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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ HUMOR NONFICTION

Animal Pursuits: A Frivolous Frolic through the Puntastic Province of Animals

Richard J. Atkinson
Trafford (Sep 18, 2012)
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Readers who love nothing more than laughing and groaning over clever wordplay may find something to like in *Animal Pursuits: A Frivolous Frolic Through the Puntastic Province of Animals*. With his first novel, retired Australian schoolteacher Richard J. Atkinson presents a staggering number of animal-related puns within the framework of a modern fable. In Atkinson's story, the world is run by witty talking animals who can barely set aside their jokes long enough to find the murderer in their midst.

The tale of Fungus Frog's death is told by Elmer Elephant to his grandchildren, Eric and Ebony. Fungus was ready to marry Lily Lizard, but he was killed on their wedding day. Who is the culprit? Elmer follows the criminal's winding trail through eight hundred pages of storytelling with the help of Bobby Bloodhound. The extraordinary length feels unnecessary to the tale. And its sparsely scattered clues are uncovered by a seemingly endless parade of animals.

The real entertainment in *Animal Pursuits*, however, is in the words themselves. Atkinson's presentation is unique, consisting almost completely of dialogue presented like lines in a play, such as this exchange between Constable Perky Pig and Dopey Dachshund, who are discussing Gardiner Grasshopper:

PERKY: "Where does he work?"
DOPEY: "He does *stem* cell research, but just recently, he was arrested for *stalking*."
PERKY: "I wouldn't take a *leaf* out of his book if I were you."
DOPEY: "No, it doesn't pay to *branch* out these days."

Ants, for instance, provide rich opportunities for puns: eleg*ant*, *ant*ique, or pleas*ant*, among countless others. The lists can be quite long, and because of these devolutions into inexhaustible word-association games, readers can lose sight of the original joke. For example, Bar Bee has a long line of of admirers called a "Bar *Bee* Queue." That's worth at least a smirk, but the repetition of bee-related words gets tiresome after pages of puns, from a kick in the *"bee* -hind" to music by the "*Bee*tles."

Atkinson returns to the murder mystery at regular intervals, but it is easy to forget the underlying story in the midst of all the nudging and winking. Readers who persevere will be rewarded, on occasion, with the more refined gems embedded in the story. Several episodes have more subtle wordplay, such as a clever riff on the common cold, presented as a political struggle (a "cold war") between teeny-tiny troops from Micronesia.

The purported mystery in *Animal Pursuits* provides more giggles than action, making it the sort of book one dips into a little bit at a time, particularly given its length. Adults may enjoy reading a passage aloud to their kids or grandkids now and then, although the author's intended audience is unclear. The animals' names and antics seem tailor-made for children, but a number of the puns are very sophisticated, and some of them have adult sexual themes that are inappropriate for a young audience.

Animal Pursuits is best thought of as a widely assorted collection of puns, to be read selectively and in small doses.

SHEILA M. TRASK (June 4, 2013)

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