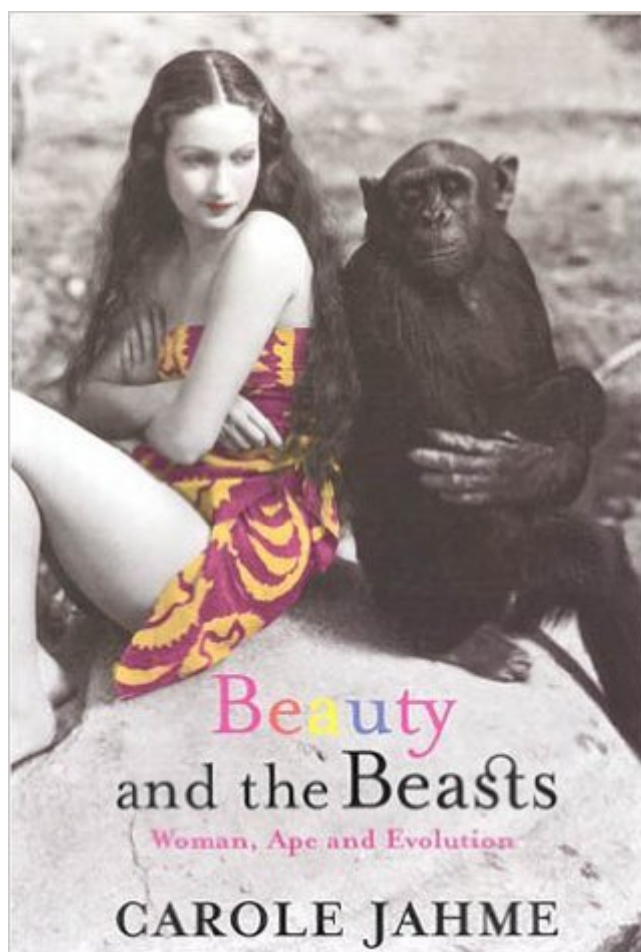


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Beauty And The Beasts: Woman, Ape, And Evolution



Synopsis

Animal magnetism . . . or a disturbance in the field? What is it with female primatologists and their chimpanzees, orangutans, and gorillas? The sheer number of women in this field is startling, as are the dangers they risk pursuing their beloved subjects. Fiercely dedicated and devoted, they go to remarkable lengths to conduct their studies and to protect their great apes from poachers, revolutions, and human contamination. It is an impressive array of scientists: Jane Goodall, of course, and Dian Fossey (who was actually killed in the field), and less celebrated women, like Mary Leakey, Shirley McGreal, Birutė Galdikas, and others, who also braved everything from civil war to enraged simians with fangs bared. Their intriguing stories are a monument to forty years of dauntless scientific endeavor. But their ineffable longing for the company of their primordial cousins, their intense identification with these primates, is an intriguing theme that runs through their professional lives at a depth that can only be described at times as intimate and mysterious.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The great apes share more than 98 percent of our DNA and in the last 40 years women have come to dominate the study of our closest relatives. Today 62 percent of primatologists are women. British primatologist Jahme's anecdotal overview of primate research focuses on the women who have shaped the field since Jane Goodall ("The Chimpanzees of Gombe," "Reason for Hope") established her chimp site at Gombe in 1958. Though women have made most of the startling discoveries about wild primate behavior, it was a man, Louis Leakey, who got it all started. Believing

that the study of apes would enhance our knowledge of human evolution and convinced that women were more patient and observant than men, and therefore more suited to fieldwork, Leakey encouraged Jane Goodall's interest in wildlife and steered her to chimps. Inspired by Goodall's work, Leakey's other two "trimates", Dian Fossey ("Gorillas in the Mist") and Birutė Galdikas ("Reflections of Eden") achieved similarly impressive results studying gorillas and orangutans. Jahme strikes a good balance between the work and the women, relating the dangers and controversies along with the triumphs. Jane Goodall left Gombe for two years after she was nearly abducted by terrorists in 1975 (four other workers were taken and later ransomed) and she has been criticized for influencing chimp behavior by using feeding stations (a practice she also now condemns). Dian Fossey was only in the Congo a few months when she was kidnapped and repeatedly raped by soldiers in 1967. She was the last white person to escape the Eastern Congo and all she wanted to do was get back to her gorillas, which she did, establishing a base on the Rwandan side of the mountain.

I liked this book. It offers an informative and broad overview of the achievements in primatology during the late 20th century, particularly those of women. As a layperson, I appreciate very much that "Beauty and the Beasts" is intellectually stimulating, but not overwhelming. The subject matter is riveting: Women who sacrifice their lives to the study of primates. They risk being mauled by the subjects of their observations, eaten by lions, gored by bulls, kidnapped, raped--by both terrorists and orang-utans--and murdered. They often sacrifice their familial relationships, the opportunities of husbands and children and social interaction with other human beings. Carole Jahme takes on an enormous amount of material in her well organized and easily accessible book. I disagree with some of her politics, particularly regarding motherhood and infanticide. We are given case after case citing the importance of young primates fully bonding with their mothers, yet Jahme repeatedly excuses the many female primatologists she profiles for all but abandoning their young children. She also argues that infanticide is biological and defends British law which generally punishes the crime with probation and psychiatric care. I cannot excuse a mother murdering her baby, particularly in developed Western countries where women have options. Despite our biological urges, we have moral obligations to rise above nature. But these represent mere paragraphs in a highly enjoyable book. The editing, however, is no less than criminal as it unavoidably undermines Jahme's scholarly credibility. There are numerous grammatical errors and confusing sentences. Most unfortunate are the several dozen typos.

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