

Book Review

“Tranquil Footsteps” by Srilal Miththapala

Reviewed by Namali Premawardhana

It is quite a feat to get inside an elephant’s mind, to discover without interaction with the imposing and intimidating animal, the trials and tribulations it faces in daily life; its wants and needs. “Tranquil Footsteps” is one man’s effort to help us achieve that. Through his book, which follows one herd of elephants living within the sanctuary of the Uda Walawe National Park, Srilal Miththapala not only affords the reader valuable and interesting information about this most majestic member of the animal kingdom, but also gives him insight into the creature’s mind and heart.

The story is told through the eyes of the matriarch of this apticular herd of elephants. We follow her, together with her family, through the drought, pain and death into monsoons, growth and life. During this journey, many times does one find oneself stopping suddenly to realise the important, yet almost forgotten fact that these are elephants the author writes of. He manages, deftly to portray the different members of the herd with their different characteristics in such a familiar manner, that quite often they seem to be human.

In rare moments of inspiration the narration puts the reader right in the elephant’s skin (four feet, trunk and all!) clearly exemplifying the author’s connection with, and love for, these majestic creatures. Yet sometimes the writer seems to be disconnected from the speaker (obviously as one is a she-elephant and the other is a he-man) and the transition between the engaged narration and the disengaged narration as seen in the transition between fact and fiction is not always smooth.

The book is a great balance of fact and fiction, but the two aspects don’t always gel together. Added to this is the fact that some explanations tend to be repeated. But as it promises, the book DOES “appeal to a wide range of readers”. On the one hand, the lifestyle, social patterns and

peculiar habits of elephants are described from the basics to a degree of detail, which would thrill an average wild-life fan. On the other, a smattering of beautiful thoughts and expressions, combined with a moving, although at times disjointed storyline holds the general reader until the end.

Srilal Miththapala is a “serious wild-life and nature enthusiast”, a scientist, hotelier and engineer. The man in the book is definitely the nature-man though sometimes it’s difficult to say whether it is the “fan” or the “scientist”. Both these sides of the author are seen clearly in the book, yet the last and most beautiful episode in the book shows an even deeper side to him.

In the fleeting moment of friendship and real communication between the youngest elephant in the herd and two young children visiting the park, Srilal Miththapala comes out as a friend, a sort of goodwill ambassador or peacemaker between elephants and man. He manages to convey a deeper message than what amazing creatures the elephants are: that they are simply living beings that crave the same things we do: love and protection.

Tranquil Footsteps
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Stamford Lake
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