

John Fraser has lived in Rome since 1980. Previously, he worked in England and Canada.

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The theme of the three stories that make up John Fraser's latest literary tour de force, *Animal Tales*, is sacrifice. Sacrifice for others, for those close to one, or as a once-religious, generalised act.

The context is a nature 'personalised' in the form of its animals – animals as the screen on which humans project their aspirations and their failures.

In the first tale, the female protagonist suffers a series of disappointments – in her art, her civilisation, and the violation of her body. There remains for her only the self-denial and cleansing of consumption by an animal.

In *The White Room*, the hero betrays trusts and friendships, culminating in the seduction of his friend's wife. The gift of an animal seems to unload the guilt and treachery on to the beast itself.

The Guardians are the fantastic terra cotta animals that guard Chinese tombs. A powerful boss tries to salve his soul through a deal with nature.

Only the lifeless guardian statues hide the void, however. The living animals are let down – along with the humans themselves.

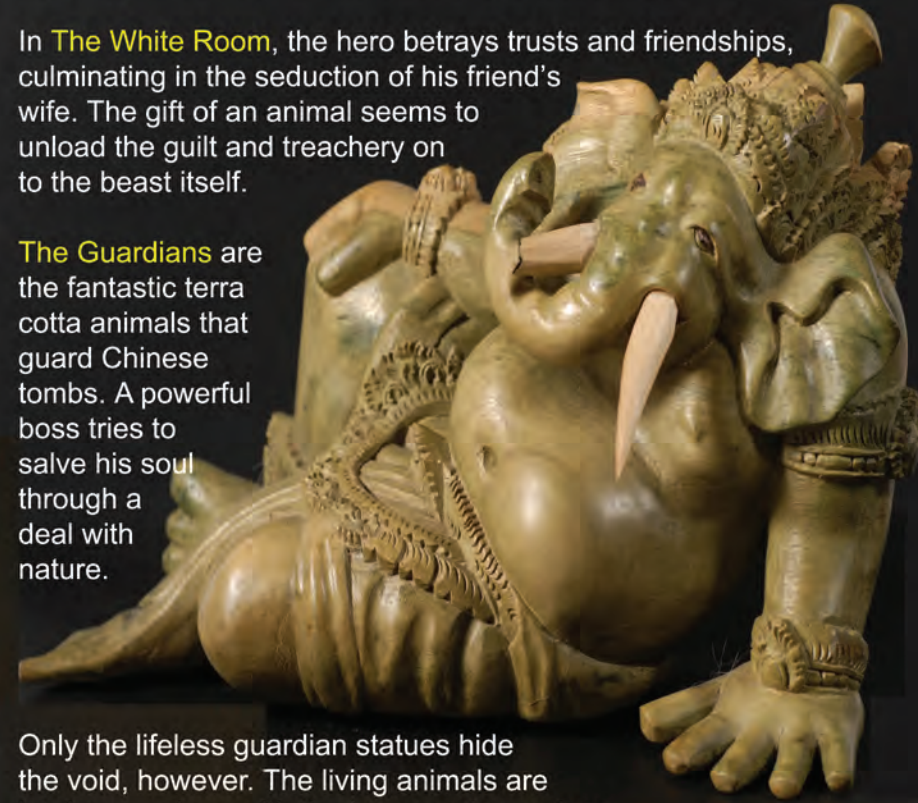
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Hybrid figure,
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Ganesh: wood,
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John Fraser

ANIMAL TALES

Animal Tales



John Fraser

AESOP Modern

From *Animal Tales*:

Gill asks, 'How's your project? What was it again?'

I improvise: 'Fantastic animals.'

'That's orientalist,' says Gill.

'There's centaurs,' I say. 'And Leda. And Europa. Of course, there's the simurgh, and the Prophet's flying donkey. And princely monkeys. Dragons, gryphons, cockatrices. Snakes. The roc.'

'It's all sex,' says Gill.

'I hadn't thought of that,' I say. 'They're just cute. It's the imagination. Then there's Ganesh. You can't put gods in among the animals – and yet, they're all mixed up in it.'

'No, no,' says Nadia. 'Fusion's in! It's not a kind of music, no – guys want the attributes of animals, to join with them. There's so few beasts that's left, their characters and skills, they mustn't disappear. They fuse into ourselves ...'

But then – of course! The bird that flies, hunts like a lion. The bright and docile genius – the gooselike thing that is all other birds – the simurgh. How often we have sought – a man, a woman, that is all other men and women. One we could obey and serve, and execute the ones that don't. If they're not found – then maybe the son, the daughter, has all the qualities, and more, of father, mother. And in turn becomes a father, mother ... Sure, we need a horse that flies: a tiresome mistress who becomes a bush ... We could have that woman if we became the labrador that jumps up at her on the road, if we were the rain that bounces off the sidewalk ... We'd go to war more often if we were a snake, a tiger ...

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