

as the authors' introductory remarks state, the book is aimed more at young people and adults who may not yet appreciate snakes and their place in nature. This book makes a valiant and, I hope, successful effort to "develop an acceptance of — better yet, an admiration for — snakes that equals that expressed for many other wild creatures."

I still think of the Southeast as a herpetological paradise, but friends who grew up in Florida suggest that it ain't what it used

to be. Nevertheless, at least from a distance, it seems very exotic, and, despite having cumulatively spent years in the Neotropics studying many wonderful snakes, the snake fauna of the southeastern United States still has a romantic quality — and I'd still like to have another Yellow Rat Snake for a pet someday.

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Reptile-Assisted Coming of Age

Lizard Love. 2008. By Wendy Townsend. Front Street, Boyds Mill Press, Honesdale, Pennsylvania. 196 pp. Hardcover — ISBN-10: 1932425349 — \$ 17.95.

Wendy Townsend is a newly minted graduate of the Vermont College MFA Program in Writing for Children and Young Adults, but she has been writing all her adult life and has long been a personal hero of mine. Fifteen years ago, when I was struggling to understand Green Iguanas well enough to rehabilitate seriously damaged individuals, Wendy's writing (much of which appeared in early issues of the *IGUANA TIMES*) was an inspiration — not only could she write a clear and concise technical description of iguana husbandry, she also spoke eloquently of her detailed behavioral observations, delineating complex group dynamics, as well as the personality differences and moods of the various individuals in her charge. With Dr. Frederic Frye, Wendy co-authored the pioneering *Iguanas: A Guide to their Biology and Captive Care* in 1993. In that same year, she, sadly, predicted that ill treatment at the hands of the pet trade would lead Green Iguanas down the same path as "dime-store turtles and county fair anoles, doled out as token prizes, like [so many other] valueless objects."

Wendy brings all her love of nature, her sympathetic touch with language, and her observational skills to bear in her delightful debut novel for young adults. The book's protagonist, a young mammalian female named Grace, appears in the prologue as a six-year old at her grandparent's country home. Her best friends are the local birds and insects and the denizens of the garden and the local pond, which include the beloved bullfrog that she blissfully hugs to the party dress she has worn to her aunt's wedding.

We next encounter Grace as an adolescent living with her mother far from her childhood Eden in the gray concrete metropolis of New York, replete with dim winter light, constant mechanical chatter, and oppressive odors. Grace finds her haven at a local pet shop, "Fang and Claw," where she meets an amphibian surrogate in the form of Walter. "He was chubby, with soft-looking skin almost as white as the T-shirt he wore. Across the front it said Bronx Zoo Reptile House. His shaggy hair was a pale color. He made me think of the tree frog who blends in with silvery lichen on tree trunks." She also meets Spot, a wonderful creature with a "great spiky crest and a black banded tail," his head covered with colorful jewel-like scales. Grace learns about reptiles while helping the gentle Walter rehabilitate damaged animals. Just as Walter pro-

vides a hide box in order to help a frightened monitor adapt to her surroundings, Spot the iguana helps Grace adapt to the unfamiliar environment of the city, her love for her pet bolstering her self-esteem as she crawls through the school year.

Back at her grandparent's house with Spot for the summer, Grace finds that even Eden is not eternal. Grandpa has given up gardening to avoid spending so much time in the sun, and all of the habitat provided by the unruly blackberry brambles has been uprooted by "helpful" neighbors from the newly built houses along the now much busier roadway. Nevertheless, Spot enjoys his time in the summer sun, gradually becoming more and more orange even as Grace succumbs to the physiological changes inherent with the onset of adolescence. By the time she's due to head back to the city, Grace finds herself so much altered that she desperately wishes she were more reptilian and less pronouncedly mammalian.

Teased mercilessly at school and even subject to a "love bite" from Spot, Grace struggles to come to grips with her changed physical self. Experiencing the sexual maturity of the iguanas, snakes, and monitors in her world, Grace finally has some measure of success at adapting with the help of her animal and human friends, especially the kind and "naturally" wise Walter.

Townsend makes excellent use of her natural history knowledge to elaborate, yet not overwhelm this charming coming-of-age tale. Many of her animal characters are taken from real life. Spot the iguana, for instance, lived a remarkable 24 years, and, having been privileged to tour "backstage" at the Bronx Zoo Reptile House, I suspect that much of the detail from that part of the story is also very real. Young readers, especially animal lovers, will empathize with the embattled Grace and her coping mechanisms. Older readers/animal lovers (who enjoy young adult fiction as I do) are liable to see their youthful selves reflected.

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