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# Reader's Guide

from Elena Passarello  
 author of *Animals Strike Curious Poses*

## Author Asks:

- 1) I'm inspired by the idea of an essay collection as an artistic form (rather than merely an assortment of essays that involve similar topics). Where and how do you see this collection working as more than the sum of its parts? What do you notice about how the book indicates its interest in a larger argument or a "build"?
- 2) This book takes the same shape as a medieval bestiary, or "book of beasts." In the actual bestiaries of that era, real facts would combine with myth and rumor to create a half-factual, half-fanciful portrait of each animal. The bestiaries also tell a larger story: usually some kind of morality story. There might also be a third story that of the author in these medieval tales as well. Where do you see these three types of storytelling in *Animals Strike Curious Poses*? Locate places where you can observe the weave of hard fact and myth, the larger commentary, and glimpses of the (slightly off-kilter) human mind that put the whole thing together.
- 3) When I first began writing about nature (as an undergraduate two decades ago) the common practice was to avoid personification in one's essays. This impulse has led to a deeper understanding of the animals—like octopodes and birds of prey—that operate very differently than we do. Locate the places in the book when an animal is presented outside of human storytelling, on its own terms and discuss the effects.
- 4) In the past decade, however, anti-personification trends have slackened a bit among nature writers. Many now think that telling the similarities between another animal's habits and our own can increase a reader's empathy for that animal, and thus promote its conservation. It also helps remind us that we are not separated from the rest of the animal kingdom—we are all animals influencing one another and evolving together. What animals in the book receive this kind of consideration? Why do certain animals get a more human-centric treatment than others in *Animals Strike Curious Poses*?
- 5) The essays of the collection represent various creative tactics—they report facts, tell stories, ask questions, and play with language in their own ways. Can you catalogue some of these tactics? How do the tactics of "Vogel Staar" differ from those of "Harriet" or "Koko"?
- 6) Why would a particular essay (its subject matter, its argument) opt for a particular tactic? In your estimation, what do these varied tactical methods allow for? What are their limitations? Do any fall outside what you consider to be the limits of nonfiction?
- 7) One thing I learned all too well in making this book is that our history of interactions with animals is most often a history of cruelty. Even when past humans thought they were worshipping or celebrating an animal, they were often subjecting it to a

lifetime of violence (as seen in the case of Clara the rhino or Sackerson the bear). Discuss the way certain essays address these cruelties: Is it appropriate? Does it incriminate humans enough? How do the essays balance a conversation about cruelty with enough energy to keep the essays moving forward?

8) Some of these essays play with gender, even though gender is a human social construct usually not extended to other fauna. Which of these essays feel gendered to you, and how does the human concept of gender contribute to/ detract from that animal's story?

9) Only one essay in the book—"Lancelot"—is an overtly personal essay (written from an "I" point of view, discussing experiences from my life, etc). What happens when you encounter a personal tale amidst all these third-person pieces? How does the front-and-center presentation of the author affect the book, especially when it appears so late in the game?

10) The essay "Celia" discusses de-extinction, a scientific possibility that, as I type this, is growing ever closer to becoming a reality. What do you think about the idea of bringing back long-gone species? What should our understanding of the morality of this concept be? And considering how much hybrid breeding and laboratory intervention is required to even consider de-extinction, do you think it is the same as a natural specimen? Is it even possible to truly bring these wild animals back to life?

11) How did you process the significance of the limerick that appears at the end of the essay on Twinkie the Starfish?

12) Psych! There was no essay about Twinkie the Starfish. I bet you feel really embarrassed now, huh?

13) Wait a minute. . . . Did you actually read any of these essays?

14) Sooooo . . . what exactly were you doing instead of engrossing yourself in my deathless prose?

15) Just out of curiosity: If there was an essay on a starfish named Twinkie and said essay did end in a limerick, what would that limerick be (suggested rhymes—pinky, stinky, coinkydinky)?



# Writing Exercises:

## Bestiary for Beginners

Write a short (100-200-word) prose piece for each one of the queries below and, once you've edited the fragments for style and concision, arrange them into a mini-bestiary that depicts your unique relationship to the animal kingdom. Feel free to add other sections into this collage as you see fit. As a bonus (and to make it a true bestiary), try to make each section discuss a different species, so there are as many beasts represented as possible.

- What is your earliest memory involving an animal?
- What is a memory of a pet bringing you comfort?
- Have you ever engaged in a “conversation” with a critter?
- What animal do you first remember wanting to research or learn more about?
- What beasts and bugs were (or are you still) afraid of?
- When did an animal teach you about violence?
- What is an instance in which you were cruel to an animal?
- What animals do you associate with disgust?
- What is your most memorable dream involving a natural creature?

## Intersection Explosion

Think of a type of animal that fascinates you, but about which you know very little. First, research that animal's evolution, biology, habitat, cultural practices, and status on the planet. Then, investigate the role humans have played in the animal's livelihood over the past several thousand years and the various cultural myths humans have invented that involve the animal. Once you've taken those two research journeys (biological fact and human history/ storytelling), look for interesting intersections: points of connection, contradiction, causality, or explosion. Begin an essay at one of those intersections and use it to discuss both the natural and social implications of that particular species and its relationship to humans.

## Further Reading:

Richard Barber, *Bestiary*

Elizabeth Tova Bailey, *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*

John Berger, “Why Look at Animals?” (in *About Looking*)

Jorge Luis Borges, *Manual de Zoología Fantástica*

Jenny Diski, *What I Don't Know About Animals*

Linda Kaloff, *Looking at Animals in Human History*

Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction*

Amy Leach, *Things That Are*

Barry Lopez, *Of Wolves and Men*

Jon Mooalem, *Wild Ones: A Sometimes Dismaying, Weirdly Reassuring Story about*

*Looking at People Looking at Animals in America*

David Quammen, *The Boilerplate Rhino*

Christopher Smart, *Jubilate Agno*

Judith Thurman, “First Impressions” (New Yorker, 2008)

