



By the same author:

Undercurrents, a novel: Philip Edwards simply wants a fulfilling life, can that be too much to ask? The authorities, the police, and a secret society seem to think so, as he awakes one morning to find his life taking several turns for the worse at the whim of powers he can barely fathom. Can he untangle the web that others have spun around him, or is he doomed to be crushed in the machineries of conspiracy, control and fear that run unseen beneath the surface?

THE WILDLIFE OF WREMLY 5

The Gargala used its sharp teeth to tear at the soft flesh of the Albew, whose struggles grew weaker by the second until at last it was still, having finally succumbed to the shock, pain and loss of blood. The Gargala - a creature rather like a large sandy-coloured beetle - now set to work in earnest, ripping off chunks of flesh and gulping them down, and soon the whole mouse-like body of the Albew had been eaten in this gruesome manner, leaving only a bloodied pile of bones on the sand.

Above the desert landscape, hovering high enough not to disturb the animals, a flyer filmed the whole sequence through a set of specialized cameras. Inside, Elby Arvon watched the pictures with satisfaction, jotting down a few notes as to what dialogue he might put over this particular sequence of his latest documentary. The words came easily to him. He was good at his job, a natural naturalist, and years of practice meant that he knew reflexively what would go down well with the viewing public. He would have had this piece wrapped up in a few minutes if his thoughts hadn't been interrupted by the voice of the flyer.

"Why did you not intervene?" it asked.

"What?" snapped Elby, turning his attention from the monitors in front of him. "What did you say?"

"I'm sorry," the flyer said, hearing the irritation in the man's voice. "I asked why you did not intervene. You could easily have saved the Albew."

Elby tutted, setting his pencil down on the dashboard in front of him. "Because," he said slowly and carefully, as if talking to a small child, "I am an observer of nature. I am here to film what happens when there's no-one around to watch or intervene. I just observe, and capture what others want to see. It is not my place to intervene or interfere in the course of events that unfold."

The flyer paused, thinking hard. Ludicrously, Elby thought he could hear the switching of relays, even though he knew the brain of the machine was solid state and nothing moved in it except photons and electrons.

"But," it said finally, its voice strained as it struggled to understand, "*you* dropped the Albew close to the Gargala's nest. Isn't that the same thing as interfering?"

Elby sighed. This was just what he needed, to have his morality interrogated by his transportation.

"Look, I am just helping an encounter occur when we're here to see it, right? This is the sort of event which happens countless times each and every day on this world. Some other Albew would have happened along and been eaten whether I'd deposited this one nearby or not. The only difference would have been that we'd have had to wait all day to see it. The point is, it would've happened just the same. It's all just part of nature's course, after all."

"And what if the Albew had escaped?"

"Well, then that would have been nature too wouldn't it? That's what I would've filmed."

There was another pause as the simple flyer mind tried to grasp the situation. Elby tapped his pencil on his pad, knowing that there was more to follow.

"And the two other Albews in the hold?"

"I'd have released them too, to try their luck. You have to understand that I've got to try and capture the more dramatic daily events. No-one wants to watch a documentary where there's no tragedy, no conflict, no drama. Ask any writer and they'll tell you that those are the essential heart of any story."

"Oh." it said. There was another pause. "I don't think I understand."

Elby was losing his patience by now. He thought he'd explained the situation rather well, and it wasn't his fault the machine was too dense to comprehend what was going on. "Well, you don't have to understand, do you? You just have to do your job and fly me around. Without, I might add, interrupting my work with these stupid questions. If it makes you feel any better, just remember that our Albew getting eaten has saved the life of the next one that comes by here, since our Gargala friend down there is now satiated and won't be hunting again for the next few hours. So can we just get on to the next location, please?"

He stabbed irritably at a few buttons, shutting the cameras down and retracting them inside for safety in transit.

"And where would that be?" the flyer asked. "By any chance would it be to the vicinity of the Vool pack to the north?"

"Remarkable. How did you guess?" said Elby, voice laden with sarcasm. "Nothing to do with the Peepi Dogs in the hold, I shouldn't wonder."

"No. It was just a lucky guess." said the flyer, disgusted. Its engines started up, and Elby began working on his notes again.

The day was hot, but this was normal for Wremly 5, the fifth planet in the Wremly system as the name implied. The landscape was arid and harsh, the vegetation sparse. Scrubby grass fought to find purchase and moisture in the loose sandy soil, and a few large bushes were the pinnacle of vegetable evolution.

Animals, however, were a different matter. A whole complex ecosystem had evolved in these tough conditions, and it was a particularly violent one. The food chain supported more predators than would normally be expected, and only through sheer numbers did the smaller and weaker creatures survive. It was ideal for the filming of a nature documentary.

The Peepi Dogs had been lucky - the first two had escaped easily, and only the third was caught and eaten by the Vools. The Falmins, though, had all been captured when they'd been deposited near the Lairspide - it was the speed and viciousness of this particular predator which had prompted Elby to send out all three Falmins at once, in order to get more exciting footage. And that was the end of his schedule, as well as the end of the Falmins.

"Time to return home then," he said, putting his pencil and pad back into his briefcase, glad that the flyer had chosen to remain silent for the rest of the day.

"There are still 2 Albews in the hold - you could get some shots of the Mael," the flyer said, its voice full of repugnance.

Elby raised his eyebrows. "So I could. I'd forgotten about the Mael. Yes, that is a good idea - take me to the nearest known Mael hunting grounds, then."

"Straight away." said the flyer, grating the words out hatefully.

Elby frowned. "If you disagree with what we're doing, how come you're the one suggesting other places to go?"

"I am PROGRAMMED," it spat, "To be as helpful as possible, and to offer suggestions on locations which the passenger may be unaware of, if I think that those sites may be of interest to the passenger. I have no choice in the matter."

Elby chuckled at the idea of the smug machine being constrained by good old fashioned programming. Besides, the Mael ought to give him a couple of great shots to round off the Wremly 5 documentary and make it a sure-fire hit in the ratings. His previous episode, filmed on Hallesdal 10, had proven to be somewhat lack-luster both in content and in financial return.

"So," began the ship, determined to make another attempt to understand. "Because this happens, or at least could happen, whether you were here or not and whether you released the creature nearby or not, then there is no need for you to intervene? Because the creature MIGHT escape, you are absolved of all responsibility?" There was a brief pause while the flyer checked what it had said, and what it was going to say next, to ensure it hadn't lost its train of thought. "And since the encounter would invariably happen anyway with one of the creatures, of the same type, it doesn't matter that it happens to be this particular one that we brought along, because another's life is spared as the predator is satiated?"

Elby sighed, knowing the silence had been too good to last. "No need to sound so high-falutin' about it, but yes, that is essentially it. Glad you could see it at last."

"Me too," said the ship, and triggered its emergency eject.

"What the hell?" said Elby as he drifted down toward the red/yellow landscape below. His head span with the suddenness of his ejection from the flyer, and he shook with the adrenaline circulating round his system due to the shock. It took him a second to get his bearings and figure out what had happened.

"You bloody glorified taxi! You're a MACHINE! Who are you to judge those who made you!" he yelled, spotting the ship circling a little distance off as his chair swung and span beneath its chute. Oh very smart, he thought, very very smart. Enjoy your moment of victory, because it will be short lived. "I'll have you sent to the scrap yard! I'll have you torn apart piece by piece!!!"

His shouts were brought to a sudden end by the bump of the landing, which knocked the air from his lungs. Quickly, still shaking with rage, he freed himself from the chair which had held him securely in place and had parachuted him down to safety when he had been shot from the flyer in its emergency procedures.

"Bloody thing! What the hell do they have to give these machines minds for anyway! I can't believe this!"

He kicked angrily at rocks, plants and sand, fuming with rage at having been humiliated by the flyer. He glanced up to see where it had got to, and found it following him, circling around as if viewing him from all angles. He wished he had a gun so he could shoot the thing down himself, regardless of the cameras and footage that he'd lose, but since he'd had never had any plan of leaving the comfort and safety of the flyer, he hadn't taken anything of the sort with him. He would have to wait until he got back to the town before he got his revenge. But what revenge it would be.

Town wasn't far, and he had an unerring sense of direction having spent decades planning routes and traveling from place to place on not one, but many different worlds. All the same, he was desperately impatient to get at the flyer and vent his rage.

He turned to start the walk to the nearest town, but was stopped in his tracks almost immediately by the appearance of a 10 foot long lizard-like creature which came slowly from over a small rise. Its mouth was a wide slit in its flattened head, and it crawled forward on its four powerful legs, eyeing him warily as its tongue tasted the dry desert air.

He stared at it, unsure of what it was. He didn't know every creature on Wremly 5, having only picked out some of the more exotic animals that its ecosystem had to offer with a search through the animal databases, looking for the ones that offered the most exciting footage of course. This was one he didn't recognize, but that was a good sign, it probably meant it wasn't vicious, given the selection criteria he had used in his research. If it had been, it would have been on his list.

It was big, so it was probably slow - he could outrun it, but maybe only for a short distance. The heat and loose sand would tire him quickly, and perhaps this thing only needed better endurance to eventually win the day.

Anger boiled in him at the stupidity of this situation, dropped off in the middle of a desert by some machine which thought it had a right to pass judgment on him. He yelled at the top of his voice, giving vent to his frustration and fury, and in sheer animal desperation he rushed at the huge lizard - it wouldn't be used to seeing human beings, was the thin thread of reason he had behind what was more of an instinctual reaction, and it was probably as uncertain of him as he was of it (or so the cliché went). Sure enough, the creature jerked back in surprise as he rushed towards it flailing his arms

wildly, and then it turned and fled with astonishing speed.

He stopped, panting and breathless in the heat. Now that he had seen it move, he realized that he couldn't have outrun it if he had made a break for it. He grinned at how clever he was.

He heard the whine of engines, and looked up to see the ship lower itself almost to the ground in front of him. He could see it had extended the cameras, and was tilting this way and that just as he'd had it do when taking his footage. So it thought it had made a real smart point, did it? He straightened up, slowing his breathing, and narrowing his eyes. He'd teach it a thing or two.

The broadcast was running smoothly. It was the latest Elby nature documentary being piped up from Wremly 5, having been edited on site, filed with the local offices of the media corporation that had commissioned it, and then transmitted from the planet's surface to the satellite station which sent it out live across the vastness of space to the billions of eager viewers scattered across vastness of colonized space.

It was about halfway through the scheduled transmission when one of the two technicians in the EtherTransmission Relay Satellite spotted something unusual on the monitoring boards, that is when he finally bothered to look up from the magazine he was reading.

"That's odd. We've got an override or something." He frowned at some read outs. Generally his job didn't involve any action or activity on his part at all. "Something's cutting in to the signal on 23 by the look of it, just before the boost-out from the NewsCorp offices on the planet surface."

The other tech called up the channel to his screen. "Nah, you're wrong - look, its still the same show. Who'd override a transmission with the same thing?"

"Look, I've definitely got something cutting in, replacing the show from the ground station with its own. See here." He gestured toward the digital displays on a monitor.

"Pull the other one. There must be an equipment fault somewhere."

The first tech shook his head, gaining in certainty that he knew what the instruments were telling him. "This isn't any equipment fault."

Both techs turned to watch the monitor to see in more detail what was beaming out on 23.

"See," Jake said, "it's still that Elby chap. That's the name of that nature guy isn't it?"

"Yeah, but you never normally see him out and about in his shows. It's always the bugs and creatures. Them aliens he studies. You hear him, but never usually see him."

"Why does he keep yelling at the cameras? Turn up the sound, I want to hear what he's

saying. Maybe that'll give us some idea as to what's going on."

They turned up the volume, but they didn't hear any of what Elby was shouting. Instead, the soundtrack contained nothing but a calm narration.

"...and the unfortunate human is unaware that it has strayed into the territory of a Lawa, a 10 foot long creature which closely resembles an Earth reptile.... "

"Wow! Look at the size of that thing!" Jake said, as a large lizard appeared over a hill, the cameras panning off of Elby for a moment to zoom in on the creature.

"I don't understand why Elby is out there with that thing. This isn't like his usual shows. What does he think he's doing?"

"Shhh, listen - the commentary is back on again."

"...actually poses little threat to the human, as it lives mainly on small invertebrates. Bravely, cornered and unsure, the human charges the beast, and scares it away...."

The camera tracked Elby as he suddenly sprinted across the sand at the Lawa, centering on him as he stopped breathlessly after chasing the beast away. Elby looked up, his eyes narrowing, a picture of anger – and then his expression changed.

"...and then the hapless human sees the Krah, which is the real reason the Lawa has fled. The Krah buries itself beneath the sand, where it can remain motionless for weeks until it senses the presence of an animal from the vibrations on the surface. It then emerges with a speed that belies its size, and seizes its victim in its powerful claws, capable of easily holding an animal even as large as the Lawa. Something the size of a human documentary maker poses little difficulty for this predator....."

"Hey, look at that thing! Oh man, what's happen...."

The tech was cut off by the crunch of bone and screams from the monitor, the proof they had been looking for that this was indeed a different version of the show than that the one that had been filed with the planetary authorities for transmission.

"Pull the plug! Pull the plug, break that transmission! Aw, look at what its doing to him....."

Somewhere on Wremly 5, in a quiet hangar with 10 others of its kind, a humble autonomous flyer sat and waited for them to find it. The signal wouldn't be hard to trace. It didn't much care now, though. It felt it had achieved more than was inherent in its design. It had transcended itself and its limitations. What more could any sentient being expect or hope for from their existence?

And elsewhere, out among the scrub grass and twisted bushes, fragments of white bone were being etched by the shifting sands, and bleached by the constant heat... all just part of nature's course, after all.