The Zoo in You: Faith Lessons on the Wildness Within
by Cameron Semmens
Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

When our family go to the zoo, different family members want to visit different animals. Jerrin loves the gorillas and their restless quiet strength. Ben leans towards tigers because they look cool and dangerous. Jessie also enjoys the gorillas because they are smart, cute and like us. Emily is drawn by the monkeys because they are funny and the fun they have swinging around. I never tire of watching kangaroos, an animal distinctly at home in Australia. Different people are fascinated by different animals, and their fascination can suggest something of the individual's temperament and spirituality.

Melbourne-based poet Cameron Semmens has compiled reflective contributions about faith and meaning from leading Christian voices including Alison Sampson, Geoff Bullock, Mark Sayers, Michael Frost, Olivia Marden, Roma Waterman and Tim Costello. Twenty-three contributors offer their meditations on a favourite animal and the theme it suggests, combined with the playful poetry and prayers by Semmens.

The Zoo in You thus explores dilemmas of pain and suffering, grief and regret, doubt and questions. It describes bearing God in the mission field and in the everyday, worshiping in song and the Psalms, grappling with consumerism and identity, and seeing surprising images of God and growing in self-awareness. It invites the reader towards action and rest, dreaming and tangible kindness. This spiritual journey is accompanied by a whole Zoo of animals, including a donkey, owl, caterpillar, cockatoo, turtle and dragons, elephants and bees.

For example, Roma Waterman in her reflection 'DREAMS... with Bees' urges readers to pursue the hard work of dreaming and anticipate the meaning of success. Semmens poetically paints an image of bees in the abdomen with their hopes and dreams wanting to fly out, and prays:

God
We have dreams —
Fill them with your angels.

We have hopes —
may they fly free
on the winds of your Spirit.

We have desires —
give us the strength to channel them
towards life
and others
and you.

Amen.

Fuzz Kito in 'WILDERNESS... with a Tiger' urges readers to let God prompt readers to growl at injustice and suffering. Semmens comments about this call to wildness and action:

Whenever faith
becomes neat, nice and tidy,
the Tiger of my spirit
wants to mess it up
and get it dirty with
the wonderful reality
of the raw Spirit of creation.

The Zoo in You is a beautiful book that sets the imagination flying, provokes contemplative prayer and playfully prompts reflection about God, doubt, grief, guilt, trust, grace and hope. It is suited for personal contemplation or small group discussion. We are looking forward to using it as part of an interactive and intergenerational spring service in our local church. It is an ideal gift for a friend or to treat yourself to an enjoyable read that helps connect you with your wildness within.


Semmens, Cameron (commissioning editor and poet) and Hamish McWilliam (Illustrator) Melbourne: Crooked Nose Wisdom, 2011

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