminds us of what is most problematic about anthropomorphism. But other moments are particularly endearing (if sentimental) like her description of the zoo workers such as the bird-man Les, and the familiarity evident in most of her depictions of the animals. In these good-humoured yarns we are reminded of what is most effective and necessary in an anthropomorphism born of experience and observation. The numerous photographs included from the experiences eye of Rick Stevens add a further dimension to what is on the whole a casually pleasant book.

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