

# Our Panther



By Geoff Bouvier – San Diego Reader – July 14, 2005

## *The Panther*

*His vision becomes the passing bars,  
so shattered, it holds little else.  
To him there are a thousand bars,  
and beyond the bars, not a world.*

*He strides in narrow circles, tighter and tighter,  
and the steadiness of his powerful soft pace  
is like a dance of impatience around a center  
in which a noble will stands immobilized.*

*Only at times, the heavy curtain of his pupils  
rises quietly -. Then an image enters in,  
rushes downward through the tense, resilient muscles,  
plunges into his heart and is gone.*

– Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) Translated from the original  
German text

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Perhaps you've seen the television show Pet Psychic on Animal Planet. The main character, Sonya Fitzpatrick, is an animal communicator. The premise is that this woman can telepathically converse with nonhuman creatures, diagnosing

their problems, discovering interesting things about them. Whether you believe this practice is viable or not, one of the true pioneers in the field of animal communication lives right here in San Diego.

Brigitte Noel is a petite, attractive woman, 52, red haired, with neat, almost invisible glasses over her big, round, innocent-seeming light-brown eyes. She's in terrific shape – a result of her active, horse-riding lifestyle. She radiates intelligence, somehow, and a quality that I immediately recognized as inner strength. Her voice has a wonderfully genial tone, cheerful and singsongy.

We met at the zoo one fine morning, after a phone conversation and an e-mail or two, and introduced ourselves. I'd sent Rilke's poem to her the day before, and she'd responded that it would be "fascinating to learn how Orson feels about his life in a 21st-century zoo designed to be environmentally friendly to both animals and visitors." She was implying that the lot of Rilke's panther was in fact quite different from what a captive panther would encounter today.

And so, before I'd even met her, and even though I'd read Rilke's poem a hundred-odd times, Brigitte Noel had suddenly awakened me to an aspect of the poem that deserved some criticism. Although Rilke was writing universally about THE panther, it must be realized that he was observing a particular panther in a particular situation, at a particular time. I mention this, for one thing, because, in general, animals are not kept in cramped cages anymore. Animal rights activists and zoological societies have changed all that.

For thousands of years, zoos were designed to show off oddities. The original zoos even displayed people. There was no concern for natural habitats, or for the well-being of the creatures in captivity. Over time, as human knowledge and human resources have grown, and as the rights of animals have become more of a concern, our zoos have tried to embrace a

more humane idea of animal internment.

Jo Ann Haddad had enlightened me on this point somewhat. She'd told me that, "In the zoo's charter, it states that the zoo's purpose is education and conservation. These particular animals, all the animals in captivity, are basically sacrificed for the greater good. We're trying to make it as good as possible for them, and simulate their natural environment as best we can, because that helps us educate the public, not only about this type of animal, but also about the environment where this animal comes from. It's easier to teach people about concepts like recycling, instead of showing them a billboard saying that it's better to recycle, instead we show them a cat, and we say, 'Now if you don't recycle, then this animal won't have anyplace to live. He will die.' And we can use that to bring the message to people more effectively."

By now I'd noticed that those barred boxes weren't called "cages" anymore; the proper term was now "enclosures." And refreshingly, this shift in nomenclature didn't seem like some predictable P.C. euphemism. Today's enclosures are larger than yesterday's cages, and their interiors are crammed with the accoutrements of natural habitats, such as Orson's trees, pools, rocks, and comfortable places to sleep.

In short, the animals aren't just "on display" anymore; they're set up to live well, to be comfortable (though enriched and gently challenged) representatives of their races, and then, auxiliary to that, people might saunter along to see them. In an old zoo, keepers fed the animals and hosed out their cages. In the new zoo, as Haddad mentioned, animals are given enrichment opportunities. The San Diego Zoo even has a wing of the staff whose job is to observe the mental well-being of the animals and make sure they're feeling well.

As we walked downhill across the zoo grounds, toward the cat string, as they call it, Brigitte Noel was instructing me, "Sometimes having all your needs taken care of can be a boring

affair. Animals aren't supposed to be fat and lazy. The struggle to feed and procreate can be fulfilling and exciting. But wild animals in captivity have it easy, perhaps too easy."

Every time we'd pass an exhibit, on our way to Orson, Noel would take a moment to view and acknowledge the various animals, "Oh, look at you! Aren't you beautiful?" And so on. It was like walking down the street with someone who's extraordinarily friendly, even to strangers: you start to realize that it's good to lavish others with your attention, because it makes them feel good. Noel was spreading her feel-good energy to every furry, feathered, scaled, and tailed critter we passed. Curiously, I don't remember her saying hello to any of the people who walked by us.

"The San Diego Zoo makes an incredible effort to stage the most compatible environments possible," Noel told me as we approached Orson. "Zoos used to be more about the people; you know, 'come see the animals and be safe doing it.' But now they really take the animals' well-being into account. Almost every creature we've seen so far seems to be doing really, really well here."

How could she tell? "Animals can project out, to a certain degree," Noel told me, "but really they exist in the moment. Their frame of reference is the present moment, and that's it. I have people who find out that I can communicate with animals, and they'll tell me to ask things like, 'Who'll win the Chargers game next Sunday?' Ridiculous questions like that. But an animal doesn't know that; animals know very little beyond the here and now. But that's what they can teach us. And opening ourselves up to receive that information isn't all that difficult. They're still on the earth plane with us; they come straight from the heart; they're still mammals like us; and there are ways for us to connect. The whole point is to find this commonality, to find these points of unity, and then we can connect with these animals."

Then Noel seemed to scold mere humans. "If we go into our intellects too much," she said, "and we want things for the future, and we remember things from the past, and we live separate from what's going on in our hearts right now, then of course we won't understand the animals, because animals are all about their hearts and the present moment."

As we arrived at Orson's enclosure, he was gnawing Monday's meal: a cow knuckle. Noel told me that she needed a few minutes, and she sat down at the base of a railing and began to take notes on a yellow pad. Orson hardly looked up from his fun. Gnawing, licking, chewing, pawing, crunching: he was loving that knucklebone, let me tell you. And it was at that moment that it occurred to me just how large and powerful Orson was. The sound of his teeth working over that bone, the length of the claws that held it in place, the sinewy shoulders, the sheer size of him: I remembered Roy...

While I pictured being torn in half and flopped around like a beef part, Noel stood up and announced that she'd finished her interview. I was startled. For the past four or five minutes, I'd thought she was brainstorming what questions to ask Orson, but now she was telling me that the two of them had been communicating all along.

To show me the transcript of their conversation, Noel needed a flat surface. So she walked over, grabbed a covered garbage can that was almost as tall as she was, and she dragged it downhill a few feet. I saw this as an emblematic image, not just of Noel's physical strength, but of her resourcefulness and ability to use the tools provided her, even if they aren't the perfect tools. She was a woman who could take matters into her own hands.

She placed her notepad on top of the garbage pail, and before she began to read, she told me, "Orson's cage is like a jewel box, and he's the black diamond inside. He's in total control; he's patient. Look at him. He's so cool, yet so dramatic. He's

such a happy cat. He knows everyone is going to ooh and ahh, so he's working his audience every day. He's not bored at all. He's having the time of his life in there."

Noel went on, "You mentioned Orson's pacing the last time you saw him. But his pacing is really just a solution to a problem. He needs exercise, and he wants to be on display, so he paces in front of everyone. He's not neurotic at all."

Then Noel looked at me and smiled, "So you want to know what Orson told me?" And I smiled over my skepticism and nodded.

BN: Hello, Orson, would you like to share with me today?

O: I am Orson the Great. I am the Great One here. My roar is the loudest, and my presence is felt everywhere. I am a very powerful presence in the Zoo. I am my keeper's treasure and I adore Joann. I would not let any harm come to her. She can trust me. I know she often wonders about this, but her scent is very distinctive. I would not mistake her for another.

BN: How do you like it here at the Zoo?

O: I am important. And that is enough. I have come to be important. I like to be admired, and I make myself dramatic. I like to be admired, and at night I would like light to shine on me. People are always asking: Where is he? Where is he? Where is he? And that is very frustrating for me.

BN: Geoff standing here has come to write about you in a newspaper that people read and get information. What would you like to share with Geoff?

O: Please let Geoff know I am very happy. Very content. He is worried about me but there is no reason. I am very proud, very proud – my pride and my dignity are unaffected here. I am of great, great value to the Zoo. Of great value. I am so valuable, so. I am like the Jewel in the Crown of the Zoo.

BN: Geoff was concerned when he saw you pace the other day.

O: I get my exercise that way. I am very happy, happy, happy. I am fine. I am so proud, so strong, so awesome.

"So you see, Orson's like a dignitary," Noel explained. "He's onstage. Orson is being exceptionally dramatic for us."

We looked through the generous mesh of his enclosure. "I mean, look at him," she said. "He's enjoying his breakfast, but he's also very into what we're doing. He's looked at us several times, and he's very calm and dignified. He wouldn't show too much enthusiasm, because he has to show his level of leadership and dominance."

I started to mention Rilke's poem, but Noel gently cut me off. "That poem doesn't apply to Orson at all," she said. "That's a sad poem. That's a poem about a panther in a tiny cage with bars who was kept in a very old-fashioned way of keeping animals. Plus, it was probably a wild panther who wasn't meant for captivity. Although Rilke's panther might have been a little happier in this environment right here. But really, it doesn't even relate, because Orson is more domesticated. He's the treasure of the zoo. He has a purpose here, and he really has a sense of that purpose. He's there, on exhibit, showing us all his glory, and he's perfectly suited for the job he's being asked to do. Perfectly suited. He's totally cooperating with the work that he's doing. And it is work. So he's not even bored. Because he's working the crowd, and he's showing off a magnificent animal, and raising the sensitivity of people."

By now, Noel was positively gushing, "I mean, I've never been able to get this close to such an animal, and, to me, this is just a treat. The zoo has been very sensitive to what type of animal Orson is, and his personality. Because maybe another panther would be a lot shyer, and need more screening. But Orson really enjoys being down here in front of everyone. This is more of a stage than an enclosure. The fabulous zoo decorators have come in and made his habitat. And he's quite

calm and very content. I don't know that Orson could fend for himself in the wild. It seems at this point in time like he's very accustomed to having staff, like he's very used to being catered to. I don't think he'd like the jungle at all, where he'd be less important. Then he might have rivals."

So Noel had drawn an entirely different picture of Orson the Black Panther than I'd expected. But how had she done it? There was no doubt in her voice, no sense that she was being fanciful or that someone else might have a less flattering interpretation of Orson's demeanor.

"It's called telepathy," Noel explained. "I get on a frequency that's his frequency. It's very much like having an FM receiver or a cell phone. I get on his frequency, and he gets on mine, and I can do it effortlessly now, because I've done it so much. And then, I communicate with him in real time. It's a bit like a CB radio. I'll say, 'Okay, Orson. How are you?' And then I get very receptive, and I don't think of anything else. I don't let any other thoughts crowd my mind. I stay on what I call the spiritual phone line, not the regular phone line. Because there's only one line, but if I start thinking about my laundry list, or the bus that went by, then I'll toggle right off into the regular thinking part of my brain, and I'd go offline with Orson. So I try to stay online, and then we go back and forth. And it's a very polite form of conversation, because I'm totally open, and I wait for his information, and I'm not thinking about my question as he's communicating with me, because that would be going offline. So, it's simple to do, but it takes a lot of practice, because we're so conditioned to have such a busy brain all the time."

I wondered if Noel could communicate like this with people, or rather, I asked Noel directly if she could communicate with people in this way. What I really wondered was whether she was communicating in this way with me, right then. Could she read into my personal thoughts? Was I exposed to her in some involuntary way? Could she tell that my opinions about her



were shifting from condescending amusement to I'll-be-damned respect?

"You can talk like that with another person," she answered, "but it has to be from the heart. You have to be completely trusting with that person, and it has to be completely from the heart and the third eye. But with people, most of the time, it ends up being completely mental. I can pick up things psychically from a person. But you have to have a certain politeness. I'm not going to be constantly policing for people's inner thoughts. I don't go prying. I just stay very private. For instance, if I'm walking around here, I'm not going to pick every brain that I see. You know, I ask first. And that keeps me from becoming completely overwhelmed."

So I was safe, or at least I thought I was safe. But instead of being careful around Noel, and throwing interference her way, I found myself mischievously trying to "tell" her silent things for the rest of the day.

We stood there in front of Orson's enclosure, and Noel reflected. "This has been an incredibly privileged one-on-one communication. And I took it down to the best of my ability, and as clearly as I could. On a personal level, and in my work, I try to be perfectly clear, to get all my human stuff out of the way, to honor my spirit and the animal's spirit, so that when we do communicate, it comes through very clearly. There's no human prejudice; there's no personal ideas about anything, because I'm always surprised. Sometimes I might see an animal who has the appearances of being one way, but then I work with him and find out there is a problem, but it's not the problem you might think it is."

As Noel talked, I looked at Orson (who by now had moved on from his knucklebone and was rubbing his cheek on a log), and I imagined him saying all these wonderful things. And it wasn't difficult. He really did look self-important, dramatic, proud, comfortable, and in control. My inherent skepticism

made me think that I was perhaps just a victim of suggestion, but I had to admit: it was a powerful suggestion. This new impression of Orson was even coloring how I'd looked at his pacing a few days before.

So what did Noel hear when she tuned Orson in? Was it human words? Cat sounds? How did she make sense of it?

"I get all the information from the animal," she said, "but not the words. It all just comes to me intuitively – it comes whole – and I have to put it into words. I have to translate it. It happens nonverbally and instantaneously. It's all about spontaneity and clarity. If I don't get a strong signal, then it's because I'm not in tune. But if I open up and receive, and clear information comes through, then I have no doubt how to make verbal sense of what the animal is communicating."

It occurred to me that what Noel was describing also applied to the way that I look at artwork, and listen to music, and read poetry, more or less. All these signals and cues come to me underneath the surface of the art, and after years of experience, I can pretty much recognize things about a particular work that might make some people say, "Huh? What are you talking about? What makes you think the artist was trying to do that?" And I can explain it, a little, but in the end it's just clear, spontaneous, intuitive information that transmits from the work of art to my brain.

Noel is an artist of the spirit, but she's also too scientific to let it go at that. She meticulously checks her work. After all, most of the animal communicating that she does is designed to serve a practical purpose. She tries to help animals and their people get along. And, according to her clients, she's good, very good in fact, at what she does.

"I always like to make sure that I'm not just working in the ethers," Noel said. "I always want to see a practical result from the work that I do. So when I do my work for my business,

I always call back and get proof and confirmation that what I'm doing is helping people and their pets."

Noel's business – All-Ears Animal Communication – has been doing well for over 10 years. She runs a workshop where she teaches the fine points of her craft. She's written a book on the subject (entitled LoveLink).

And after a couple of hours with Noel, I was beginning to give over my doubt. She was too smart and too pragmatic to be some new-age hippie. She's not even a vegetarian. ("That's not part of the natural cycle," she said. "I'm too spiritual to get caught up in that. And plus, I like eating meat too much.") In the end, I had to conclude that this lady might really be communicating with animals.

So now it was time to rewrite Rilke's beloved poem, to update it, and to re-particularize the imagery, based on my research and my time with animal experts of various stripes.

Orson, The Black Jaguar  
Often Inaccurately Identified as a Panther

His vision, through the generous mesh of his enclosure,  
has grown so energized that it can hold anything.

It seems to him there is one great theatrical stage;  
and upon that stage, it is his world.

As he paces in patient circles, wherever he may,  
the movement of his powerful soft strides  
is like a ritual dance around a center  
in which a noble will dwells fully thrilled.

When the curtain of the pupils lifts, quietly,  
an image enters in,  
rushes down through the supple,  
liberated muscles,  
plunges into his heart and is reborn.

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