

A Boa for Christmas

By Frederick Boyce

Let me be the first to say that Christmas is a challenging time to be trying to write an article about snakes. Like their fellow reptiles, snakes become inactive in the winter, a period of dormancy known as *brumation*, during which they greatly reduce their normal operating capacity and subsist off of fat stored up during the summer and fall months of activity. But aside from the fact that snakes just aren't active, there are significant other challenges to writing about snakes at this time of year. There are few, if any, good Christmas snake stories. If there were any snakes in Bethlehem, they were never mentioned. Come to think of it, there are very few nice stories about snakes at any time of year.

My mother liked snakes—indeed, she loved all animals. Even before I came along, she had a pet green snake named Cleopatra who could often be found in graceful repose in the chandelier over the dining room table. My mother also liked Christmas. It was her favorite time of year, I believe. She threw herself into the manic holiday chores—the decorating, the endless writing of cards, the cooking, the cleaning, the hosting of fancy cocktail parties. I think she actually loved and hated it all at the same time. It was a lot of work. Most of all, however, she loved buying presents for everyone, especially her children.

One present she did not buy, however, was George. George was a boa constrictor who belonged to the son of one of her close friends. As it happened, the young man had been drafted and, like so many others, was headed to Vietnam. His mother asked my mother if she could please take the snake, and my mother decided it would make a perfect Christmas gift for my brother and me. For such reasons, I was generally envied by my peers throughout my school years, as most of their mothers were terrified of snakes and would never dream of letting them have one. I was just seven years old, a rising second-grader, and George seemed huge to me. I could drape him over my shoulders and his head and tail nearly reached the floor on both sides. In truth, he was only a little over five feet long—not huge for a snake that can potentially reach a length of 10 or possibly 12 feet in exceptional cases, but he seemed enormous to me.

One day I left the door to his large enclosure unlatched and my mother found him very comfortably coiled around some hot water pipes in the basement ceiling. She decided he would be fine up there until my brother or I got home from school and went ahead with her afternoon bridge club meeting. One of the ladies, nervously half-joking, asked her, "Well, what's loose in your house today?" and she replied, "Just George." When she told them who George was, half of the ladies promptly fled the house and the remaining brave souls followed her down to the basement for a look.

The boa constrictor has never been nearly as huge as its reputation. The actual boa, a favorite with the old side-show snake charmers because of its naturally docile disposition, certainly bears no resemblance to the gigantic, menacing serpent that stalks the Swiss Family Robinson, ultimately swallowing their beloved donkey when its sinister attempt to eat the resourceful family, barricaded inside their blockhouse, is thwarted. As giant snakes go, the fabled boa constrictor is actually on the small side. It is dwarfed by its close relative, the green anaconda, and by the four species of python that are capable of reaching 20 feet or more in length. Not even one of them is capable of swallowing a donkey, unless it is a very small one.

In Portuguese, the word "boa" means "good," and these big snakes are highly prized in Brazil for their rodent-catching abilities. They are indeed among the most powerful constrictors, capable of cutting off the circulation of their prey and causing cardiac arrest. They are also one of the very few animals whose binomial scientific name, *boa constrictor*, is also the common name.

My favorite book of early childhood, which was read to me over and over again at bedtime, was a thin little tome with whimsical drawings entitled *Crictor* by Tomi Ungerer. It is the story of an elderly woman living in Paris whose son is a herpetologist in Africa, studying snakes. One day he sends her a box in the mail, a

round box shaped like a giant donut. In the box is Crictor, an enormous and very friendly boa constrictor, which in the drawings is plain green with an endearingly pointed face. Boa constrictors are actually various shades of brown and tan (only their smaller relatives, the emerald tree boas, are green), and they are not found in Africa. The boa family is, in fact, based overwhelmingly in the American tropics, home of all the true boa constrictors as well as the tree boas, rainbow boas and the anacondas. Any giant constricting snake in Africa, Asia or Australia is going to be a python of some sort. I refuse to pick scientific nits, however, with this little gem of a children's book, still a favorite, because it is one of the very few books that has ever portrayed a snake in a favorable, even heroic role.

Crictor indeed does become a hero when he surprises and detains—in his mighty constricting coils, of course—a burglar who was attempting to rob his beloved mistress. He is subsequently presented with a medal by the mayor of Paris, and a statue is erected of him in the local park. Other scenes depict him serving tea, holding a book open at eye level and allowing himself to be used as a jump rope by school children. During the winter, the nice lady knits a long sweater for Crictor to wear (not much actual help for an ectothermic reptile, but again, let's try not to let things like that spoil a good story), and he frolics in the snow.

OK, so any real boa constrictor that spent any time in the snow would almost certainly die of an upper respiratory infection, but I still think it is worth putting up with just to have a positive snake character in the literature. I believe that copies may still be available somewhere, and I would highly recommend this delightful book for any youngster who is just getting to the reading age.

Have a wonderful Christmas, Hanukah or holiday of your choosing, and a very Happy New Year.

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The author's current pet, a Peruvian redtail boa constrictor—Photo by Fred Boyce

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