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Invitations to the World of Reptiles: *Reptiles USA*'s Rhetorical Strategies

It would be logical to assume that magazines cater to specific audiences. A twenty year old female college student in Manhattan probably wouldn't enjoy the latest issue of *Field and Stream*, while a retired farmer in Iowa would likely have little use for a magazine like *People*. However, this could be challenged if one keeps in mind the ultimate objective of any magazine's publishers; this, of course, is to sell the magazine and increase profits. Therefore, most magazines contain numerous subtle invitations to the discourse community that they function within. These invitations speak directly to unfamiliar readers, giving them a peek inside the obscured world of the magazine that they may or may not want to enter. To be effective, such invitations must be calming, reassuring, and educational to those who are outside the discourse community when their reading adventure begins. Above all, the invitations must be artistic. They must paint pictures in the readers' minds. They must allow the readers to imagine themselves as part of the community that they are peering into, and they must make the reader feel that joining that particular discourse community is possible. *Reptiles USA* magazine invites its readers into its discourse community through a presentation of reptiles that are easy for beginners to own, biblical intertextuality, the first person, the creation of a sense of responsibility, and the promise of a rewarding human connection to the animal world.

Supposed ease is an important component of *Reptiles USA*'s strategy. Ironically, this is done through an almost immediate presentation of a challenge. An article near the front of the magazine begins with, "Deciding on a first-time reptile or amphibian pet can be a challenge given the number of species available..." (Merker and Merker 8). However, the difficulties of choosing a scale-covered friend are only explained for a paragraph before a solution is offered. The authors explain, "We have chosen the species outlined here based on availability, ease of care and qualities that make the species interesting, such as

coloration, pattern, natural history or behavior in the captive environment” (8). Because these components are commonly used when choosing a pet, they are also easy for beginners to understand and capable of assuring new readers of the magazine that they can join this group if they use the magazine as a guide. Ease serves as the principle component of this invitation to the discourse community. The writers have done a large portion of the work for their readers—they have taken the time to determine which of the thousands of reptile and amphibian species will be best for someone who has never undertaken the task of their ownership before. They have made an offer, based upon personal opinion and (one would assume) a sufficient amount of research. *We are trying to help you*, the authors imply. *We have given you a way into our circle.*

It is in the title of the same article that a unique example of intertextuality is found. The article is entitled “In the Beginning,” and the subtitle is “Let there be enlightenment. Discover which beginner herps are right for you” (8). “In the beginning” are the first three words of the Bible, and “Let there be enlightenment” is a direct imitation of the common phrase “Let there be light,” uttered by God when He decided to bring light to the world in the Book of Genesis. At first glance, this appears to have nothing to do with purchasing reptiles. But this is a deliberate attempt to create an aura of innocence around the reptilian community. Snakes are a widely feared animal, and many believe this has a great deal to do with the story of the snake in the Book of Genesis. Because Satan was said to have shape shifted into a snake to tempt Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, snakes have traditionally been associated with the human tendency to sin. Therefore, snakes have come to be synonymous with temptation, disobedience, immorality, and deception. It would not be a stretch to say that this reputation has spread to other reptiles, because they share many of the same physical characteristics. As a result, reptiles have had a difficult task in overcoming these ancient stigmas. *Reptiles USA* attempts to help readers to do just that, however, as is evidenced by the use of the word “enlightenment.” The magazine is telling its readers to enlighten themselves about reptiles, to see them for what they truly are instead of what tradition says they should be. It is dissecting an age old image and assuring readers that any fears they have about reptiles being evil or of supernatural significance are false. As such, this invitation to the reptilian discourse community is

one of familiarity and reassurance. It is familiar because of its allusion to a text that many are familiar with: the Bible. Additionally, it is reassuring readers, with the subtitle alone, that these animals are safe and appropriate to bring into a home. The familiarity and reassurance will likely have a calming effect on any readers who would like to join this community, making them feel more like a member of it.

The emotional use of the first person is also an important component of *Reptiles USA*'s invitation to its community. First person makes the reader feel as if he or she is being spoken to directly, which increases the connection he or she feels to the text. In particular, Leo Spinner's article "A King Among Snakes" uses first person to the extent of a miniature memoir, taking readers on a personal journey that outlines what it is like to be inside this community in a way that outsiders can easily relate to. Spinner begins, "Having first learned about kingsnakes as a child growing up on Cape Cod in Massachusetts, and while reading Skip Lazell's brilliant book, *This Broken Archipelago*, it became my dream to find New England's native kingsnake....It wasn't until many years later when I was a teenager in the '80s that my dream was realized and I actually found my first *Lampropeltis triangulum triangulum*..." (70). This is loaded with pathos, a sweet narration of the American dream wrapped around a reptile. The description brings to mind images of magical childhoods by the seashore, with the pages of a book turning to the rhythm of the gulls' wings. It may cause readers to subconsciously reflect on their own childhoods, enabling them to identify more with this community by thinking, "*What do you know? These reptile people had childhoods that weren't so different from mine.*" By sharing a piece of his past with us, Spinner is also building ethos because he is declaring that he is not a neophyte to the reptilian community—he has been involved with it since his childhood in one of America's favorite vacation spots. This is reinforced by Spinner's description of the much anticipated moment when the snake was finally found. He states, "...it was lying in the middle of the road at night between a lake and the forest during the heat of summer. A powerful snake, I recall the way it encompassed with great might every area of contact it established with my hands" (70). This addition transforms Spinner's dream into a success story. Readers now know that not only has he been involved in this community for a long time, but he has been a successful part of it. This makes readers more likely to trust any claims that Spinner makes later

on. Therefore, Spinner is inviting new people into this community based on common past experiences and trust, which is rooted in the achievements of his personal story.

Yet another invitation the forum uses toward prospective community members is one that builds a sense of responsibility. For example, Andrew Hermes states, “The more plants [tortoises have] in the enclosure, the more food and shade options they have to feel safe” (45). There is a significant amount of *pathos* at work here, as it is easy to imagine a lost, starving tortoise inching its way around a tank and searching for shelter in vain when reading these words. *Logos* is also used in this statement, as it is stating a fact about tortoise care that anyone outside the community this magazine is designed for would not know. The *pathos* and *logos* combine to form an invitation to the community that makes readers feel responsible for their prospective new pet, because readers now understand the tortoise’s need and have been given the knowledge necessary to fulfill it.

Perhaps most importantly, the magazine invites readers to become insiders to the reptilian community by appealing to the readers’ needs for companionship with animals. Humans have sought this connection for a large portion of human history. The magazine uses this to its advantage by making a promise of companionship. It states, “With proper care and handling, [an Argentine black and white tegu] could become your best friend for many years” (Larocca 103). This offers the chance for connection to the animal world in exchange for sufficient effort. This also combines *pathos* and *logos* to make an appeal. It logically will not be possible for the tegu to remain in its owner’s life for a long period of time if it is not well cared for, and the idea of this friendship with an animal will appeal to many people. Therefore, *Reptiles USA* has invited new members into its community through identifying with a common need to connect with animals through pet ownership.

To conclude, these invitations combine to create a welcoming image of the community of reptile and amphibian fans. The magazine implies that any reader of *Reptiles USA* could become a member of this community. It does not directly state that anyone could join its community, but it does allow readers to see themselves as part of it through the common ground it creates with them. Readers are given a simple way into the community near the beginning of the magazine with the list of animals suggested for

beginners, and their fears are lessened as the traditional stigmas against snakes and other reptiles are challenged. First person is used to strengthen the connection and forge emotional ties between the author and his readers, and the sense of responsible ownership and promise of a connection to a pet reptile allow readers to imagine how it would feel to be responsible for another living thing, even if it is not as cute as a kitten or as colorful as a cockatiel. Overall, these methods allow readers to look inside the reptilian community and picture themselves as the most experienced, compassionate, and functional owners that the world of pet owners have to offer.

Works Cited

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