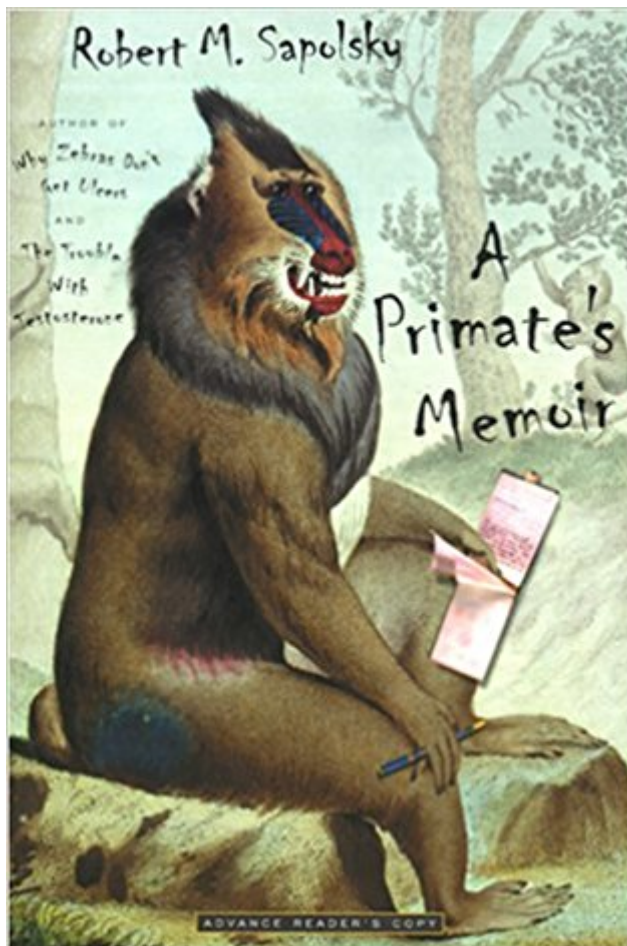


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A Primate's Memoir



Synopsis

"I had never planned to become a savanna baboon when I grew up; instead, I had always assumed I would become a mountain gorilla," writes Robert Sapolsky in this witty and riveting chronicle of a scientist's coming-of-age in remote Africa. Raised in an intellectual, immigrant family in Brooklyn, Sapolsky wished he could live in the primate diorama in the Museum of Natural History. He wrote fan letters to primatologists, started reading their textbooks at age fourteen, and even learned Swahili in high school, all with the hopes of one day joining his primate brethren in Africa. Finally, upon graduating from college, Sapolsky's dream comes true when, at age twenty-one, he leaves the comforts of the United States for the very first time to join a baboon troop in Kenya as a "young transfer male." Book smart and naive, Sapolsky sets out to study the relationship between stress and disease. But he soon learns that life in the African bush bears little resemblance to the tranquillity of a museum diorama. He is alone in the middle of the Serengeti with no radio, no television, no electricity, no running water, and no telephone. His nearest neighbors are the Masai, a warlike tribespeople whose marriages are polygamous, with wedding parties featuring tureens of cow's blood. The victim of countless scams and his own idealistic illusions, Sapolsky nevertheless survives culinary atrocities, gunpoint encounters, and a surreal kidnapping, while witnessing the encroachment of the tourist mentality on the farthest vestiges of unspoiled Africa. As he conducts unprecedented physiological research on wild primates, he becomes evermore enamored with his subjects -- unique and compelling characters in their own right -- and he returns to them summer after summer, until tragedy finally prevents him. Here is Robert Sapolsky's exhilarating account of his life in the bush with neighbors both human and primate, by turns hilarious and poignant. The culmination of more than two decades of experience and research, "A Primate's Memoir" is a magnum opus from one of our foremost scientist-writers.

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Customer Reviews

Robert Sapolsky, the author of *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* and other popular books on animal and human behavior, decided early in life to become a primatologist, volunteering at the American Museum of Natural History and badgering his high school principal to let him study Swahili to prepare for travel in Africa. When he set out to conduct fieldwork as a young graduate student, though, Sapolsky found that life among a Kenyan baboon troop was markedly different from his earlier bookish studies. Among other things, he confesses, he had to become a master of shooting anesthetic darts into his subjects with a blowgun to take blood samples, a mastery that required him to become "a leering slinky silent quicksilver baboon terror." He also had to learn how to negotiate the complexities of baboon politics, endure the difficulties of life in the bush, and subsist on cans of mackerel and beans. His memoir is, in the main, quite humorous, although Sapolsky flings a few darts along the way at the late activist Dian Fossey--who, he hints, may have indirectly caused the deaths of her beloved mountain gorillas by her unstable, irrational dealings with local people--and at local bureaucrats whose interests did not often coincide with those of Sapolsky's wild charges. It is also full of good information on primates and primatology, a subject whose practitioners, it seems, are constantly fighting to save species and ecosystems. "Every primatologist I know is losing that battle," he writes. "They make me think of someone whose unlikely job would be to collect snowflakes, to rush into a warm room and observe the unique pattern under a microscope before it melts and is never seen again." --Gregory McNamee

Few would relish a job requiring proficiency with a blowgun as well as a willingness to put up with parching heat, low pay and copious amounts of baboon shit. But for Sapolsky (*The Trouble with Testosterone*), a Stanford professor and MacArthur grant recipient, it was literally a dream come true. As a boy in New York City, he'd wanted to live in one of the African dioramas at the Museum of Natural History. One week after graduating from Harvard in the mid-1970s, he got his chance: he went to Kenya to study social behavior in baboons. Hilariously unprepared for the challenges of living in the bush, the naive grad student learned to deal with supply and transportation snafus, army ants and giant cockroaches, safari tourists, dinners of canned spaghetti coated with a mixture of sugar and rancid camel's milk, and surreal government bureaucracies. He developed great

fondness for "his" baboons, whose behavior seemed uncannily like that of a bunch of quarrelsome human adolescents, and discovered that their interactions didn't necessarily conform to accepted theories. While Sapolsky's primate observations are always fascinating, his thoughts on Africa and Africans are even more compelling. As funny and irreverent as a good ol' boy regaling his friends with vacation-from-hell stories, Sapolsky can also be disarmingly emotional as in his clear-headed tribute to late gorilla researcher Dian Fossey, and his final chapters, which reveal his rage and impotence as he watched his baboons succumb to a horrific plague. Filled with cynicism and awe, passion and humor, this memoir is both an absorbing account of a young man's growing maturity and a tribute to the continent that, despite its troubles and extremes, held him in its thrall. Agent, Katinka Matson. (Mar. 1) Forecast: Heralded by Oliver Sacks and Edward O. Wilson, and with a well-placed excerpt of this book in Discover magazine, Sapolsky will venture out on a seven-city author tour that should help bring him to the attention of readers interested in animals, Africa, ecology and travel. Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

One of my MOST favorite books. Sapolsky writes very personal reactions and observations about the baboons he is studying, adds wonderfully dry wit and acknowledges his own shortcomings and eccentricities while teaching you a wealth of information about these animals. He also injects interesting commentaries about some of the local tribes he interacts with in Kenya. I bought and read this book years ago and loaned it to a friend, who never returned it. I so enjoyed the book the first time that I recently bought it again. Enjoyed it even more the second time, now my husband is thoroughly enjoying it, too. It is definitely a five star book!

A fascinating glimpse into the daily routine of a primatologist doing his thing. The backstory of professor Sapolsky's early cravings to be an observer of primates is realized and in the telling we learn humanity and baboon share common ground in many dimensions.

This was an excellent book about Baboons, Humans, Maasai tribesmen. Parts of the books make you laugh others make you weep. Robert Sapolsky has the knack taking you into Africa while you are sitting comfortably in your air conditioned home. Strongly recommend a second read

This is a well written book about a twenty or so year period that the author spent studying a baboon troop in Africa. About 50% of the book is devoted to the author's study of baboons and the other 50% is devoted to African culture, politics and geography. It is heartfelt, well written, and is a great

nonfiction read by someone from the west who has thoroughly visited and experienced Africa. If you like nature writing, personal adventure, and a collection of interesting stories and anecdotes, you will like this book.

Before purchasing this book, I had read Robert Sapolsky's introduction to a series of articles in a special addition of Scientific American. In that article I thought he wrote well, and had some interesting insights; so I thought I would enjoy one of his books, which I thought would be mainly about his science. It turned out that this book really had very little science in it, but was mostly about his adventures in Africa as a graduate student working on his thesis. I was not disappointed by his writing, and I really appreciated his humor. I realize that humor is often a matter of taste, but clearly his appealed to me, because I often found myself chuckling audibly. I usually don't have the luxury of reading a book in a few days, but after getting started on his adventures, I carved out the time to finish it in a short time period. If I had been looking for a book without science, I would have given it five stars, but I would have liked a little more insight into his accomplishments which led him to be chosen as a MacArthur Fellow.

This book is incredible. It is so cleverly written. I found myself constantly laughing throughout while also learning about baboons and Sapolsky's research and life. 100%. Would read again, would recommend to a friend, etc etc.

I started to read this book because the idea of a study of primate social interaction was interesting. The author only occasionally got to the science, and mostly told great stories of field research in Africa.

Very interesting stories of Sapolsky's multiple stays in Africa to observe the relationships and growth and maturation of baboons within their troops. His reflection on his own growth as a human primate and maturation into a research scientist was very interesting and quite deep. His story-telling capabilities are outstanding. I laughed out loud many, many times. Highly recommend!

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