

The Snake Charmer : A Life and Death in Pursuit of Knowledge

By Jamie James 2008

Hardback 260pp. \$24.95

Published by Hyperion, New York ISBN 978-1-4013-0213-9

CD set: 7 CDs 8.5hrs \$29.95

Published by Blackstone Audio Inc. ISBN 978-1-4332-1217-8

Reviewed by Mark O'Shea

It might come as some surprise but very few herpetologists have died of snakebite, in the field. That does not mean famous herpetologists have not died of snakebite, they assuredly have: Grace Olive Wiley (1948, Thai cobra, *Naja kaouthia*); Karl Patterson Schmidt (1957, boomslang, *Dispholidus typus*); and Schmidt's close friend Robert Mertens (1975, twigsake, *Thelotornis capensis*), but these and other deaths, including the only UK exotic snakebite fatality¹ occurred under captive conditions.

The 20th Century herpetologist most famous for dying 'in the line of duty' was probably the 20year old Australian Kevin Budden who was killed by the first coastal taipan (*Oxyuranus scutellatus*) ever captured for antivenom research, as he attempted to bag it in Queensland in July 1950². Ironically he died at Cairns Base Hospital, the same hospital where Steve Irwin would be pronounced dead 56 years later, but as we know, not from snakebite. Another herpetologist bitten and killed in the field was Frederick A. Shannon who died in 1965 following a bite from a Mojave rattlesnake (*Crotalus scutellatus*) he was attempting to capture in Arizona (Pinney, 1981) but such tragedies are thankfully rare.

The most recent such misadventure, and the first of the 21st Century, occurred in only the second year of the century, in 2001, to Joseph Bruno Slowinski, from the California Academy of Sciences. You might wonder why the newspapers were not full of lurid tales, reliving the death of one of the most garrulous and controversial field herpetologists of our era. Well, Joe died the day after 9/11, not in the Twin Towers or the Pentagon, but in a remote Burmese jungle, he died from the bite of a many-banded krait (*Bungarus multicinctus*) and it had taken him almost 30hours to die, but the World was preoccupied, it was looking the other way, towards Manhattan, and away from Myanmar.

¹ The intoxicated Curator of Reptiles at London Zoo was bitten and killed by a cobra in 1897, 111years ago.

² For more on the life and death of Kevin Budden visit David William's page at :-
<http://www.kingsnake.com/aho/species/extras/budden.html>

It is to my great regret that I never met Joe Slowinski, although several of my friends could be counted amongst his friends and colleagues, and one of my film directors had met him to discuss the idea that he become my 'buddy' (contributor) on a film about spitting cobras in Burma, for the third series of *Big Adventure* – Joe and Wolfgang Wüster had recently described the Burmese spitting cobra (*Naja mandalayensis*) and Joe liked television, he had made documentaries with National Geographic. Sadly we never got to make that film, nor even meet and talk herps.

When Joe Slowinski died it sent shock waves through the professional herpetological community, but obviously his passing did not grab the same visceral, global attention as the death of Steve Irwin.

This is a shame because Joe deserved that recognition, but now it seems he may have got it through the publication of *The Snake Charmer* by Jamie James, probably the most talked about herpetological book of the year, and not just amongst herpetologists.

I purchased both the book and the 7CD unabridged audio set from Breck Bartholomew of Bibliomania, Utah (www.herplit.com). I generally avoid audio-books, they are so massively abridged that they ruin the narrative and put you off ever reading the book itself, but James' *The Snake Charmer* is unabridged so you could listen to it in the car, flick to the book at home, and then go back to the CD in the car without flicking from diluted to concentrated to diluted again. In the end I listened to the 7CD set and referred to the book when I wanted to re-read a section later. As it happens each of the CDs conveniently lasts 70-80 minutes which is roughly the time it takes me to drive from home to West Midland Safari Park, and back again, so *The Snake Charmer* was my companion to and from work for almost a month of weekends during the late summer.

There are three main chapters: Many-banded Krait; The Snake Charmer, and The Expedition, followed by an Epilogue, Sources and Methods, Notes on place names, Acknowledgments and an Index to follow.

The first chapter, Many-banded Krait, introduces us to *B. multicinctus*, the species, and then the individual snake, captured the night before, that was to extinguish one of modern herpetology's shinning lights. This short chapter closes with the sentence: "*Joe looked at it in quiet horror. Without the hope of a doubt, he said, "That's a f*****g krait".*" We are left wondering what happened next, although we really know what happens in the end.

The second chapter, The Snake Charmer, is subdivided and adopts a neat herpetological naming of the sub-sections as if following on from the Many-banded Krait chapter, each being named for a species of snake³ that features in the narrative. We are guided through Joe's childhood, his early career and on upwards to international recognition as his reputation and influence increased. James writes: "*By 2000, Joe has established himself as a major player in international herpetology*". 'An understatement!'

³ Black Rat Snake; Boa Constrictor; Prairie Rattlesnake; American Copperhead; Monocled Cobra; Central American Coral Snake; Pigmy Rattlesnake; Kukri Snake; Golden Tree Snake; Burmese Spitting Cobra and Inland Taipan.

The narrative is extremely readable (or listenable depending on the media you choose). James leads you through Joe's early life, well illustrating his devotion, his single-minded determination, his two-fingers to authority, but he also introduces us to a darker side of the man, his hot-headedness, his heavy drinking and partying, and his sometimes dishonesty. I was shocked, if it is true, by the account of his killing of snakes belonging to the Butantan Institute in São Paulo, Brazil and wondered how he avoided being arrested. Joe also had his fair share of close calls and snakebites, but I really cannot call the kettle black on that score.

Joe seemed to be able to attract research funding for any project he embarked on and knowing how difficult it is to fund our PNG AVRU research project I was particularly envious of the \$2.4million National Science Foundation grant to study biodiversity in Yunnan, which he was jointly awarded.

The third chapter, The Expedition, deals with the large Californian Academy of Sciences expedition Joe had organised, albeit somewhat haphazardly, to one of the remotest region of Earth, Hkakabo Razi in northern Myanmar, or Burma as it was known before the military junta took over. There is no doubt that Joe Slowinski's career was heading for the stellar heights when he embarked on the expedition and on August 23, 2001 wrote in his journal "*This is the start of the big expedition*". Unfortunately, it was also the start of his last expedition.

Someone once asked the late Prof. Straun Sutherland, Founder and Director of AVRU and the Immunology Research Department at the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories, Melbourne, how serious was a snakebite in a remote location. He likened it to a "shotgun injury or a myocardial infarction" (heart attack), in other words your ability to reach medical assistance greatly affects your chances of survival. The untimely death of Joe Slowinski probably illustrates this fact more than any other because following the bite he lived for 29.5 hours, a period of time that ordinarily would allow a snakebite victim to reach hospital and expert medical assistance, but not when you are holed up many days march into dense jungle with persistent cloud cover that makes medivac by helicopter impossible. Under such conditions malaria or a badly broken leg could result in a fatality, so what chance has a snakebite victim? The utter tragedy, as Joe's fellow expedition members fought desperately to save him, is graphically told in this chapter.

The Epilogue seeks to explain Joe's legacy, his achievements, which were many, but also the fall-out and recriminations following his death. It pulls you up short and makes the point that nobody is responsible for their actions more than that person themselves, a snakebite is often the fault of the bitten person, not the snake, not someone else, you have to say "I made a mistake" but then in Joe's case he did not live long enough to utter those words, and really you ask yourself, looking at the way he bulldozed through life and problems, would he have admitted he made a mistake.

I thoroughly recommend "The Snake Charmer". It would be a superb tale if it were fiction but since it is a factual account of the life and death of a snakeman of our age, it has a relevance few of the biographies of Ditmars, Loveridge, Ionides, Haast can achieve, not to do those eminent gentlemen down but Joe Slowinski was a modern snakeman. He was a bit like a maverick but academic Steve Irwin, he was the person so many young snake keepers wanted to be, or meet, or emulate. He was and will remain somewhat of a legend.

Of course, there have to be some problems with “The Snake Charmer” and they largely revolve around factual inaccuracies, this was a book written by a non-herper after all, so mistakes slipped through. The acknowledgements list several top-flight herpetologists who are supposed to have proofed the manuscript but I find it hard to believe they would have allowed some of the factual errors that made it through.

I will not spoil things by listing mistakes I spotted, apart from one particular hum-dinger: (p.192) “*Most intriguing, Htun Win had caught a Dendroaspis, an elapid closely related to the infamous black mamba of Africa. Joe was delighted: He had never seen one before.*”

I'll say he was delighted, I would have been too, to see a mamba captured in Myanmar, what a coup, that would re-write elapid biogeography. So Joe had never seen one before, sadly he was to go to his grave without ever seeing one because plainly Htun Win had emphatically not caught a *Dendroaspis*!

I was listening to the CD version enroute to WMSP when I heard this and almost swerved off the road in surprise. When I got home I check to see if the narrator had made a mistake. *Dendroaspis* was not in the index, although other generic names were listed but “mamba: *Dendroaspis*”, was there, leading to the above quote. There was a strange lack of consistency throughout the book with some scientific names italicized but others in regular text, and *Dendroaspis* was not in italics in the quote.

What did this mean? I wondered if Joe had been excited because Htun Win caught a *Boiga dendrophila* but ruled that out too, they do not occur that far north, and then suddenly realised the likely identity of the snake concerned. There are at least five species of treesnakes in the genus *Dendrelaphis* in the region, what are often called bronzebacks, but could Joe have really gotten excited about such a mundane genus, unless he figured it was a new species. Perhaps someone misread Joe's notes. I guess we will never know as Htun Win also died in 2004 so the two herpetologists have taken the truth about their mystery mamba to their graves with them.

The Snake Charmer is a great read and putting aside any mistakes by the author, I am sure readers will be inspired, but also warned, by its outcome. Snakes do not just kill farmers, gardeners and plantation workers, they sometimes kill snake experts.