

# The Rome Zoo

Pascal Janovjak

Novel

French



The Rome Zoo was established in 1911 in the gardens of the Villa Borghese; over the last hundred years it has undergone constant transformation and expansion, with accompanying changes of name and appearance. Pascal Janovjak has lived in Rome since 2011 and has made a painstakingly detailed study of the city's zoo. His novel, *The Rome Zoo*, is an investigation, based on ethology, animal behaviour, in a century of human and animal confrontation and co-operation; two realms today more disunited than ever before, in spite of inhabiting the same territory.

*“At nightfall he’d given the animal one last sugar lump, and that evening the tamandua had almost eaten out of his hand, its twitching snout practically touching the skin of his palm. Then Salvatore had taken out the old shotgun.”*

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## Author

Born in Basel in 1975 to a French mother and Slovakian father, Pascal Janovjak studied comparative literature and art history in Strasbourg before moving to the Middle East. He worked first in Jordan for an Aid and Development programme, then in Libya, where he taught literature at the University of Tripoli. His works include: *Coléoptères (Beetles)*, *L’Invisible (The Invisible One)* and *À Toi (To You)*, which he wrote with Kim Thuy.

Photo: Laura Salvinelli

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Excerpt translated by Romy Fursland

The building that Chahine and Giovanna had noticed that day was Moro's laboratory. The doctor had seen them coming, and they couldn't avoid talking to him.

"You're an architect, I'm guessing?" Moro asked as he shook Chahine's hand. Giovanna was surprised to hear the doctor speaking French, while Chahine looked down at himself and wondered what it was about him that made Moro so sure he was an architect.

"It's your shoes," said Moro, laughing. "Well, actually it's more your eyes... When most people walk in here, the first thing they see is the microscopes, the jars. But you looked at the door lintel and the angles of the walls, where there's nothing to see apart from cement and air. You could be a structural engineer, I suppose, but I think your shoes are too nice for that... English, aren't they? But come along - let me show you around. Giovanna has never ventured in here before, so I can give you both the tour. The buildings have had a change of use, as I'm sure you've noticed; this used to be a reptile house, which explains the small windows. At least they shield us from prying eyes while we work."

Giovanna hated the test tubes, the tinkling of the metal against the glass, the smell of disinfectant - it was a gut reaction. The clinical glare of the neon lights made her uneasy. An ugly, round-shouldered man was fiddling with some pipettes in a corner; he gave a sort of grunt in her direction. Moro had launched into a lecture about dust mites, alopecia in gelada baboons, and parasitic disease in peccaries - words that sounded a little too well-chosen, thought Giovanna, words like a lullaby, like the humming of those large freezers which she wasn't sure she wanted to know the contents of.

Chahine had stopped in front of a glass tank lined with newspaper. A little snake was coiled in one corner, a bright orange spiral. It was a *Pantherophis guttatus*, Moro explained, which had almost been eaten by its brother and had been brought here to convalesce. The two reptiles had both been eating the same mouse, one ingesting it from the tail end and the other starting with the head: as they did so, spasm by spasm, the larger

snake had started to swallow the smaller one. Someone had realised just in time to prise them apart.

"But he's fine now: I'm putting him back in his vivarium tomorrow. The keeper has nicknamed him Fortunello - pretty, isn't it? You see," he added, with an amused glance at Giovanna, "that's the benefit of being seen as a mad scientist... While everyone else is busy trying to work out what you're up to, you're free to devote yourself to the little tragedies of everyday life. But look," he said, pushing open a door, "you're in luck - it's not often you get the chance to see a big cat up close like this."

The lioness was named Maya, and she was lying stretched out on the operating table with her eyes closed and a bandage on her flank. Even in this state, thought Giovanna, her majestic presence filled the room.

"You can come closer, it's all right," said the doctor - and following his example, Giovanna gently laid her palm on the animal's fur.

Maya was one of the zoo's new acquisitions, an Asiatic lioness who'd failed to settle into her new home. She'd started exhibiting stereotypy almost as soon as she'd arrived, pacing round her pen over and over again, treading precisely in her own pawprints. Every time she did it her hip bone brushed against the big glass window of the enclosure, and she ended up with a bald patch and then an open sore. The wound became infected. "And it wasn't pretty, I can assure you," Moro declared. "She must have been in a lot of pain, but still she never changed her route - at first we tried putting obstacles in her way, but she always ended up finding a way to chafe her wound. Eventually we had to isolate her, and over the past few days she even started biting at the sore spot. Sometimes we just can't help picking at our own scabs," said the doctor, gazing at Chahine over the top of his glasses. But Chahine didn't react; he was still looking down at the enormous creature on the table.

He'd hung back and watched while Giovanna, deeply moved, had run her hand over the lioness's muzzle, smoothing her long white whiskers, strangely affected and at the same time unsettled by this huge face with its closed eyes. As she stroked the animal's cheek, Giovanna accidentally revealed Maya's black gums and the yellowed ivory of her teeth.

"It's not dangerous? I mean, she's not going to wake up?"

"That's unlikely," said Moro with a smile. "She died this morning."

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Unlike Berlin Zoo, Rome's zoo has never suffered bomb damage, and it has never closed. The families who visit in the late 1940s are often bereaved, it's true – many have lost a husband, a father, an uncle – but things are gradually returning to normal, and for the zoo itself the real horror is yet to come. On 2 May 1949, a fine collection of antelopes arrives from Somalia. It contains gerenuks, young kudus, bushbucks with spiral horns, proud gemsboks from the Horn of Africa and even little grey duikers. But on 4 May the kudus start to froth at the mouth, and the next day some of the gerenuks are found dead on the ground, and the zoo's staff begin to be concerned for the rest of the newcomers. They isolate them in the quarantine zone and carry out various tests on them, while the animals' legs tremble and pus oozes from their eyes. And then, the day the results come back, a giraffe chokes on its tongue on the other side of the zoo. Now the staff realise that they are dealing with an ancient and terrible plague, one which their initial precautions have failed to contain – the keepers themselves have spread the disease, transporting it in the folds of their clothes, between the hairs on their skin. The rinderpest proceeds to decimate the zoo.

The head keeper Leonardi passes a hand over his face. The gesture only lasts three seconds, but it allows him to completely blot out the world; it's healthy, it's what human beings do on average 30,000 times a day when we blink. But Leonardi is not a man to cover his face, and has only made this gesture twice in his life: once when his wife cheated on him with a wine merchant in the autumn of 1936, and once when he was told about the death of Fritz the bear during the Liberation of Italy. But now's not the time to go raking all that up again, thinks Leonardi, adjusting his cap. What we must do now is protect the rest of the city from the epidemic. The zoo is closed down and several *carabinieri* are stationed at the entrance. The director manages to position himself on the other

side of the gates just before they're closed, so it falls to *capo-guardiano* Leonardi to take responsibility for the quarantined zoo. He feels as if he's on a vessel lost at sea, of which he has suddenly been made captain.

For the rest of the staff, the days that lie ahead will be a nice little holiday: they'll spend time with their colleagues, sleep in the animal enclosures, play cards; they'll go back to tending their secret little vegetable gardens. There's nothing better than a zoo with no visitors: like Leonardi, all the keepers are the sons or grandsons of farmers, and harbour a deep-seated distrust of the city dwellers in their Sunday best who are ordinarily to be found strolling up and down the paths with their polished shoes and their sunshades and their children in white collars, their children who always end up throwing stones at the peacocks and spitting at the monkeys. The keepers feel much more comfortable on the other side of the bars, in the company of the mute creatures in their charge.

And then comes the order to cull the animals. Because of the quarantine, nobody is allowed to come and help the keepers, and there are still a good two hundred ungulates left in the zoo including the giraffes, the bushpigs, the Barbary sheep, the Indian oxen and the American bison. The keepers are at a loss. One or two of them know how to fire a gun, of course – they learned during the war – but what they don't know is how to kill animals they have seen being born, animals they have named and fed and whose smell they recognise just as clearly as the creatures recognise theirs when they enter their enclosures in the morning with a word of greeting and a bucket full of fruit. So it is Leonardi senior who does what needs to be done, with the help of his son, a boy of twenty-seven: he too would rather be elsewhere.

The sound of gunshots goes on for four days. The other animals are extremely agitated by the smell of the blood. From the city centre, people can see tall plumes of smoke rising into the clear sky.

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That was how the last epidemic of rinderpest in Europe came to an end. When the old keeper told Giovanna about it he used different words, in his pleasant Roman

accent and enriched with certain details that only he knew. He hadn't actually witnessed the epidemic himself, but he'd been born in July 1949 while the zoo was in quarantine. His father had been a young keeper at the time, and he'd often told his son how he'd climbed over the zoo gates to get to the maternity ward the night he was born.

But all that was in the past, *tempi passati*, said the keeper, gazing at the tamandin. They were both standing in its enclosure, waiting for the director and Moro. The animal was hiding behind its shrub; the only sign of it was the tip of its snout, the ragged sound of its breath. Giovanna asked if they could go closer, but the keeper told her the animal was timid and its claws could be dangerous. "It's quite something when Oscar suddenly stands up on his hind legs. He did it to me once, but that was in the early days when we didn't know each other very well... He usually only comes out at night; sometimes he ventures up the tree. But not very often any more. He's like me - he's an old man now... Anyway, I'm very glad he's not going to London," added the man, passing a calloused hand over his face.

The silence that had arisen between the animal and the humans was shattered by the insistent ringing of Giovanna's phone, which she ignored. She felt cold. She felt ashamed, too, now that this creature was on the verge of becoming a curiosity, not to have paid more attention to it before. And she suddenly understood something very simple: that by trying to sell the spectacle of so many different animals, you forgot the fascination exerted by the presence of a single one. Moro had told her that the key thing when observing an animal was to identify its tracks, and Giovanna shivered as she looked at the deep gashes criss-crossing the tree trunk. The enclosure was scarred by violence and loneliness.

The keeper cleared his throat. "I'd like to..." he said in a hoarse voice, "I mean, if it's possible - I've already asked the *dottore*... I'd like to carry on looking after him."