

## BOOKREVIEW

John Godey; De slang, Utrecht 1991, ISBN 9044923986 Dfl. 10,-

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To begin with, two citations:

'In the upper jaw of the snake were only two teeth, the poison fangs, ankylotish attached to the inside of the jawbone. In the poison fangs there were groves through which the poison from the poison gland, by which they were connected, flowed. The teeth of the poisonous snake were badly subjected to wear and must therefore be replaced from time to time. Sometime they broke prematurely. But then the replacing teeth shove on, which grew always under the functioning teeth, to take the place of the lost teeth. This cycle of losing and replacing continued throughout the snake's life.' (pg. 55-56)

From an arbitrarily other page:

'Sloughing is an imperative demand in the life of a snake. In contrast to most animals a snake continues to grow from birth to its death. Because he literally outgrows his horn skin, the snake is forced to throw it off regularly, three to four times a year.' (pg. 75)

Who isn't familiar with the issue of this book could, on the basis of these citations, mistakenly think to be dealing with a herpetological handbook. Nothing is less true, it's a 'Black Bear' from the Dutch publisher Bruna, and therefore a part from a series of police, detective and espionage novels. I came across this book by chance when I was going through the books on the holiday merry-go-round in my bookstore. I was intrigued by the frightful wide opened mouth of a viper or rattlesnake on the front page. For the price of Dfl. 10.- I decided to buy it. Herpetologists who don't want to be occupied with their hobby only scientifically may possible spent some nice hours with this book. For this reason I want to draw there attention to it.

What's it about? A sailor got into the possession of a snake of which he doesn't know what kind it is. When this rough sailor ends up in New York's Central Park he gets robbed and killed. The content of his package gets out and the robber is frequently bitten by what turns out to be a black mamba. He is hardly aware of this, but soon begins to feels the effects. When he is taken to the hospital that same night, he suffers from symptoms which correspond with a overdose of hard drugs. Intensive treatment does not help anymore. Incidentally four little holes in the victim's thigh are noted and a possible snake bite is thought of.

The snake makes the best of the situation: Central Park is big and there is plenty of food around. The only pity is that he is constantly confronted with human beings.

To make a long story short, repeatedly people are attacked and bitten by the mamba and soon the snake is responsible for a quit a number of deaths. Meanwhile the local authorities (major elections are underway) react with the usual American overkill. Forced by the press hundreds of policemen are sent out to search, without any result. Also the herpetologist, soon hired by the police, has little success at first. After a while however, he succeeds in deducing the site where the mamba is hiding in Central Park. Meanwhile however, the snake continues in making victims, so the most insane considerations are proposed how to destroy her.

For those who want to read this little book integrally, I don't want to take away the whole surprise and therefore I will not give away the story. Only the remark that, at the end of the book, the mamba leaves Central Park to poison five members of a family in their home. During this passage I recalled reading something similar in another book. Going through my limited herpetological library I soon came across a work of Sweeney which contained this next passage:

'There is, for example, a case known from Natal, written down by Fitzsimons, where a black mamba intruded a hut of a family and killed of its five members before it could escape. Presumably this all happened in the dark and both the members of the family and the snake have reacted in panic, with disastrous effects for the family members.'

In his introduction the author says he got expert advise both from herpetologists and doctors. In the book this is evident. Wherever he doesn't use these expert advises and is thrown back upon his own talents, he is, simply said, very bad. This goes for his descriptions of the mentality of the American government and society, as well as for the poor way in which he tried to integrate a love relation stirred with soft-sex into the story.

I did however read 'the snake passage's' with great interest. For me these passages were the motive to study more deeply the information about the black mamba as it is for instance given in the books of Grzimek, Trutnau and the already mentioned Sweeny. As far as I can judge the author seems to have deepened himself into the main character. Although I still think it's strange that a snake who throughout the story is consistently pornominally referred to as 'he', 'him' and 'his' turns out, at the end of the very last page, to be a female who symbolically has laid a few eggs.

## LITERATURE

Grzimek, B., 1973. *Het leven der Dieren. Deel VI, Reptielen.* Utrecht.

Sweeney, R., 1971. *Snakes of Nyasaland.* Amsterdam.

Trutnau, L., 1982. *Schlangen im Terrarium. Band 2, Giftschlangen.* Stuttgart.