

# Please Don't Eat the Doctor

*A wildlife veterinarian recalls close encounters with curious patients.*

## APPOINTMENT AT THE ENDS OF THE WORLD

*Memoirs of a Wildlife Veterinarian.*

By William B. Karesh.

Illustrated. 376 pp. New York:

Warner Books. \$27.

By Marcia Bartusiak

**W**HAT avid world traveler wouldn't want William B. Karesh's job? First he journeys to Africa to care for an injured okapi, an exotic distant cousin of the giraffe found only in the Congo basin. Renowned for its burgundy coat and black-and-white striped legs, the okapi is prized by zoos. One specimen can be worth as much as a quarter

of a million dollars. Later in the year Karesh might fly off to Indonesia, helping parse the genetic code of the varied species of orangutan that inhabit that country's hot and humid jungles.

But after reading "Appointment at the Ends of the World," I decided I might be happier rooting for Karesh's efforts from afar. What made me reconsider? I think it was the fly bots, larvae that often infest animals (and humans) in the wild. "They penetrate your skin and maintain a little breathing hole that frequently drains pus while they grow up inside you," Karesh writes. The little critters can get to be three-quarters of an inch long. Or maybe it

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FROM "APPOINTMENT AT THE ENDS OF THE WORLD"  
William B. Karesh with a pair  
of albino penguin chicks.

was the leeches in Borneo, which "find their way onto your shoes or clothing, then inch up your pants or down your shirt in search of a tender spot to feed on."

When not ministering to the animals of the world or recovering from a raging foot fungus, Karesh can be found at the Bronx Zoo, headquarters for his employer, the Wildlife Conservation Society. From there, he regularly hopscoches around the globe to monitor the health of wildlife populations and assist in the society's wide-ranging research efforts. Early in his book he sets the record straight: "What I do for a living is not fun, at least not while I'm doing it." Believe him. He figures that only 5 percent of his travel time is spent working on animals directly; the remainder is spent dealing with the enigmatic rules and customs of third world bureaucracies. Animals do not make the work dangerous, he says; what does is having to travel "through the middle of rebel-infested nowhere and mediating my fate with teen-age soldiers equipped with better weapons than educations." But his love for the job emanates from every page. He confesses that he's addicted to the adrenaline rush.

Karesh's writing is not flashy but folksy and conversational as he champions the cause of the W.C.S. He is not deeply introspective. All mountains are lush, all plains are grassy and all his fellow conservationists are unique and special. What draws you in are his stories of the animals. His most vivid descriptions are saved for them. Peccaries, wild pigs with bristly hair and chisel-like

Marcia Bartusiak, a science writer, is the author of "Thursday's Universe" and "Through a Universe Darkly."

tusks, smash through the woods of South America "like a brigade of natural vacuum cleaners, snorting and grunting as they go." Bright-colored macaws, raised at a breeding station in Peru, come back for a visit and act "like a miniature urban street gang." The bellies of caimans, South American crocodiles, are "kind of pudgy — you can push them in like the Pillsbury Doughboy." And baby seals, "with their thick soft fur and huge dark brown eyes . . . look and feel like living plush toys." Karesh never goes out to do fieldwork without his pantyhose in hand. The nylon material makes a nifty indestructible basket for suspending blood-sample tubes in liquid nitrogen.

Karesh was possibly destined for his position. As a boy growing up in Charleston, S.C., he was famous locally for rescuing baby blue jays and raising orphaned raccoons at his home near the Ashley River. After obtaining a degree in vet-

erinary medicine, he graduated to caring for bigger game, first at zoos and now around the world. His book offers the opportunity to get a feel for his workaday life as he reports on his experiences during expeditions to Congo, Bolivia, Cameroon, Peru and Borneo over the last few years. Each trip had a different objective. Some of these journeys are simply interesting, others more arresting, such as the search for a forest elephant in the heart of tropical Africa.

His assignment was to attach seven-foot-long radio collars to some elephants, so researchers could use satellites to track their roaming pat-

terns. Forest elephants have thin, straight tusks and are smaller, and far less studied, than their grassland cousins. Finding one is not easy. Karesh and his companions spent three long weeks tramping through the rain-soaked foliage of Cameroon, machetes chopping away, before they spotted their first candidate. After Karesh shot off his tranquilizing dart, the elephant charged. Fortunately, Karesh found refuge behind a tree. It was my favorite episode. "If it hadn't been so dangerous, it would have been like a scene from a Keystone Kops comedy," he recalls. "I could see a part of the elephant on either side of the three-foot-wide tree trunk. . . . As the elephant and I continued our awkward dance — first leaning to one side and then to the other — I had what seemed like a billion seconds to contemplate life. . . . Am I really getting paid enough to do this? I asked myself." He added that placing his body "at arm's length" from an angry elephant "seemed way beyond the call of duty." No elephants were collared on that trip. It took three more years to complete the project successfully.

In the toughest of situations, Karesh never forgets he's a veterinarian. During a death-defying face-off with a jaguar he still notices "nice teeth, none broken." In and around these adventures, he manages to take jabs at corporate do-gooder projects gone awry in the wild and shows us the downside of ecotourism. His book puts the need for conservation on a personal level, which seems to make a stronger argument for the cause than dry statistics on the receding acreage of tropical rain forests.

In the midst of this engaging memoir Karesh reflects on the question "Where are you from?" He simply replies, "Earth." □