



Handpicked Humorous Creatures

Tamara A. Coleman

IngramSpark

(120pp)

978-1-73403-170-6

Handpicked Humorous Creatures is a short collection of prose and poetry that draws humor from personal interactions with animals.

From standard household pets to bats and squirrels, Tamara A. Coleman's *Handpicked Humorous Creatures* utilizes a blend of prose and poetry to relate diverse anecdotes about encounters with animals.

The stories are relayed from Coleman's perspective, stretching from her childhood through to animal encounters with her own children, exemplifying the significant presence that animals have had throughout her life. The stories are organized by subject creature; while tidy, this method results in some repetition, as similar experiences with the same kind of animal are described back-to-back.

The majority of the entries are formatted as poems, in scattered rhymes of various types—some couplets, some in abab format. These appear within otherwise prose entries, too. But line breaks are employed in awkward places, shattering the flow of individual entries. Though less prominent, the book's essay-like sections are more successful.

With the inclusion of stories from childhood—as with a lively tale about an unwanted visitor during a night away at camp—Coleman's presence is defined in terms of resilience and religiosity. Many other people appear, most often family members, but their relations to Coleman are often the only information provided about them. This lack of details muddies both characterizations and the interpretations of some stories.

While there is humor to be sieved from the tales—"A doe / We do not see the deer"—the majority of the anecdotes are more grisly than amusing; very few of the subjects survive their ordeals. Uncomfortable instances of animal neglect are relayed; the distress of Coleman's children in such moments is equally disquieting. The narrator declares a dislike for cats, celebrating a landlord's restriction that requires her daughter to give up her pet; her joy is thwarted by her daughter's ingenuity in finding a workaround. Other stories are outright disturbing: a family pet falls to their death from fourteen stories; a squirrel is electrocuted on power lines. This belies the suggestion that the book will be "family friendly." A heartfelt dedication to a late family dog is a rare moment of sentimentality, but even this is unrealized, as a section on dogs is omitted, despite the assertion that the dog is a "favorite character."

Pervasive grammatical errors hinder the book's readability, and its inconsistent font sizes and spacing confuse where one category ends and another begins. The categories sometimes suffer for their specificity: there are separate sections for insects, bugs, and butterflies, with creatures sorted incorrectly, or distinctions made where none are necessary. Though most are casual in tone, some entries shift into lofty, formal prose, particularly when religious beliefs are invoked; these abrupt changes are jarring.

Handpicked Humorous Creatures is a short collection of prose and poetry that aims to draw humor from personal interactions with animals.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (December 9, 2021)

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