

Interview with Joana Santamans illustrator of *Vida*

«Animals can teach us how to live.»

Por Pilar Maurell



How would you define *VIDA*?

I look at it as a kind of poetic, artistic animal encyclopaedia.

Your life and work has always been full of animals, hasn't it?

Animals have always been my source of inspiration. I love drawing and painting them, and once I get started I always feel the urge to do a complete collection. My first love was birds, so I imagined having a bird collection, and that was where I got the idea for *VIDA* from. I also wanted every drawing to have some kind of romantic but interesting text with it which would relate animal observations to questions on the human condition. I also selected my animals on the basis of visual criteria; I wanted the book to have that kind of romantic air like a summer palace, or a mixture of prints. We tend to rack our brains for artistic solutions, but then you can find them in a butterfly or a beetle, or by studying how fractals repeat their geometry in nature – they're amazing.



It can't have been easy to put together.

I had to limit the number of animals in the book, so I looked for specialist scientists for each species, told them about my project and met up with them. Then I made lists of twenty or thirty animals from each group: birds, butterflies, insects and fish, ones that lived in the Mediterranean and were beautiful and commonly seen.

This type of book is popular in the English-speaking world.

Yes, and I think we miss out on that here. I really wanted to make it and had a great time, too. It looks good, and as well as that, I think it's a really interesting choice for libraries, schools and families.

We don't know much about nature.

I miss it. I grew up in the countryside and am sensitive towards nature, so I feel bad that city life makes you lose contact with the culture everyone in the rural world has. I thought it would be good to gather it together in this book, and it was a fascinating project for me. I think you lose out on important things if you don't know about the living things that are all around us; and if you don't understand that, and shut yourself off from it in your rational lifestyle, you can lose sight of reality.

How do you work?

I almost always work from photographs. I use lots of them and take something from each one. I draw the contour in pencil, then use watercolour on top of that, and scan them into the computer to finish off.

Were any of the animals particularly difficult to draw?

The dragonflies. They're really transparent but have a lot of detail in them. Every animal needs its own technique: point for

insects, and working really close up, almost like meditation; birds need looseness and transparency.

There are passages of text to go with each animal. Who wrote them, and how?

I wanted to write them myself, but it would have taken me far too long to write the book, so I decided to ask my dad, because I got my love of nature from him. He's a keen reader, too, and loves animal documentaries – a born scientist. He used his own knowledge and what he learnt from the interviews with biologists that I gave him, and then wrote his own reflection from all of it. He completely understood what I wanted – we are father and daughter, after all! My dad's way of thinking is more poetical than a biologist's, though.

It's charming.

We get on really well. He taught me to see things like this. I always wanted to be a painter or a biologist, and daydreamed about drawing plants and animals – and here I am.

What do you find so fascinating about nature?

I like to focus my artwork on it because it's a kind of mirror of the human condition, a way to see and understand ourselves. I'd like the book to get this across subtly. Animals can teach us how to live.

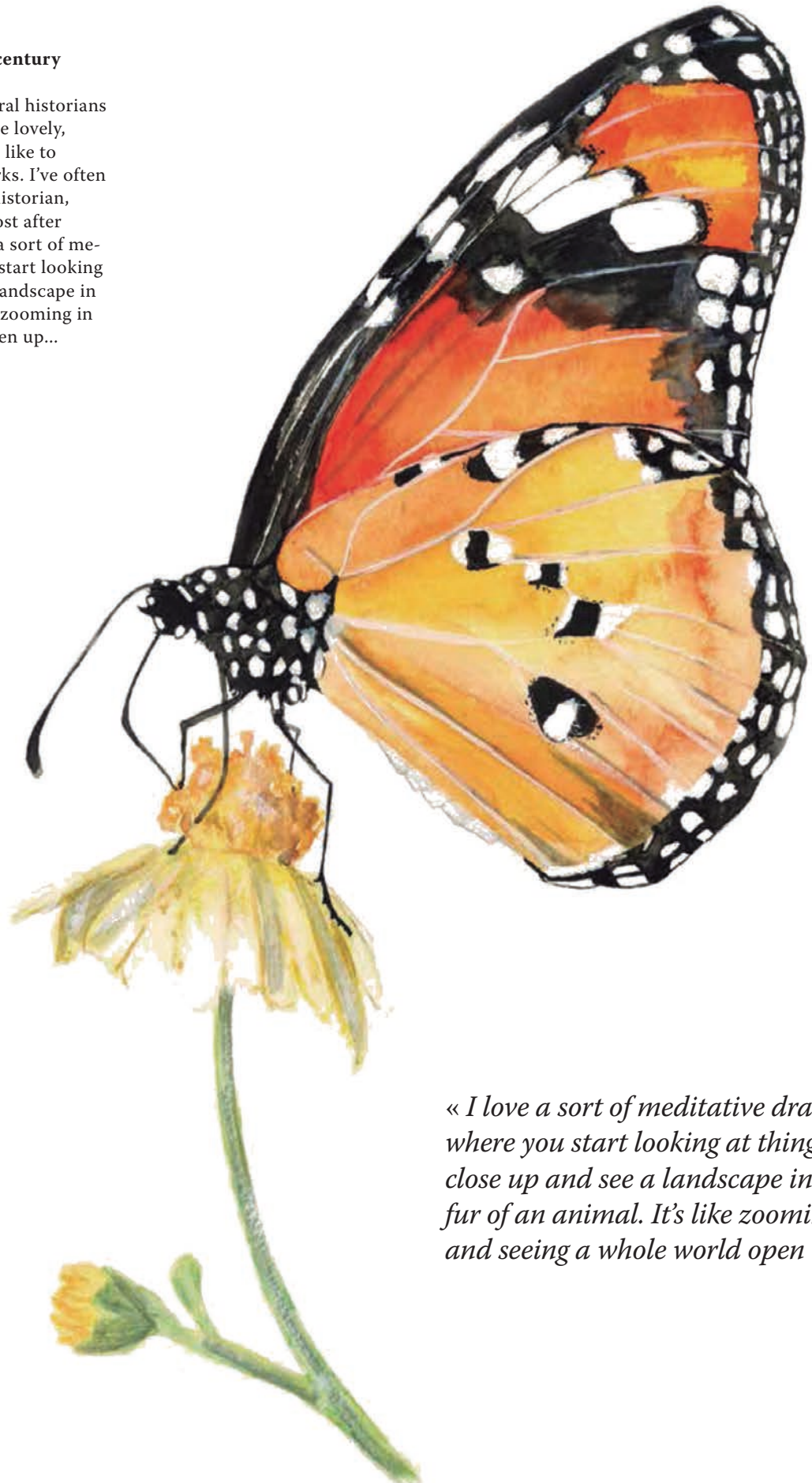
There's a feeling of peace when you read the book.

That's probably because it makes you feel connected to things we're all disconnected from. City life is so effervescent; there's always lots going on, but we lose our calm, and forget the real rhythms and reasons for things. We need to teach our children to

stop, look around, learn and get bored, watching ants, for instance – to learn to search for beauty in everything. I'd like the book to be a gateway, like a taste of nature for the city dweller, a way into the beauty of the animal world.

It's a lot like a nineteenth-century natural history book.

Yes – some of the great natural historians were good painters and wrote lovely, beautifully crafted books. I'd like to revive the spirit of those works. I've often been told I'm like a natural historian, because what I like doing most after drawing is observing. I love a sort of meditative drawing, where you start looking at things close up and see a landscape in the fur of an animal. It's like zooming in and seeing a whole world open up...



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