



American Zoo: A Sociological Safari

David Grazian

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Orangutans swing from Kevlar-lined fire hoses. Giraffes feast on celebratory birthday cakes topped with carrots instead of candles. Hi-tech dinosaur robots growl among steel trees, while owls watch animated cartoons on old television sets. In *American Zoo*, sociologist David Grazian takes us on a safari through the contemporary zoo, alive with its many contradictions and strange wonders.

Trading in his tweed jacket for a zoo uniform and a pair of muddy work boots, Grazian introduces us to zookeepers and animal rights activists, parents and toddlers, and the other human primates that make up the zoo's social world. He shows that in a major shift away from their unfortunate pasts, American zoos today emphasize naturalistic exhibits teeming with lush and immersive landscapes, breeding programs for endangered animals, and enrichment activities for their captive creatures. In doing so, zoos blur the imaginary boundaries we regularly use to separate culture from nature, humans from animals, and civilization from the wild. At the same time, zoos manage a wilderness of competing priorities—animal care, education, scientific research, and recreation—all while attempting to serve as centers for conservation in the wake of the current environmental and climate-change crisis. The world of the zoo reflects how we project our own prejudices and desires onto the animal kingdom, and invest nature with meaning and sentiment.

A revealing portrayal of comic animals, delighted children, and feisty zookeepers, *American Zoo* is a remarkable close-up exploration of a classic cultural attraction.

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