



Catch Me a Colobus

Gerald Durrell , Edward Mortelmans (Illustrator)

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A pot-pourri of animal anecdotes, based on hectic days at the author's Jersey zoo and his forays to various corners of the earth to rescue animal species in danger of extinction. First published in 1972.

Catch Me a Colobus Details

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Author : Gerald Durrell , Edward Mortelmans (Illustrator)

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From Reader Review *Catch Me a Colobus* for online ebook

Iona Stewart says

I love Gerry Durrell and all his books, also this one.

Gerry loved animals, and his main aim was to stop the extinction of as many animals as possible by going on expeditions to Africa and South America in order to catch threatened animals and bring them to his Jersey zoo (when this had been established) in order to breed and thus preserve them.

He wrote these wonderful books, not for the love of writing them (in fact he mostly hated it), or to become a famous author, but to finance his animal—catching trips.

Gerry begins each chapter with an example of a hilarious letter or note he has received asking for help or advice.

In the period described in the book Gerry was married to Jacquie.

Catching the animals was the least of Gerry's problems; afterwards there was the matter of finding food they would eat, and hopefully enjoy, and finding out what on earth to do when they refused to eat anything at all.

Sometimes the animals escaped, went on a rampage and had to be captured again.

If Gerry succeeded in obtaining a couple of a certain species, one of each sex, there was the problem of getting them to like each other, so they would mate.

We are reminded of the fact that animals all have individual personalities, just like we humans.

Gerry is one of the funniest writers I have encountered.

Here's an example of Gerry's humour

"He (a Cornish Chough) liked to sit on Jacquie's shoulder and run his beak delicately through her hair, presumably in the hopes of finding the odd woodlouse or some similar delicacy and one day ... he rammed a piece of paper into my ear ... presumably some frustrated nest-making attempt ..."

He provides us with a few examples showing that the speech of talking birds is not just haphazard parroting, but exceedingly apt.

There was one man who insisted that parrots couldn't talk at all.

He walked up to a parrot in the room (an African Grey parrot) and said "You can't talk, Polly, can you?"

"The parrot regarded him for a moment ... and said, in clear and unmistakable tones, 'Kiss my behind'. ... The parrot had never used that phrase before and, indeed, never used it again, but it had said it as clear as a bell and there was no getting round it ... The man, white with rage, left the party, saying he wasn't going to stay in a house where guests were insulted."

I'm sure Gerry loved the parrot getting its own back on the rude, unbelieving man who denigrated its abilities.

I confess to having a similar experience myself, when my daughter and I were discussing Misser, my cat, in her presence. In some strange way the conversation got round to the unlikely topic of whether she could understand French, and I unkindly remarked "how could she, when she can't even understand Danish (the language we were conversing in). At that Misser promptly jumped over to me and bit me on the finger (and she had never done that before nor did again). Misser thereby proved to me beyond any doubt that she could in fact understand Danish.

The book is filled with absorbing stories and illustrated with a host of animal drawings by Edward Mortelmans showing us the appearance of the rare species discussed.

In short, this is another amusing and informative book by Gerry Durrell, which I highly recommend.

Trounin says

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(c) Trounin

Irene Lazlo says

Como siempre, siendo Gerald Durrell me ha encantado. Probablemente éste haya sido el libro más triste de este autor que he leído porque en él mueren más animales que en cualquiera de los otros que he leído. Aún así, siempre me había preguntado cómo sería ese aspecto de cazar animales y tener un zoo: la posibilidad de la muerte de esos animales. En este libro se entiende muy bien la frustración y el proceso que va detrás: la autopsia, el evitar que vuelva a ocurrir a otras especies... Aún así, también tiene partes divertidas y visitas a parajes exóticos así que es muy interesante. Como los demás libros que tratan del zoo, encontramos animales salvajes más vistosos como leopardos, leones y monos, y eso siempre apetece.

Priya says

Written for my blog, Tabula Rasa.

In this memoir-like book, Durrell has returned from a trip to Australia, only to find his zoo in shambles. In Catch Me A Colobus, he recounts how they set up the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, found sponsors and eventually built the zoo back into shape. The first half of the book is a compilation of vignettes expanding about seven years at Durrell's Jersey Zoo. From escaped chimps, pregnant tapirs and bullying parrots to stories of the strange characters that visit the zoo, like a woman who sat on a bird. Durrell and his

staff care deeply for their animal cohabitants, which shows how his zoo is a long way off from the cruelty that is commonly seen in such places.

The second half of the book follows Durrell's expedition to Sierra Leone to collect the rare Colobus monkeys and make the eponymous BBC series. The travelogues detail the conservation efforts or lack thereof across the world, the lives of tribals and forest officers, the customs problems Durrell faces when transporting animals across oceans and the difficult job of adapting the wild to a life of captivity. When Durrell speaks about conservation in the final chapters, he speaks with an admirable passion.

"The world is as delicate and as complicated as a spider's web, and like a spider's web, if you touch one thread, you send shudders running through all the other threads that make up the web. But we're not just touching the web, we're tearing great holes in it..."

When asked why I should concern myself so deeply, I reply that I think the reason is that I have been a very lucky man and throughout my life the world has given me the most enormous pleasure. People always look at you in a rather embarrassed sort of way when you talk like this, as though you had said something obscene, but I only wish that more people felt that they owed the world a debt and were prepared to do something about it."

Durrell's dedication to his zoo is remarkable. In this pre-internet age, he conducts his research through a vast library of books on flora and fauna. He highlights the shortcomings of most books of science and explains how he combats them by maintaining intricate journals on the behaviour of the animals at his zoo. He also often reaches out to his contacts for assistance, from veterinarians and human surgeons to other zookeepers. Their readiness and the lengths they go to help out say a lot about Durrell himself.

I had read a book in my mother tongue once about a similar conservationist's zoo, and I had a few issues with it. The main problem was, the writer kept attaching human qualities to the animals that made their behaviour a little misleading to the uninformed reader. The leopard threw a tantrum, he would say, and purred to me that he was upset with me. It was cute, but not quite scientific enough, and I kept wanting to remind him that it was a wild animal he was referring to. Durrell, on the other hand, displays his love for animals and their unique personalities quite well, while explicitly reminding the reader not to mistake a chimpanzee for a friendly little pet.

Disappointingly, the book has no pictures, only cartoony illustrations at the beginning of each chapter. An annoying unnecessary addition are some rather absurd fan letters that beg the question - do people put in any thought before they put pen to paper?

But Durrell more than makes up for both shortcomings. He has some engaging writerly tricks up his sleeve. My favourite is how he attaches animal qualities to the humans that populate this book. So we see someone "spread out in his chair like a ship-wrecked giraffe," or another "clung to his bed like a limpet," and we get these profiles of the BBC crew -

"Chris has heavy-lidded, green eyes, which he tends to hood like a hawk when he is thinking, and in moments of crisis retreats behind his nose like a camel. And there was Howard who was short and stocky with dark curly hair, and enormous horn-rimmed spectacles which made him look like a benevolent owl."

Now, I would not have called an owl benevolent myself, but I can totally see it. It is silly and very entertaining, and only the tip of the giant iceberg that is Durrell's warm, endearing humour. The glimpses of his personal interactions with his wife Jacquie and his assistants make him out, perhaps self-flatteringly, to

be a thoroughly lovable guy.

Durrell is also pretty good at imagery. I mean, the man can really write. He sees the world with the eyes of an expert, notes even the tiniest of details, and yet, his conversational tone assures that we never feel overwhelmed by factual information. Check out these few passages on Durrell's first sighting of the Colobus monkey. I have never seen a tree or a monkey described with so much care and fascination.

I was standing, looking out over the misty forest, when I heard some noises in the valley just below the house. I knew it was monkeys because there was that lovely sound as they leap into the leaves, like the crash of surf on a rocky shore. They were heading for a big and rather beautiful tree that grew a couple of hundred yards from the veranda just below us. It had a sort of greeny-grey trunk, the leaves were a very vivid green, and it was covered, at this time of year, with bright cerise-pink seed pods about six inches long.

There was another crash and rustle amongst the leaves. And then, suddenly, it seemed as though the whole tree had burst into bloom, a bloom of monkeys. They were red and black Colobus, and they were the most breathtaking sight. They had rich, shining, chestnut-red and coal black fur, and in the morning sun, they gleamed as though they had been burnished; they were magnificent.

When I looked back at the tree, they had all disappeared. As I sat sipping my tea, I remembered a stupid woman I'd met at a cocktail party in Freetown, who'd said, 'I cannot understand why you're going up country, Mr Durrell. There's absolutely nothing to do or see there.' I wish she could have seen those Colobus.

I cannot believe this is the first I have heard of this man. *Catch Me A Colobus* by Gerald Durrell is a treat for animal lovers, amateur naturalists, ornithology enthusiasts, and pretty much anyone with a liking for wordy English humour.

barrieboy says

This is a pleasant and enjoyable book by Gerald Durrell who, after returning from a long expedition abroad, attempts to rejuvenate his somewhat rundown and almost penniless Jersey zoo, and of his efforts in creating the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust. A must-read for animal conservationists.

Txe Polon says

Este volumen no solo narra hechos más tristes (pero inherentes a la labor del conservacionista) que otros del mismo autor, sino que en general el tono es menos humorístico. En general es una obra menos elaborada, y algunos capítulos son más bien malos, careciendo de la unidad que suele caracterizarlos y de la estructura circular que en otros volúmenes convertían los relatos en obras de ingeniería. Los primeros cuatro capítulos son los peores (especialmente malo es "El señor D. y la señora D.", que carece por completo de unidad temática), pero la obra mejora cuando se narran los viajes a Sierra Leona y a México.

Rebecca says

If you've never read anything by the late English naturalist Gerald Durrell, you're in for an absolute treat. I'd recommend starting with *The Corfu Trilogy*, his hilarious account of growing up on a Greek island in an eccentric family that also included novelist Lawrence Durrell. Yet he is perhaps best known for his wonderfully readable travelogues describing international animal collecting journeys. This is, I think, the third one I've read so far, and though they do all follow a similar pattern they don't become formulaic.

I especially appreciated this one because I had the good fortune to read it while on vacation at Durrell Wildlife Park on the island of Jersey (in the Channel Islands off of France) last weekend. Durrell's is no standard zoo, but a conservation-oriented center that links captive breeding and work on the ground in native countries in the effort to save endangered animals from extinction. Though there are no colobus monkeys at the zoo today, it does still specialize in primates, with lemurs, gibbons, gorillas and orangutans taking pride of place.

Catch Me a Colobus is a sort of sequel to *Menagerie Manor*, which chronicled the setting up of Jersey Zoo. Durrell returned from a trip to Australia and New Zealand (the subject of *Two In The Bush*) to find his zoo close to bankruptcy. He started the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust and, between the financial support of donors and his own writing, managed to rescue the zoo. The rest of the book details his trips to Sierra Leone and Mexico (the latter section is a bit shoe-horned in, like he had some leftover material but not enough to fill a whole book on its own), all filled with the same sorts of madcap adventures and quirky characters beloved by readers of his autobiographical works.

His passion for conserving the natural world comes through clearly:

The world is as delicate and as complicated as a spider's web, and like a spider's web, if you touch one thread, you send shudders running through all the other threads that make up the web. But we're not just touching the web, we're tearing great holes in it; we're waging a sort of biological war on the world around us...By our thoughtlessness, our greed and our stupidity we will have created, within the next fifty years or perhaps even less, a biological situation whereby we will find it difficult to live in the world at all.

Those words were prescient when the book was first published in 1972, and even more telling now, more than four decades later.

(This review formed part of an article about books for animal lovers on Bookkaholic.)

Metodi Markov says

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Leore Joanne Green says

Gerald Durrell! I have certainly missed his writing. I forgot how well he writes. Funny, flowing, interesting and with a fantastic vocabulary.

I had a bit of a rough time reading about the accidents which happened in the zoo, but it was a terrific book and I finished it so fast.

Great great great!

5.3.07

Bionic Jean says

Durrell's travels in search of exotic animals while he was based at Jersey Zoo.

Chrisl says

This, the first of the Gerald Durrell books I read encouraged finding more his animal collecting stories. That interest wasn't long sustained, but I'm glad to have gotten to know a bit of Durrell's world.

Tripta says

I think this excerpt sums up everything I love about this book in particular, and Gerald Durrell in general. He's like PG Wodehouse. A Wodehouse who loves animals of all shapes and sizes, from Colobus monkeys to police dogs.

'Now,' said Ambrose, 'to show how obedient they are their trainers will tell them to sit where they are, and then the trainers would go to the other side of the studio and you will see how the dogs would obey them.' The trainers told the dogs to sit, which they did in a panting line, and then walked over to the other side of the studio.

'You see,' said Ambrose, a broad and happy grin on his face. 'Now this dog, here, he's called Peter and he's five years old. This one here is called Thomas and he's four years old...'

At this point the third dog, which had got thoroughly fed up of the whole thing, got up and walked over to the other side of the studio, away from the glare of the lights.

'And that,' continued Ambrose, unperturbed, pointing in the direction in which the dog had disappeared, 'that is Josephine, and she's a bitch.'

Ekta says

An amazing journey of Durrell in far away places to collect exotic animals for his zoo. The details about places he visits, people and life their adds to the excitement. His writing style hooks you and makes you sympathetic to the cause of animals around us. A must read for children and adults alike.

Seren says

I grew up on these books, along with James Herriot's novels, so I always love to read them again, revisiting my childhood dreams (I wanted to be just like Gerald Durrell, and live on a Greek island). They never get old, are always entertaining, and give you a glimpse into the world of the professional naturalist etc. I love reading about the antics of the animals, some of whom have more personality than most humans, and getting to read about the wonderful places the author describes. Always a fun, entertaining, quick read with a healthy dash of nostalgia and wonder thrown in.

Khushnuma Daruwala says

I'm pretty sure I wrote him a letter when I read it as a child. And I did once again when I re-read this book. (Not him personally but his trust). His writing and the work he and his team have been doing over the years is commendable. That his books make you want to reach out and get involved is a testament to his writing. His books are the trust's best advocates.
