

WILLIAM M JOHNSON



MAKING A KILLING



AN END OF THE WORLD BLACK COMEDY

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William M. Johnson



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ABOUT

MAKING A KILLING

When Dr Ernest Walters and his research team are murdered in the Aguarico Parrot Preserve, news of the deaths has massive repercussions on the Earth Summit, held in the troubled Caribbean paradise of San Pimente.

Here, the world's dignitaries and power-brokers are gathering to save the planet, which has been given just five years to live. With every nation out for itself, the delegates gleefully embrace *sustainable exploitation* — the fashionable euphemism for business as usual. While the ozone holes gape and the greenhouse hots up, the hunting and shooting continues. But the Aguarico murders expose rattling skeletons in VIP closets internationally, and they threaten to bring the Summit edifice crashing to its foundations. It is time for the animals themselves to confront the weakening human species and march on San Pimente...

A devastating satire, *Making a Killing* exposes myth after myth and peels away mask upon mask until the true face of corporate nature conservation is finally laid bare. The true face revealed, is not a pretty sight.

'[A] highly original, often unexpectedly witty but frightening tale of man's destruction of the Earth and his seeming indifference to the fate of all creatures but his own. William M Johnson courageously pulls no punches. No one is spared. There are no innocents, either here or abroad... This sharp, brilliantly observed book deserves a wide audience.' — Virginia McKenna



'A mind-blowing and witty exposé... A no-holds barred, no mercy account of the conservation mercenaries' (Have Bad News — Will Travel — First Class) successful efforts to get a rich living from a dying planet... A "must" for the guilty and the innocent so that lessons can be learned before it is too late.' — Ian MacPhail, a founder of World Wildlife Fund (WWF)



'[A] black comedy the deepest shade of noir. William Johnson has written a novel that invites comparison with Tom Sharpe or Ben Elton... rollicking along from demos to Earth Summits, throwing in popes and presidents and royals, introducing various speaking animals into the castlist and ending on a suitably apocalyptic note, illustrative of the Gaia hypothesis... A heady and entertaining mix...a brave attempt at the Great Green Novel.' — David Nicholson-Lord, BBC Wildlife Magazine



'A witty exposé of the double standards of nature conservation... This tale of man's destruction of the Earth is bound to cause controversy. But it will certainly make

you laugh too.' — The Geographical



'An author with an instinctive feel for his subject...prepared to carefully and quietly dissect the high-profile world of nature pseudo-conservation until all that remains is something devastatingly unnatural...' — The Comedy Review



'A wicked black comedy that pulls no punches...' — Sunday Mercury



'A controversial black comedy which highlights the darker side of conservation — the multinational corporations, vote-catching politicians and conservation organisations competing against each other instead of fighting for a common cause... A satire that will attract not only committed environmentalists but also fans of fast-paced murder mysteries...' — Environmental News & Information Service, The Conservation Foundation



'A Royal Family, the Roman Catholic church, conservation organisations, the United Nations — they all come in for brutal yet hilarious treatment in William Johnson's new book, Making a Killing... Johnson's acerbic, dark sense of humour cuts through the veils of smoke and secrecy that surround the environmental movement and its acolytes. Based on a wealth of experience the reader will sense that this book is far from a work of total fiction. The characters are too finely drawn, the situations too believable, the diagnosis too plausible, the danger too real. It's a scenario that could — perhaps will happen. And it's a warning to us all. I couldn't put it down.'
— Wildlife Times



'A devastating black comedy...' — Wildlife Guardian

Chapters

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- 3. Armageddon Mon Amour*
- 4. The March Hare*
- 5. Cat Among the Pigeons*
- 6. Wheel of Fortune*
- 7. High Noon*

1. Murder Most Foul

A pair of misty bifocals peered warily through the lush tropical foliage. They were quickly followed by the hooked, beak-like nose on which they were perched.

Dr Ernest Walters, chronically pale despite these Caribbean sun-drenched climes, was the sort of Englishman prone to prickly heat even in the depths of the cloud forest. Notwithstanding a baffling selection of liniments and creams, even so much as a stray sunbeam would invariably bring an ultraviolet rash to his spindly arms and legs. Kitted out in solar topee, khaki shirt and shorts, he struggled through the Aguarico Parrot Preserve, a compass clenched in one bony hand and a pair of binoculars swinging from a pallid, scrawny neck. His lank frame making him look vaguely absurd against the giant ferns and vines, he clambered awkwardly over fallen rotting trunks, his pink face streaked with sweat and perpetual anxiety.

Ever since his days at Eton, Walters had been cursed with an obsession for detail that to some bordered on the eccentric and to others, dementia. While sorting and re-sorting the contents of his desk or tuck box had been put down to admirable fastidiousness, out in the real world, which some people claim to have discovered, it merely made him appear absent-minded and even vacuous. Curiously, this dazed preoccupation also increased exponentially according to the direness of the circumstances in which he found himself. As a research scientist with impeccable credentials, he had been raised so effectively on the Grand Theory of Reductionism that his adult mind, dutifully putting away childish things, was now forever sorting and re-sorting complex facts and influences into neat, simplified categories. Parallel thought being only a gleam in evolution's eye, this computing exercise naturally took time so that even impulse and spontaneity had exceeded their precious ephemeral lifespans by the time processing had completed its course. Understandably, this did little to make the good doctor an ideal guest at dinner or cocktail parities where a faculty for shallow conversation and repartee was considered indispensable.

Walters removed the topee from his head, the wisps of remaining hair, once painstakingly combed into long neat strands to conceal his advancing baldness, now sticky and dishevelled. Up in the trees, a flock of iridescent parrots looked down on him in disdain and then went back to preening themselves. They were all too familiar with this strange ritual as the scientist and his two-man crew stalked through the forest on tiptoe trying to look inconspicuous, sometimes with assorted bits of foliage tied to their bodies and pith helmets.

'There they are!' Dr Walters exulted in a mewling whisper, crouching down in the undergrowth. 'I don't think they've spotted us!' The comment was greeted by

several mocking squawks from the canopy of leaves and branches above them. With claw-like hands, he wrestled frantically with his binoculars to bring the birds into focus. ‘Twelve pairs of rainbow macaws!’ he whispered, signalling Simon, at his shoulder, to jot down notes and observations.

Pepe, their guide, muttered disparagingly under his breath. ‘We have no time, boss!’ he growled. ‘We must keep moving!’ Pepe’s bloodshot eyes roamed nervously over the surrounding tangle of vegetation, his tracker’s finely tuned senses alert for any alien sound. Detecting nothing, he cleared his nose and throat with a slimy gurgle, spitting lavishly into the undergrowth. He knew it irritated the paleface parrot doctor, who was notoriously finicky about hygiene even in the depths of the jungle.

But Walters seemed to have entered another world, the terror that they had all experienced earlier that morning either displaced by forest fever, incipient madness or the ecstasy of discovery.

‘In the twenty odd years that I’ve been working here, surveying the rainbow macaw population and studying the feasibility of proposing a plan protecting the species from poachers, I have rarely seen such a magnificent sight!’ Dr Walters perched himself at the base of a tree, his wiry legs entwined around each other like strands of spaghetti.

Simon, his young research assistant, glanced at Pepe in fear and bewilderment. ‘Do you think they’re still after us?’ he whispered hoarsely. ‘Why doesn’t he get a move on?’ Pepe shrugged impatiently, scowling at the doctor.

The parrots gazed at them quizzically, a few of them hanging upside down with an insolent gleam in their eyes. It was unscientific, but Dr Walters felt distinctly uncomfortable. For a fleeting moment it occurred to him that they might even be mocking him.

Suddenly the day-dream caved in. Frenzied sounds of pursuit ruptured the forest’s tranquillity, seizing them all with dread — the jagged fragment of a shouted order, the hollow drumming of jackboots on the forest floor, the metallic echo of weapons being cocked. Taking command, Pepe slashed a path through the tangled vegetation with a machete, a panic-stricken and stumbling Dr Walters in tow, pushed and prodded from behind by a panting Simon, terror etched onto his young face. As they crashed through the undergrowth, Walters caught a fleeting glimpse of the parrots above. It was odd. In that magnified moment of their frantic escape, Walters had the distinct impression that the multicoloured birds were gazing down on him in judgement, cackling ‘20 years! 20 years!’

‘But it’s been so difficult to arrive at a firm scientific conclusion,’ he heard himself say in a refrain that seemed as repetitive as the birds’ chattering squawks. ‘More funds are required for scientific research in order to reach conclusive proof that the

species and habitat needs more stringent protection.'

The rare birds stared down at him with beady-eyed disdain. In the stampede through the undergrowth, as the ghastly premonition of death, torture or imprisonment came home to roost with a vengeance in his boiling, terror-stricken mind, it occurred to him that he was in fact reliving the fate of thousands of birds he had come out here to study and ostensibly save. Hunted down, trapped, so tightly crammed into crates and cages that their little chests could scarcely breathe, to be bartered and sold in a lucrative international marketplace. 'Sustainable exploitation!' they screeched at him as he was flung through the dense foliage. The birds were mimicking the buzzwords of international conservation, the phenomenal scientific discovery that now allowed humans to save endangered species by killing them.

Evidently his feathered friends didn't appreciate the finer points of conservation strategy. Perhaps, in their beady eyes, there was scarcely any distinction between the poachers who hunted them illegally and the nature managers who authorised scientifically formulated quotas so that former poachers could now hunt them with the full blessing of the law. It seemed inconceivable that parrots, normally renowned for their intelligence, could be so stupid.

'Sustainable exploitation!' they squawked, as the three men ran for their lives.

Yes, yes, he had seen the little feathered corpses laid out in neat rows for autopsy and disposal, but until now he had slotted any guilt into that sector of the human brain which is labelled 'Expedience'. There, the sacrifice of parrot individuals had been assigned to the greater good of the parrot species. Also, there were the interests of his employers to consider. The Dodo Foundation so desperately required success for this flagship project that he couldn't bear to let them down. In agonising spells of deliberation he had reasoned that he should break the news to them gently, and not shatter their illusions in one fell swoop. That, he had concluded loyally, would have been unforgivably heartless. But as usual, events had overtaken him. Anguish and remorse had plagued him as he composed his most recent weekly reports to headquarters, each conveying increasingly alarming news. He rarely received replies as such, but mostly what appeared to be pre-printed 'thank you' notes, assuring him that his letter/report/article* (*delete as appropriate) would be afforded due consideration as soon as the DDF International Projects Co-ordinator returned from vacation/ conference/ extended duty travel abroad*. It occurred to him that they might be deliberately ignoring the deteriorating situation in the hope that it would miraculously heal itself.

As if to underscore his misgivings, a congratulatory letter, bearing the heraldic seal of Badmoral Castle, had recently arrived at his base camp via the diplomatic pouch, conveying a gracious invitation to him to address the Earth Summit, by

all accounts the single most important environmental event in world history. On second reading, he was forced to conclude that the letter was more like a summons than an invitation. The imperious Royal missive — which in his hopeful naivety Walters imagined had been penned personally by HRH — even sketched out his speech for him. He was to lecture the distinguished multitude on the outstanding success of this innovative free-market approach to nature conservation. It was *suggested* that he strongly emphasise its central tenet of animals paying for their own conservation. This, the letter reminded him in no uncertain terms, was what the DDF and the esteemed Walters had accomplished with such consummate skill in the Aguarico Parrot Preserve: scientifically controlled legal quotas of parrots entered the marketplace, providing sufficient profits for the protection of their surviving comrades in the wild. The scheme was indeed ingenious.

There was only one slight drawback. Since the DDF had initiated its project the parrot population had plummeted from several thousand pairs to no more than thirty. The species was now on the brink of extinction. It was all very embarrassing.

Revenues generated by the scheme had quickly evaporated into bribes and expensive scientific equipment that now lay discarded, covered in mildew. These state-of-the-art computers had emitted their impressive bleeps and flashing lights for little more than a week before succumbing to the humidity, giving up the ghost of their virtual reality with a feeble whine and the parting words, ‘terminal error’. Gangs of armed poachers had been on the rampage for months, making nonsense of his formulation of quotas. Despite well-greased palms at the higher echelons of power, the police sat in their stations reading newspapers, drinking coffee, torturing peasants and raping Indian women, refusing to venture into the jungle which they described as ‘the barbaric lands’. It was evident from their contemptuous attitude and snide smiles that they had no concern whatsoever for the rainbow macaws, a phenomenon which never ceased to amaze him. After all, he whined, the parrots were their heritage!

In his weekly updates, which he now suspected no one ever bothered to read, he had dutifully reported the invasion of the Preserve by gold prospectors, logging crews and cattle ranchers. Bulldozers equipped with gigantic chains and flame-throwers were slashing and burning their way through the rainforest. Venturing deeper into the Preserve, hordes of grizzled prospectors were bringing disease and destruction to the most isolated Indian villages, a feat only matched by the Tribes of the Lord Mission who were intent upon converting the savages to Christianity. Firing off an urgent memo to headquarters and again receiving no reply, he wondered whether the DDF could possibly suspect him of incipient radicalism or fraternising with those fanatical elements who were campaigning for a total ban of human activities in the forest. This dreadful thought caused him to agonise over

a most vexing scientific dilemma: could slash and burn be considered compatible with sustainable development? It was hardly idle speculation, given the fact that he was soon expected to address the prestigious Earth Summiters with a gushing tribute to the project's phenomenal success. All too soon, the world's dignitaries and glitterati would be swooping down on San Pimente, this island state in the Caribbean that for some reason inexplicable to Walters had been awarded the accolade of host nation. The implications were truly mind-boggling.

Death squads also stalked the land and their activities could hardly be considered sustainable unless one took into account the chronic problem of human overpopulation. In response to guerrilla activities, recent months had seen an intensification of military manoeuvres, albeit in the island's most remote regions, far from the prying eyes of the international press corps. Villages and people in canoes had been fired on from planes and helicopter gunships, and commandeered crop-dusters had even sprayed parts of the forest with defoliant. There was no doubt about it, as he had noted in his recent report, while this ground-breaking operation in sustainable exploitation was indeed a success, the patient was now, unfortunately, in imminent danger of death.

And as fate would have it, so was Walters and his two-man crew. They had already experienced several terrifying encounters with the ruffians in plain blue uniforms who stomped through the forest, armed to the teeth. In the most recent incident, the leader of the squad had summarily ordered them to leave the country within 24 hours or face unspecified retribution. His men, who looked and behaved more like bandits than soldiers, had underscored the message by wrecking their camp and brandishing their assault rifles at them. Obviously there was some minor misunderstanding. Displaying his calm faith in justice, Walters had then presented his official credentials. This had been greeted by derisive guffaws, unspeakable oaths and insults. Incredibly, the snarling and evidently deranged leader of the squad had actually spat on the documents even though they had been signed personally by the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Although he possessed no firm scientific proof, he was forced to suspect that these renegade troops might be in cahoots with the loggers, prospectors and cattle ranchers. The sudden appearance of several grizzled men carrying chain saws, and the roar of advancing bulldozers, seemed to provide some circumstantial evidence in this regard. His subsequent urgent pleas for assistance had again elicited no response from headquarters. Now, in desperation, fleeing through the immensity of the rainforest, he wondered whether his employers had abandoned him. With the squad in hot pursuit, there was little doubt about it. They were caught between the Devil and the deep blue sea.

Pepe, stern, reticent, continued to slash his way through the undergrowth

and they stumbled along behind him in a daze. Walters had no idea where this dishevelled, uncouth man was leading them. Truly, it would be easier to question one of the parrots, he muttered, though dutifully appended this by noting that inter-species communication was strictly forbidden lest it pollute scientific data.

Suddenly, the abbey of Mount Christobel appeared out of the swirling tropical mists, as though crafted out of nothing more substantial than legend. The breeze sent stray beams of sunlight and cloud shadows streaming through the valley. It rested, as though levitating between earth and heaven, on the peak of a rounded hill whose sensuous curves reminded Dr Walters with a sudden pang of guilt of a woman's breast. Nearby, a waterfall took flight from a pinnacle of sheer rock, cascading into the valley below. A rickety rope bridge led across the chasm, with treacherous, churning rapids far below.

When their destination finally dawned upon him, Walters had assumed that the abbey would welcome them with open arms, gladly offering them sanctuary, food and shelter. But the nuns were thrown into panic by their arrival. Heated exchanges broke out between Pepe and the Abbess whose histrionics seemed so bizarre, so incongruous with the sanctity of her office and the ethereal spirituality of this remote refuge, that it even crossed his mind that she might be an impostor. Until he noticed her face, creased with an intimate knowledge of terror he'd never witnessed before. Trembling, he took out his notepad and composed what passed for his last will and testament. Since he possessed no living relative, his closest next of kin, he concluded, must be his employers, the DDF. For once, he would write with courage, conviction, openness. He could, he reminded himself, always destroy the letter if they escaped with their lives.

'During the course of my research,' he began, 'it has often occurred to me that these animals, like humans, experience pain, emotion, even rudimentary thought. Yet I have, up until now, always resisted the temptation to ascribe any importance to this unproven phenomenon, fearing as every serious scientist must, the slippery slope towards anthropomorphism — the unforgivable transgression of endowing animals with human traits. Yet now, when all seems lost, I dare to say it: the barbaric trade in these parrots must stop!' Glistening with sweat, he reread his pronouncement and felt as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. 'There, I've done it! Publish and be damned!' he muttered to himself, adjusting his lopsided spectacles. But looking round with his vague watery grey eyes, it seemed unlikely that this courageous outspokenness would have any profound impact on the destiny of the rainforest, let alone the ailing species in question. Scribbling another paragraph, he went on to denounce the harassment they had suffered at the hands of the security forces, and the DDF's sad, inexplicable neglect.

'Abandoned to our fate,' he concluded, his mind miraculously emerging from a

lifetime in the fog, 'these last words may well prove to be not only our own epitaph but that of the Aguarico rainforest as well. Despite the imaginative embellishments of our public relations managers, this entire operation has proved a terrible fiasco. The patient has suffered the frightful injuries of human predation, only to be brought to death's door by the inexcusable bumbling of the surgeons themselves... We must now prepare to meet our Maker and our conscience. One day soon, I feel sure, you will have to do the same.'

It is improbable that Dr Ernest Walters could have imagined the incredible repercussions his words would have.

Behind a flowering hibiscus tree in the courtyard, he spied the face of a young boy. The child, who appeared to be half-Indian, studied him in innocent curiosity with large almond-shaped eyes. Across the gorge, the squad was approaching rapidly along the precipice pathway. Walters counted over thirty men with bandoleers slung over their shoulders, armed with assault rifles, machine-guns and machetes. He tore off the sheet of paper from his notepad and, approaching the boy, pressed it into his hands. Before he could utter a word of explanation, the boy had shinned up the vines to the dovecote, grabbed hold of a carrier pigeon and tied his note to the bird's leg. He watched as the child cast the pigeon into the air, the brown and white speckled bird soaring skywards. For one precious moment, Walters' heart did likewise.

Plummeting back to earth, he turned his gaze to the rope bridge, which now heaved and groaned under the weight of the advancing soldiers. He experienced a sudden surge of pity for his companions. Pepe, his face ashen, all the swaggering bravado knocked out of him. Young Simon, who seemed to be on the verge of hysteria. The sisters, scurrying around in panic. Even the Abbess who stood at the gateway with open arms, a petrified smile disfiguring her bland homespun features. He registered with vague, almost disembodied surprise that the boy had clambered over the Abbey's fortified retaining wall and was now dangling on a flimsy rope over the precipice, beckoning to him. He staggered over. But it was too late, and the rope too weak. His last hopes had been dashed. The boy ducked under the parapet as the squad charged in, butting the Abbess to the ground. The sacred tranquillity of Mount Christobel was suddenly shattered by screams and gunfire.



End of this sample of Making a Killing

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