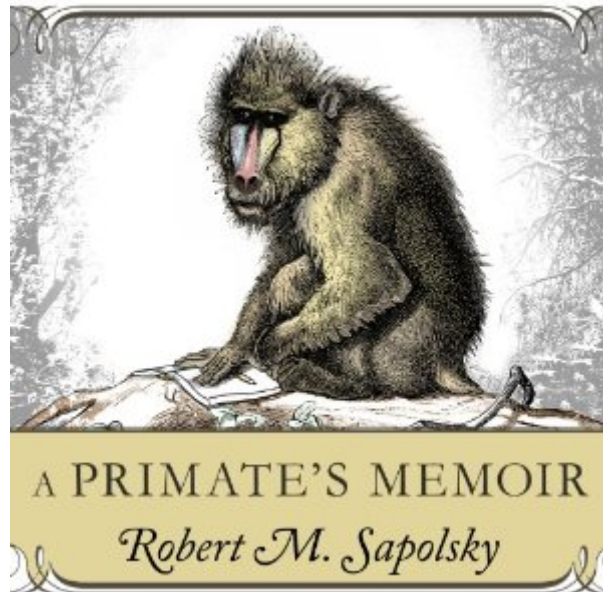


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A Primate's Memoir: A Neuroscientist's Unconventional Life Among The Baboons



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. An exhilarating account of Sapolsky's twenty-one-year study of a troop of rambunctious baboons in Kenya, *A Primate's Memoir* interweaves serious scientific observations with wry commentary about the challenges and pleasures of living in the wilds of the Serengeti-for man and beast alike. Over two decades, Sapolsky 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 ever more enamored of his subjects - unique and compelling characters in their own right - and he returns to them summer after summer, until tragedy finally prevents him. By turns hilarious and poignant, *A Primate's Memoir* is a magnum opus from one of our foremost science writers.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 14 hours and 35 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Tantor Audio

Audible.com Release Date: December 10, 2013

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00H5A0FFS

Best Sellers Rank: #24 in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Animals > Apes & Monkeys #104 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > Nature #107 in Books > Travel > Africa > General

Customer Reviews

Anyone who begins a book by telling us that he "had never planned to become a savanna baboon when [he] grew up" deserves a read. Such an opening promises witticisms and wisdom and *A PRIMATE'S MEMOIR* doesn't disappoint. The story is captivating whether Mr Sapolsky is telling us about his experiences in Kenya or about the interesting life of...his extended family? The book is only part scientific study: the effect that stress has on primate social behavior; it is also a travelogue,

a little bit of cultural anthropology, a comment on globalization and economic inequality, a memoir of course, and finally, a pure joy to read. Although it is now widely known that stress affects health, Mr Sapolsky's work has shown that this differs among individuals. He has also exploded the myth of the supremacy of the alpha male in primate groups. Among the baboons he shows complex social arrangements where important leadership functions are carried out by senior females; and what else but a complex social order would show - as his troop did - that lower ranking males suffer higher stress levels and greater ill health? After twenty years of on and off study Mr Sapolsky has naturally grown fond of the baboons. He gives them Old Testament names not from affection, but simply because they exhibit individual personalities. The King of the troop is naturally Solomon and Nebuchanezzar is a vengeful, attacking female. The book is never sappy and does not romanticize the beasts and that is good - because wild animals they certainly are. A troop is an appropriate name for a group of baboons. Perhaps squad could work also because when approaching an unknown there is an element of military purposefulness and discipline about their behavior.

As much fun to read as any book by Redmond O'Hanlon or Gerald Durrell, *A Primate's Memoir* is funny, irreverent, and full of adventure, while also being a serious scientific study of the savanna baboons of Kenya. Sapolsky's goal is to determine the relationship of baboon stress levels to their overall health over a period of years. A neuroscientist, he observes the social hierarchy and interactions of his baboon group, guesses which individuals appear to be most stressed or most relaxed and then checks their hormones and blood chemistry, not an easy procedure, given his clever and not always co-operative population. Sapolsky, who works alone, must first outwit the baboon, use a blowgun to dart him, follow and wait for him to become unconscious, and then carry him half a mile or more to his portable lab facilities, where he then draws blood and does measurements. The baboons, of course, react to stress the way humans do. The title of *A Primate's Memoir* is deliberately ambiguous--it is both Sapolsky's memoir and that of his baboon population, and his experiences and interactions with the outside world are remarkably similar to theirs. Leaving the relative safety of the game reserves and hitchhiking into dangerous territories during his "down time," Sapolsky describes his travels with enthusiasm, impeccable timing, and great, self-deprecating humor, subtly selecting details which show how similarly he and his baboon population deal with their worlds' uncertainties.

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