

## Following Fifi: My Adventures among Wild Chimpanzees: Lessons from Our Closest Relatives

By John Crocker

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## Among Chimpanzees: Field Notes from the Race to Save Our Endangered Relatives

By Nancy J Merrick

Boston: Beacon Press, 254 pp.

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In the early 1970s, under the leadership of Prof. David Hamburg, Stanford University had a programme that sent to Tanzania small batches of undergraduates majoring in human biology. At Gombe they spent months acting as research assistants in ongoing studies of chimpanzees and baboons. On the chimpanzee front, most students focussed on the mother–infant study, collecting detailed data on the daily lives of female apes with dependent offspring. Two of these students, Nancy Merrick and John Crocker, went on to become physicians, and now, decades later, each has written a memoir, and Jane Goodall has supplied a foreword to each book. Their books are enlightening (for after all, how often do such young persons get such a golden opportunity?), but the results are very different. (Necessary disclosure: I was at Gombe at the same period in 1972–73 as these two authors, so my first-hand knowledge may be similarly impressionistic to theirs.)

Crocker's is the more focussed of the two, going into depth, in a three-part structure. Part One is a detailed recollection of his experience, from arrival at Gombe onwards, for eight months in the field. It covers the first 104 pages, and Chapter 3 is a graphic account of a typical day in the life of a student researcher doing focal-subject follows of chimpanzee mothers and offspring. He captures the nuances of the experience, as well as the data collection. In the process, he formed a close friendship with one of the Tanzanian field assistants, Hamisi Matama, to the unusual extent that they later ending up going up Mt. Kilimanjaro together. Part Two describes how Crocker, as a family physician in Seattle, makes use of 'lessons learned' about parental nurturing, as acquired from time spent with Fifi, one of Gombe's most famous and influential individual chimpanzees. He shows how the simple basics of intimate interaction as practiced by our nearest

living relations can be applied to the day-to-day practice of family medicine. This is a modest application of such knowledge, by comparison with more prominent and newsworthy aspects of modelling the evolutionary origins of human behaviour, such as aggression, technology, social structure, diet, etc., but insights abound. Part Three of the book is Crocker's return to Tanzania and Gombe, 36 years later, in 2009, accompanied by his eldest son. Their journey combines curiosity about what has happened in the meantime to Gombe and the chimpanzees, introducing his son to the African bush, but most importantly, reunion with Hamisi, and introduction to his family, after decades apart. This is done most movingly and contributes to the overall feel-good tone of the book.

The book is illustrated with 37 good colour plates from past and present and has a useful 9-page index. However, it gives no scientific references, even to Jane Goodall's basic work, so that readers who want such background information must look elsewhere (see below).

Merrick's is a much more wide-ranging effort, although the two authors have much in common. She too gives a personal, detailed account of her student time at Gombe in 1972, taking part in the same study of mother-infant pairs as did Crocker. Her account of her first day in the field shows her to be an articulate story-teller. This opportunity for comparison of that research project in action is unusual, for example, in terms of allowing a sort of inter-observer reliability. She too later takes her family to Africa, for many of the same reasons, and her response to 'progress' (that is, the development of tourism) at Gombe provides a useful and confirmatory judgement. But Merrick goes on to make several trips and not just to see chimpanzees; an abortive trip to Karisoke to meet with Dian Fossey must have been frustrating. Her accounts of smuggling a young chimpanzee out of Gombe and of the

Gombe kidnapping by rebels from Zaire make compelling reading.

The book then opens up in a variety of ways that end of being an overall ‘state of the union’ assessment of *Pan troglodytes*. Wild chimpanzees, especially those in fragmented forest segments, such as at Bulindi, Uganda, get coverage that otherwise is scarce, by comparison with populations in well-known national parks. Refuges for confiscated or orphaned chimpanzees, both in Africa and in the West, get coverage, as do zoological gardens, especially Los Angeles Zoo (although its Mahale exhibit, which has no connection to the wild chimpanzees of western Tanzania, is not explained). All the major conserva-

tion problems facing wild chimpanzees are aired, such as the bush meat trade, and Merrick provides a useful list of 10 things that an individual person can do to help in ameliorating them.

The book has a useful 10-page index and nine pages of chapter-by-chapter endnotes, in the form of references. Disappointingly, it has no photographs, and the single illustration, a map, is problematic, failing to name Burkina Faso and denying chimpanzees to Niger.

In summary, both books have much to offer as first-person accounts by committed and insightful observers taking a long-term view. Anyone wondering what it was like to be a student in Gombe’s heyday of the 1970s will learn more here than from any other source.

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