

Album de zoología

(Zoological Album)

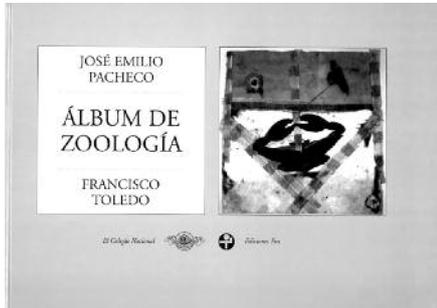
José Emilio Pacheco (poetry)

Francisco Toledo (illustrations)

Jorge Esquinca, ed.

El Colegio Nacional/Ediciones Era

Mexico City, 1998, 128 pp.



The most recent edition of *Album de zoología* brings together literary and pictorial elements that surpass those of previous editions. Like all good art books, it is also a delight to read and own.

The editor of this compendium, Jorge Esquinca, took the poems and vignettes for this bestiary¹ from eight other books by José Emilio Pacheco: *No me preguntes cómo pasa el tiempo* (Don't Ask Me How Time Passes) (1969), *Irás y no volverás* (You'll Go and Not Come Back) (1973), *Islas a la deriva* (Islands Adrift) (1976), *Desde entonces* (Since Then) (1980), *Los trabajos del mar* (The Work of the Sea) (1983), *Miro la tierra* (I Look at the Earth) (1986), *Ciudad de la memoria* (City of Memory) (1989) and *El silencio de la luna* (The Silence of the Moon) (1994). He divided and arranged them according to the four elements: water, air, earth and fire animals. Each section boasts both real animals and those that have been part of the mythical tradition since time immemorial.

Album de zoología was first published in Mexico in 1985, and a second Mexican edition appeared in 1990; the University of Texas Press published a bilingual edition translated by Margaret Sayers Peden in 1993, making it available to English-speaking readers. The third, revised Mexican edition came out in 1998, augmented by 28 attractive illustrations in a sober format.

The illustrations for the first two editions were done by Alberto Blanco, while well known Oaxacan painter Francisco Toledo did the ones for the bilingual and fourth editions.

Etymologically, “album” comes from the Latin word for “white”, “*albus*,” and was the original name of the tablet on which edicts were written in ancient Rome. The word eventually came to refer to any book with blank pages filled with compositions, illustrations or other items.

In Pacheco’s album, the blank pages are dressed with texts that are samples of the animals that share their surroundings with us; but they are also a reminder to that great public known as humanity that the planet does not belong solely to that aberrant animal known as Man.

Both Pacheco’s real and mythological fauna has the particularity of offering us a sketch of human behavior—not always benign—toward these “inferior beings” down through history.

The pictorial element of the book is essential: Francisco Toledo’s unadorned black ink lines complement perfectly the metaphorical description of the animals the poet presents.

We should remember that this is not the only bestiary illustrated by the Oaxacan painter, who also did the drawings for one of the many editions of Jorge Luis Borges’ *Manual de zoología fantástica* (Manual of Fantastic Zoology) to bring to life the mythological beings that exist only in writing.

Pablo Neruda used to say that zoological and botanical books were always his passion because they represented a continuity with his childhood and restored to him “the infinite world, the unending labyrinth of nature.”² Pacheco’s bestiary is also a prolongation of that childhood in which our dealings with animals could be ruled by the familiarity toward those we knew or by the fantasies prompted by the ones we did not know.

To paraphrase Neruda, the *Album de zoología* is the conjunction of nature, Man and art in a book that enables us to board an ark to sail in the company of other species in the new millennium.

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Staff writer

NOTES

¹ The concept of a bestiary goes back to the Middle Ages when scholars compiled stories in prose or verse about real and fabled animals as an allegory for human beings. For an overall interpretation of this book, see María Rosa Olivera-Williams, “Sobre *An Ark for the Next Millennium*: un bestiario de José Emilio Pacheco,” *Literatura Mexicana* 9, no. 1 (1998), pp. 139-154.

² Pablo Neruda, “El poeta no es una piedra perdida,” Juan Domingo Argüelles, comp., *El poeta y la crítica. Grandes poetas hispanoamericanos del siglo XX como críticos* (Mexico City: Coordinación de Humanidades, UNAM, 1998), p. 139.