

THE BOOK REVIEW

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unresolved debate of whether pathogens were brought into Europe by migrants.

The discussion then shifts to more contemporary spread of diseases and pandemics, and the implications of the new knowledge of history gained. The current scenario of COVID-19 makes this a crucial and contextual discussion, but it would be interesting to make conjectures of the shape of the book had it not centre-staged pathogens to the extent that it does. The authors do indicate their plans for future research on different geographies and different timespans. So we can look forward to more insights and perspectives on the history of humanity.

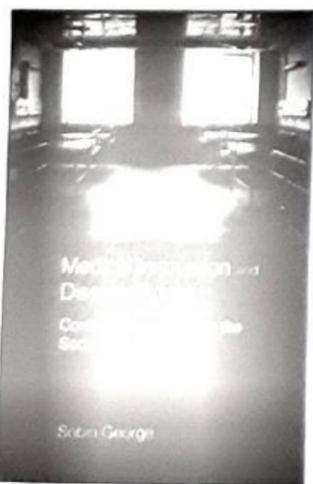
The story is an easy read in terms of getting the broad picture of the field, the people who inhabit Europe, and the accompanying factors. However, to actually retain a lot of the facts and details, one read is probably not enough: a look through the maps and graphics may also suffice for a second overview. One job that the book does well is to popularize some of this knowledge and make the readers excited about the possibilities thrown up by archaeogenetics. The book ends with future possibilities, exciting and controversial concepts such as 'designer humans', which, only a few decades ago, were akin to science-fiction.

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Book News

Book News



Medical Innovation and Disease Burden: Conflicting Priorities and the Social Divide in India by Sobin George addresses the central question as to whether health innovation in India is sensitive to the public

health needs and priorities. It unearths the overriding issues related to responsiveness and equity in India's health innovation. The book highlights the need for a responsible innovation framework for India that balances the priorities of public health and the industry goals.

Cambridge University Press, Hardback, pp. 210, price not stated.

Feline Fables

Nandita Narayanasamy

LEOPARD DIARIES: THE ROSETTE IN INDIA

By Sanjay Gubbi

Westland, 2021, pp. 266, ₹599.00

L*epard Diaries: The Rosette in India* is a 360° view of the life of one of the four big cats of India's wildlife seen through the eyes of conservation biologist Dr Sanjay Gubbi. Passionate about his pet subject, *Panthera pardus* or the leopard, the book is written in an autobiographical style and captures a decade of untiring work that involved a tedious amount of field activity with all the trappings of modern technology-driven analysis. Gubbi paints a beautiful picture of all the current understanding that is available about this versatile feline, against the canvas of varied geographical terrains of Karnataka—one of the many areas in India where the leopard resides.

Though a conservation biologist, Sanjay Gubbi has effortlessly made this book not purely academic but has interspersed biology with interesting contextual details of the natural world and earth sciences. He also talks about the socio-political and economic impacts on the survival and vulnerability of leopards. His deep involvement in the field of Conservation Biology is well-known and his book exhibits this enthusiasm which makes it so different from other books on wildlife.

Gubbi moves seamlessly from discussing the science that has driven the genetic evolution of the leopard to understanding the different forms—such as the melanistic leopard (black panther) and even the unusual strawberry leopard—in very simple language. The 'à-la-carte' menu that the leopard partakes, he says, allows it to reside with ease in both the jungle and in human-inhabited rural cultivated areas. Leopards are found in 63 countries around the globe and 'are considered biologically successful because of their evolutionary persistence and their widespread distribution' Gubbi says in the book, and the only 'places they remain

absent from are deserts and snow-capped mountains' making them, in his words, 'habitat generalist'.

What becomes quite obvious as you read through the book is his almost filial relationship with this fascinating creature. A defining moment in this relationship is his face-off with a trapped leopard in the confines of an urban school, where he almost becomes a prey to the attacking leopard. This harrowing experience—made worse by the insensitive media, the burgeoning public presence, and the ill-informed medical practitioner, who annoyingly refused to understand the gravity of the situation—only served to deepen his feelings for the displaced feline and further intensified the intimacy of this relationship.

Another episode narrated in the book highlights the almost maternal emotion that the author has towards this cat. The story of 'Benki' (meaning 'fire/flare' in Kannada), so named by his four-year-old son, is about one of the first leopards radio-collared and tracked by Gubbi's team. The recounting of the daily ritual of tracking, the roller coaster of emotions when the signals were lost, all show the depth of involvement that the author and his team had for their subjects of study.

Sanjay Gubbi brings out the horrifying tension that at times exists between humans and the natural world. He shows that it is not only the natural ecosystem and the geographical landscape in which leopards survive that are important for us to understand but one also needs to understand the role of the people who live and work within the leopard's territorial space. He highlights the impact of two human activities, namely poaching and mining, which have had a significant impact on the survival of the leopard. Unregulated mining-related activities pose a significant threat to the leopard habitat and in the book, Gubbi highlights the rapid disappearance of rocky outcrops of the Deccan plateau where hillocks are bulldozed—legally and illegally—for granite and minerals. Though the open hunting for game animals has been effectively squashed, the illegal market for wildlife continues, often fostered by the so-called civilized societies' demand for animal body-parts and fur. Gubbi recounts the



for their fur in the 1960s, just to emulate the fashion statement of Jacqueline Kennedy, who, for reasons best known to her, came to visit India wearing a leopard fur coat!

Camera trapping to study wildlife at times inadvertently brings one face-to-face with poachers and timber-smugglers, and dealing with them requires human resource management skills way beyond the capability of a mere conservation biologist. Another fairly amusing tale that Gubbi talks about is the interest shown by the animals to the camera traps. Their responses ranged from being very aggressive, where they pull down the cameras and destroy them, to being extremely innocent. The details of how a herd of elephants spent a few hours tentatively touching the cameras, moving around them curiously but ultimately just walking away is narrated in the most endearing way.

Gubbi explores issues of man-animal conflict and provides angles on how to resolve this conflict, which is only going to increase as urbanization expands and human habitation spreads. He also touches upon the omnipresent media and the 'activist' social media proponents. He believes that engaging effectively with not only media persons but also politicians on environmental issues is of paramount importance if one has to further the cause of conservation. As he writes, the work on 'conservation biology depends upon the goodwill of individuals who are in the echelons of power, and if we are unable to muster it, conservation takes a back seat.'

The book focuses the spotlight on the spotted cat with its unique rosette pattern and brings it into public view where it has always been overshadowed by the majestic Asiatic lion, and the tiger, the striped poster-boy of India's conservation efforts.

In a first-of-its-kind book on the leopard, Sanjay Gubbi untangles the complex and unique world of the leopard, detailing its diverse food habits, throwing new light on how the young are reared, the territorial versatility it enjoys, its role in predator-assisted seed dispersal and its co-existence with other carnivores. The book also offers suggestions to mitigate leopard-human conflicts and projects what the future holds for this captivating animal that resides at the interface of the jungle and civilization. This authoritative and riveting book on leopards is not only a guide-book on the big cat but also a delightful collection of feline fables from the shrubs and forests of Karnataka.

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Do you know Whodunnit?

Zahra Rizvi

MURDER AT DAISY APARTMENTS

By Shabnam Minwalla

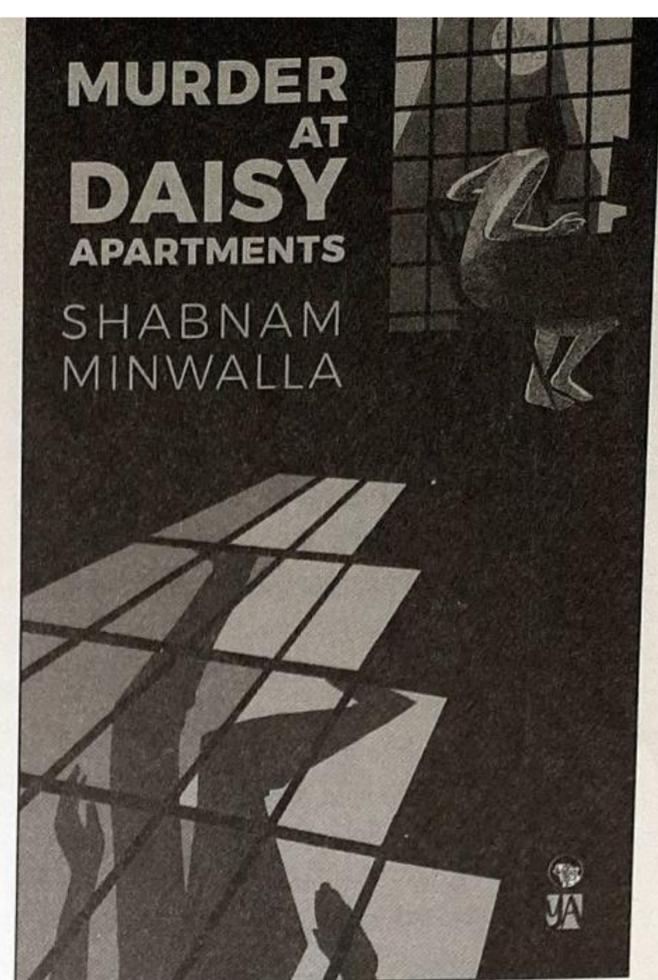
Speaking Tiger, 2021, pp. 264, ₹399.00

Ten minutes later, the Marker apartment was teeming with masked men and women, all reeking of hand sanitizer and nervous energy.

Any time else, a murder scene crowded with masked people, air tinted with sanitizer smell and nervous energy, and a cordoned off building in the middle of a lockdown, would sound almost fantastical, quite like one of the Hollywood movies where the director and the scriptwriter conspire to incorporate both disease and murder while sending along an alien or two but these are not just any other times that one finds oneself in. Shabnam Minwalla's *Murder at Daisy Apartments* looks at a cross-section of people who live under COVID-19 precautionary measures in a 'typical upper middle-class apartment complex' and decides that this is a good enough time to revive Agatha Christie.

Boasting of a large retinue of characters with even larger secrets and a prowling, notoriously disliked Chairperson of the Lily-Daisy Cooperative Housing Society, the murder mystery novel begins with almost an uncanny sense of calm. From the otherwise bored protagonist's—who is inspired by Miss Marple and Poirot—window, one hears accusations and arguments across the two buildings and the heightening hatred and discontent against Baman Marker, the dreaded Chairperson who is both a spy and blackmailer. Minwalla's voice is sardonic as she describes the petty demands and wants of the occupants of the complex who live in their privileged worlds while squabbling over which of their lives and objects are more essential than the others. The social commentary of the subtext (that one must not make the error of ignoring like the Lily-Daisy occupants) supplements the main plot of the novel which pays homage to the classic whodunnit, sprinkling the story with Easter egg, nods towards various Agatha Christie novels, making the average whodunnit fan smile while recognizing these unexpected bits.

Minwalla bridges the physically isolated individuals of diverse age groups and professions of the apartments in the simplest



of ways that make the novel surprisingly interesting. While some occupants talk on phone, the Lily-Daisy adults' and kids' WhatsApp group chats are perhaps the most detailed document of their lives that the reader has access to. This information is densely populated by notices from the Housing Society, random greetings, sharing of recipes, snide remarks and thinly veiled allegations, which the reader sifts through along with the protagonist, Nandini Venkat. Then, there is the shared Google doc of theories that the Lily-Daisy kids discuss and assign suspicious scores to people. Finally, the screenshots of shared Instagram stories of half-rumours and half-facts add another layer of intrigue to a plot that was deceptively simple at the start. The novel's unique strength lies in this web of information dump and disposal where there is always someone who is watching and/or eavesdropping, all the while sitting in their own flats.

Since Nandini's point-of-view is what filters the reader's approach to the mystery, it is almost inviting to fall into her biases and prejudices but if *Murder at Daisy Apartments* teaches the reader anything it is not to trust anyone. Nandini is the sole witness of what could have been the murderer prowling about in the opposite building at the time of the murder but her memories are punctured by the conversation she has with her best friend, Shanaya, as they discuss the movie (yes, *Mean Girls!*) they're watching while the murder is happening. There is enough to confuse and stump the reader so that when the conclusion is being stitched together one has to stop and retrace everything all over