

# True study of real animals

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The Weekend Australian

Saturday 28th August 2021

963 words

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520cm on the page



## True study of real animals

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In his extraordinary novel **The Rome Zoo**, French author Pascal Janovjak uses the eponymous institution to observe one species in particular: not the imperious lions or the mischievous chimps or the pygmy hippopotami, all of which are there in the background, but the human beings that would remove those animals from their natural habitats and put them in cages.

In a quiet twist on this strange practice, Janovjak asks us to consider the habits, and the deathless egotism, of the human species as it peers in at the various enclosures and sees nothing but reflections of itself: the only animal, to paraphrase Albert Camus, that refuses to be what it is.

The novel is set over 100 years and interweaves two narratives: a history of the zoo itself, from its opening in 1911, to its co-option by Mussolini's Fascists, to its reinvention as a "bio park" in the current conservationist style; and a mystery set in 2011 involving an endangered species of anteater and a love affair between the zoo's manager, Giovanna, and a visiting Algerian architect, Chahine. In short, often darkly humorous sections, Janovjak cuts between these narratives in a way that teases out the themes of projection, exploitation and power.

When we first meet Giovanna and Chahine, the zoo is in financial crisis. Giovanna's mission is to balance the books – a job made suddenly easier by the death, in London, of what are believed to be the only two "tamandin" anteaters in existence, apart from the one still housed in Rome. Thus "Oscar" becomes an instant celebrity and the Rome zoo's unlikely saviour. But as the crowds descend in unprecedented numbers, clutching their anteater-shaped balloons, and the historical narrative catches up to the modern one, throwing it into a new perspective, the storyline begins to darken: not everyone's motivations, it seems, are quite as plain as we have been led to believe. As a metaphor for the fraught relationship between human beings and the "natural world" the zoo is pretty hard to beat, and a recurring theme in Janovjak's novel is the way that relationship is manifested in the architecture and overall design of the zoo. Casting his shadow over the narrative is the animal merchant Karl Hagenbeck, who revolutionised zoo design in the early 20th century, and who presided over the Rome zoo's development. Hagenbeck's idea was to move from barred cages to enclosures that resembled the animals' habitats – an improvement in some ways on what went before, but in other ways an obfuscation of an essentially perverse relationship. Janovjak has fun with this aspect of the zoo's history, not least in his dealings with Urs Eggenschwyler, the sculptor employed by Hagenbeck to fashion mountains and other natural features out of timber, metal mesh and cement. Indeed, Eggenschwyler's eccentricities could almost stand for the entire project. "Nobody knows how Eggenschwyler caught wind of his

Matterhorn's collapse," writes Janovjak, "particularly as he was locked up, in Zurich, having once again been found naked in his lioness's enclosure."

As well as metaphorically figuring the relationship between human and non-human animals, the zoo reflects the different perspectives, enthusiasms and ideologies that shaped (and disfigured) the 20th century. A number of times it is described as an

"Ark", but it is an Ark bearing human beings through time – exotic specimens from earlier eras – rather than one bearing animals through space. Built in the gardens of the Villa Borghese, at a time when Italy regarded with envy the massive empires of its European rivals, it was conceived in an anxious spirit of renewal. "The virility of an empire is proportionate to the size of its zoo, everybody knows that", one character avers, and this idea recurs throughout the novel, exciting its

otherwise even prose into fantasies of rediscovered grandeur. In one passage in particular the nascent "Giardino Zoologico" appears to meld entirely with a vision of imperial violence:

*And Rome is entranced, with only its yellowing statues as reminders of the epic battles between man and beast – marble lions and broken-winged eagles, an entire mythology in the process of crumbling away. Rome, too, wants the sound of roaring as evening falls, wants fangs and knives, the muffled, feverish sound of drums, and the flickering of a campfire on black skin.*

Translated from the French by Stephanie Smeed, **The Rome Zoo** is beautifully written. Immaculately conceived, constructed and paced, its separate narratives run together with the fluidity of a fever dream. And while individual characters can feel a little indistinct at times – an effect, in part, of the way the dialogue is set within the third-person narration as something between direct and reported speech – one can nevertheless appreciate how this adds to the overall sense of the story as a palimpsest of connected narratives. Strangely, it was only late in the book that I realised that while the 2011 narrative was written in the past tense, the historical narrative was written in the present. In this way, and in others, Janovjak ensures that Hagenbeck and co. remain in attendance – equal partners in the unfolding madness.

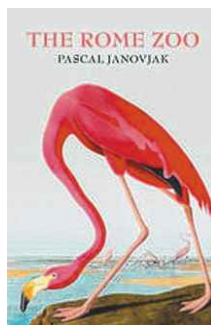
That madness is the human madness – one Janovjak's excellent novel interrogates with wit and intelligence. In Hagenbeck's day it was still not unusual to find "primitive" people displayed in zoos, in so-called ethnological exhibits. In his quietly surrealist way, Janovjak prompts us to ask ourselves whether we have really travelled as far as we think.

**Richard King** is a writer based in Fremantle. He is the author of **On Offence: The Politics of Indignation** (Scribe).



### **THE ROME ZOO**

By Pascal Janovjak (translated by  
Stephanie Smee)  
Black Inc.  
228pp, \$27.00



**exhibits.**

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