

Tiger Farms

Matthew James

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Tiger Farms is a heroic tale, an action story, and a morality play all in one—and thoroughly fun.

The battle between the East and the West is an old canard. Matthew James's debut novel *Tiger Farms* takes this old duel and injects plenty of current events, resulting in a contemporary, relevant thriller.

Mostly set in the mysterious mountains of Nepal, *Tiger Farms* features a foul-mouthed hero named Tony "Camp" Campasi. At the novel's beginning, Camp is a blue-collar everyman and an expectant father. Tragedy befalls him, and soon enough he rededicates his life to keeping endangered tigers out of the hands of greedy multinational corporations, chi-obsessed Chinese bureaucrats, and top-secret government agents. Camp frequently uses his fists to get the job done, and as a result he becomes something of a folkloric monster to the Nepalese.

Tiger Farms exposes the underworld of the exotic animal trade. In the real world, African and Asian beasts are hunted by money-hungry poachers who can fetch big bundles of cash on the black market. Elephant ivory, tiger pelts, and other delicate items often wind up in China, where the country's wealthy elite use them for folk medicine.

The novel explores these awful practices, ruminating on how governmental and economic hegemony can corrupt the pristine wildness of places like Nepal. James gives his mostly silent tigers life and makes it all but impossible not to empathize with their awful condition.

Though its opening disrupts the otherwise linear flow of the story, *Tiger Farms* is a punchy novel with hard-hitting prose. Camp is clearly the hero, and his fight to save tigers from being drugged and butchered is presented as a secular crusade. Camp, like the tigers, is drawn as a rough beast on the outside but totally golden on the inside. His personality and motivations come through clearly.

The novel's action scenes are its greatest strength. Moods are masterfully set, and suspense builds well. Its blood-splattered episodes seem ripe for cinematic adaptation. They also result in a degree of roughness, though. Dialogue is often stilted and hard to consume.

The text overdoes its naturalism, factoring in uninteresting characters in uninteresting situations. The character Lau Chao Zhu Ren, a great exploiter of tigers and a man singularly focused on his chi, comes across as exaggerated, like the embodiment of a twenty-first-century version of Dr. Fu Manchu.

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BENJAMIN WELTON (June 5, 2018)

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