

Synopsis: *Katie's Zoo* by Mark Whitaker

Ten-year-old Katie leads a normal life in a seaside town until the day she finds a crocodile behind the settee. The crocodile introduces himself as George and asks if he can stay. Despite his fearsome appearance he is very polite and seems well meaning. A chaotic evening unfolds as Katie succeeds in keeping George hidden from her Mum, Dad and little brother Matthew, and George manages to take refuge under Katie's bed before she has a chance to object.

Katie learns that she was recommended to George by Twitty, a starling she once nursed to health after an accident. The more she gets to know George, who lives happily on a diet of biscuits, the more harmless he appears. But when she hears about a local cat going missing under mysterious circumstances, she can't shake the suspicion that George might have been involved. Katie sets out to investigate, but her progress is hindered by the arrival of Claudette, a beautiful but very self-important bird of paradise. Claudette is also seeking shelter (although from what, neither she nor George will say) and makes no secret of her distrust of George. Katie finds it increasingly difficult to do her detective work whilst keeping both animals hidden.

Katie's investigations lead her to Mrs Leatherbottom, eccentric owner of the missing cat, an encounter which only succeeds in planting more doubts in her mind about George. Just as she discovers that the cat is only the latest in a *series* of missing animals, a third visitor arrives at home: Fingers, a coarse and rather menacing porcupine. Katie begins to feel the strain of keeping so many secrets from her parents, who have noticed her strange behaviour. She is also confused by her mixed feelings: she has grown very fond of George, by far the nicest of her three guests. That night, Claudette reveals to her why they are there: they are hiding from the 'pet snatcher', and thanks to Twitty, Katie has become known as a safe haven for animals in need.

Pretending to research a school project, Katie visits the local vet, Mr Kilbride. Here she learns of private 'collectors' who take care of exotic animals. Katie sees a glimmer of hope, although the reader might wonder if the collectors are all they seem to her. Heading home, she plans to come clean to Mr Kilbride the next day and arrange for the animals to be re-housed. Back in her bedroom she finds another new arrival: a timid salamander called Stacey. Katie tells them all that she will have exciting news for them the next day, but stops herself from saying more.

In school the next day, Katie comes across a book containing terrifying information on crocodiles' eating habits. Fearing that she might have put the other animals' lives at risk by acting too late, she runs home, only to find the animals gone. Only Stacey remains, having slept through everything in Katie's bedside drawer.

Katie is distraught, but that night is visited by Twitty who reveals that the animals have been captured by the pet snatcher. He leads Katie and Stacey to a remote smuggler's hut on the coast, where the animals have been imprisoned. But their joyful reunion is cut short by the arrival of the pet snatcher – none other than Mr Kilbride. In a thrilling climax, the animals find that only by working together can they defeat the dastardly vet, and when Katie's Mum and Dad arrive at the hut the animals' future is finally decided.