

## BOOKREVIEW

*Die Schlange, das unbekannte Wesen. In der Kulturgeschichte, freien Natur und im Terrarium*, Kl. Zimniok. Landbuch-Verlag GmbH, Hannover, 1984. ISBN 3784202942. Price f 23,50.

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Although I have been a snake keeper for five years, I have never answered the question I have asked myself many times: why do snakes fascinate me so? Am I, lovely paradox, afraid of snakes? For sure I was, in the beginning, but if that was the reason for keeping them, I can now get rid of them, because in general snakes do not scare me any more. That counts in particular for my own innocent and beautiful *Elaphe guttata guttata* and *Elaphe taeniura friesei*. Is it the magnificent colours of some snakes that attract me? Possibly, but why am I not more interested in birds and fishes, which are more colourful most of the time? Is it because of their behaviour that I like serpents? That explanation is more plausible: the more I observe my own snakes, the more I read about them in general, the more I am amazed about, for example, their incredible power of adaptation or their unimaginable power to survive in rough circumstances; not to speak about the sensorial equipment of many specimens.

After reading Zimniok's book I am able to answer the question I asked myself: although the answers I gave in the previous paragraph are valid too, the real answer is that I am interested in snakes because of the way mankind has treated these beasts through the eras. My christian education presented snakes to me as representatives of evil and in my surroundings I still hear comments of that kind.

But, whoever looks further than Christianity, discovers cultures with different opinions about snakes. Zimniok's book is for herpetologists who share my need for interesting literature. Besides concrete items about snakes - more about that follows below - it was the chapters with a mythical implication I enjoyed most: *Der Mythos von der Urschlange*, *Die Schlange in der Antike und im Christentum*, *Verehrung der Schlange*, *Schlangenbeschwörung*. In a pleasing way Zimniok enables the reader to appreciate his experiences, for he has made a lot of herpetological study trips. Zimniok is also a snake keeper himself: each chapter begins for example with an experience with 'Tini', an Indian cobra he caught with his own hands. It is in the above mentioned chapters that the one who is interested in the mythical snake will be satisfied.

Snake keepers, primarily interested in more concrete items about snakes, will enjoy Zimniok's book too, for it also deals with practical things, such as: *Schlangenfang*, *Schlangenfauna und ihre Erforschung*, *Liebe unter Schlangen*, *Die Giftküche der Schlangen*, *Schlangenterrarium*, *Schlangen für das Terrarium*.

Both in his theoretical (philosophical, mythical, if you want) and his practical chapters, Zimniok gives many interesting descriptions. He has enriched me with a lot of information I did not know before, for example about the status of snakes in other cultures and other times and how these animals are treated. I think it is fascinating to confront our predominantly Christian behaviour with those of foreign cultures. I have also learned many practical things for example about the poisonousness of snakes, the consequences of their bites, the treatment of snake bites etc.

It is a small book, but the contents are very impressive. It includes 18 pages of colour photographs, mostly taken by the author. The last remark implicates that you will not see photographs you have already seen in many other books about herpetology. Zimniok ends the book with a large bibliography with all kinds of titles. Both the 'practical' and the 'mythical' herpetologist will find many more titles of his taste. Although it was edited in 1984, it is absolutely not old information, on the contrary. A must!