

## BOOK REVIEW

### **The Everyday Untamed by Skye Bailey**

Book Title: *Tiger* (Karavan Stories Workshop & Anthology project)

Authors: Kerry Hammerton, Karen Martin, Gail Gilbride, Desiree-Anne Martin, Michelle A. Meyer, Alexandra Wood, Anna Hug, Caitlin Spring, Lucienne Argent, Anita Shapiro, ChatGPT and Warren Jeremy Rourke. Intro by Karina M. Szczurek.

Published: Karavan Press, Cape Town

Year: 2023

ISBN number: 9781776472604

Page numbers: 154

Key words: Anthology, South African, Strong Women, Family Dynamics, Exotic Animals, AI

A result of the inaugural Karavan Stories Workshop and Anthology Project, *Tiger*, a ferocious short story anthology, has emerged from the undergrowth. The title of the anthology, which served as the theme from which the authors developed their stories (some more literally than others), was inspired by the case in which a tigress escaped from a private farm in Gauteng, South Africa in early 2023 and remained at large for a number of days until she was cornered and euthanized. Featuring works from eleven South African authors, and ChatGPT, the stories in *Tiger* explore grief, the unknown and untamed, dysfunctional families and complex characters with often animalistic language that shines a light on the wild side of everyday life - and the reverse.

This book review of the stories in *Tiger* seeks to objectively recount the stand-out features of the anthology, as well as its strengths and weaknesses. It begins by chronicling the themes which formed the backbone of the anthology, such as complex portrayals of women and often mothers specifically. Then, it speaks on the animalistic nature of the language and the portrayal of humanity used in the anthology, and spotlights two stories in particular which used this in

especially creative ways. Next, it explores the weak points and noteworthy stories within the anthology, all of which provide ample food for thought for the reader. Then, the penultimate paragraph outlines how even at their weakest, the human-written stories in *Tiger* still remain far ahead of its ChatGPT offerings, the exact failings of which are laid out in said paragraph. The final paragraph summarises the findings.

A theme which manifested consistently throughout the anthology was that of strong willed, complex female characters - a fitting development in light of the tigress who inspired the collection. In particular, the diverse, complicated relations between mothers and daughters was central in several stories, from Kerry Hammerton's slow-developing mother-daughter mystery in 'Tiger Girl'; to Karen Martin's abusive mother in the short and elusive 'The Whale'; Desiree-Anne Martin's vibrant and heartbreaking child narrator and absent mother in 'Colouring Inside the Lines' and Caitlin Spring's devastating portrayal of grief through the eyes of a daughter in 'Walk Away'. Women in these stories were imperfect, yet wild and strong as they dealt with the trappings of everyday life.

The theme of strong complex women featured in a variety of other ways. For instance, Gail Gilbride's 'Tigress' and Alexandra Wood's 'When Tigers Smoked' portrayed mothers of sons as overbearing and fierce in their (over)protectiveness - sometimes with disastrous results. Meanwhile, the women of Anna Hug's 'Caged', Lucinne Argent's 'See if it Settles' and Anita Shapiro's 'Maxine and Minette', dealt with feelings of captivity, animosity and regret on their paths, and remained within their gilded cages, forged new paths, or a combination of the two in at times shocking yet relatable developments. Finally, Warren Jeremy Rourke's sci-fi story 'Ere, in the Unhomely', which closes the anthology, featured a lioness in a vivid example of the number of uniquely South African interpretations of the theme within the anthology.

Perhaps one of the most stand-out facets of the anthology was the use of animalistic language. Characters resisted urges to "scratch someone's eyes out" (Gilbride 22-23), felt their senses sharpen "like a wild animal" (Meyer 48) and "whimper[ed] like a wounded mutt" (Wood 58). In other stories, children were described as cubs and cars purred and pounced as they stalked their way through locations across Cape Town, the Karoo and South Korea. Some stories took it further, like Hammerton's 'Tiger Girl' and Rourke's 'Ere, in the Unhomely', which open and close the anthology respectively, wherein the line between animals and humans blurred entirely. In the first story, a tiger shares its animalistic urges with a human, while in the last, animals

smiled and swaggered like their human counterparts. In these ways, the animalistic of the everyday and the everyday in the animalistic formed the link which runs throughout the stories of *Tiger*.

However, limitations which come with the length of short stories formed the root of the few disadvantages of the anthology. An example of this can be seen in Hammerton's 'Tiger Girl', an otherwise well paced and narrated story, which resolves its plot within a few lines in a way that feels mildly rushed. Others, like Martin's 'Whale', Shapiro's 'Maxine and Minette' and Rourke's 'Ere, in the Unhomely', all with intensely creative concepts, struggled to disseminate their information within the constraints of the short story format, leaving readers with more questions than answers. Despite these flaws however, the stories remained memorable for their creativity and intensity.

Within the anthology, there were also a few stories which especially stood out. One such was Hug's 'Caged', in which a young bride-to-be's feelings of imprisonment took the form of a tiger. The story culminates in a shocking scene, which includes the gorgeous imagery of the creature soaring over the narrator, its "snowy underbelly" passing with a rush of air (Hug 85). Another was Wood's 'When Tigers Smoked', set in South Korea and following an over-involved mother who makes use of an amulet bearing the image of a tiger to regain control over her son. The story combines traditional magic alongside a modern dysfunctional family in an interesting juxtaposition. Finally, Spring's 'Walk Away' offered a departure from others in the anthology. The story, which covers a mother and daughter dealing with their patriarch's final days, provided a heartrendingly realistic portrayal of the unavoidable dealings of death. Though featuring no notable animals or figurative animalistic language, the situation of the characters operating on their base animalistic instincts during the difficult time fit perfectly within the anthology's truly diverse offerings.

The short stories which felt the most out of place, despite heavily featuring tigers, were those included in ChatGPT's 'Whispers of the Untamed'. Alongside the often gritty, imperfect, intensely human stories on offer from the real authors, the three stories produced by the AI chatbot felt sorely lacking. Though punctuated with vibrant descriptive language, clear morals, picture-perfect pacing and - in very literal interpretations of the theme - featuring actual tigers as characters, the ChatGPT stories lacked much (or any) of the heart present in the others. Instead, there was a hollowness and lack of relatability that underlined each AI story, making

them feel like watered-down myths intended for children. In contrast, the final story of the anthology, Rourke's 'Ere, in the Unhomely', which comes directly after ChatGP's chapter and which, ironically and perhaps rightfully, features AI as the villain in a future war, felt wholly different despite its flaws - unmistakably human.

To conclude, *Tiger* stands as a strong anthology; human in its wildness and wild in its humanity, it provides an intimate look at the many kinds of families, relationships and people in South Africa and abroad, now and in the future. This comes in the form of a wide offering of different portrayals of women, presented with wildly creative language. Meanwhile, the juxtaposition between the human and AI stories bolster the important role of the human artist, showcasing first hand the impossibility of AI taking over humanity just yet. The case of the tigress being brought into human civilization which inspired the anthology is thus given new life in a diverse representation of the wild, the unknown and the untamed in our everyday lives.