Jane Goodall: The Woman Who Redefined Man

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A Graceful Naturalist

Jane Goodall: The Woman Who Redefined Man. Dale Peterson. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 2006. 752 pp., illus. $35.00 (ISBN 9780395854051 cloth).

Dale Peterson's monumental biography of Jane Goodall, *Jane Goodall: The Woman Who Redefined Man,* is a warm, utterly sympathetic, reverent portrait of a remarkable woman. The author clearly knows his subject well, having had access over the course of a decade to the large corpus of written communications between Goodall (actually, as I first learned in this book, Valerie Jane Morris-Goodall) and her family and friends; to her personal diaries and field log books; and to interviews with her family, friends, and professional colleagues. Peterson previously edited two volumes of Goodall's letters, so he was well prepared for the task of writing her biography. The 685 pages of text are liberally sprinkled with quotes, so much so that it often seems the book is written in Goodall's own voice. Peterson presents her life in impressive detail, from the early 1930s, when her parents courted and wed, to 2004.

How did a young woman who prepared for a career as a secretary come to set the scientific world on its head? How did she then turn from a stellar career in field biology to make advocacy for conservation and peace her life's passion? How did she become a global icon of what is good and right about humanity? Peterson's writing makes clear that Goodall didn't start life with global honor written on her forehead. She started out as a young girl with a strong imagination, a lively curiosity, a soft spot for all living things, and, fortunately for her biographer, an unusual devotion to writing. The first section of the book chronicles her travels through girlhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, always surrounded by numerous mundane and exotic animal pets. It seems nearly a miracle that she succeeded in her life's dream of living and working in Africa, and then an even unlikelier miracle that she managed to study wild chimpanzees. She arrives at Gombe on page 179; by then, the reader is thoroughly familiar with the young woman who bravely tackles the challenge of studying wild chimpanzees, accompanied by her equally brave mother, in the forest along the eastern shores of Lake Tanganyika. Peterson's presentation of Goodall's momentous successes at watching chimpanzees, together with descriptions of camp life during these first stays at Gombe, will most likely constitute the highlight of the book for those most interested in the romance of biological fieldwork.

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Some of Goodall's most exciting discoveries came early in her work at Gombe. In the fall of 1960, she saw wild chimpanzees collecting long stems of grass and using them to fish for termites, the first of many now well-known examples of preparation and use of tools in wild chimpanzees. Until that moment, scientists and philosophers had viewed the use of tools as a distinguishing characteristic of humans. One week earlier, she had first observed chimpanzees eating meat, another supposed distinction between humans and other primates. If wild chimpanzees ate meat and used tools, the chasm between humans and all other nonhuman species of animals had effectively been bridged. Goodall's excited message to Louis Leakey relaying these discoveries brought his famous reply, "Now we must redefine tool, redefine Man, or accept chimpanzees as humans" (Goodall 1998).

But none of these tasks was Goodall's ambition. Defining chimpanzees was her ambition. Her approach was that of a naturalist, as she had practiced it informally since childhood: Watch; learn from what the animals show you. She never wavered from her conviction that this was the best way to understand the subjects of her study. But continuing to study the chimpanzees required more than these discoveries, as important as they were. It required that she become a scientist.

The second section of the book opens in 1962 with Goodall's forays into the world of scientific conferences and the travails of sculpting her observational data into a document that her doctoral advisor at Cambridge University, Robert Hinde, would consider acceptable for a dissertation. She had the good fortune to have found the perfect academic mentor for this effort, as Hinde shared her deep conviction that understanding chimpanzees required understanding their social way of life within families and communities. The section closes 320 pages later, having covered the publication of two significant books presenting the results of research at Gombe, two marriages, the birth and rearing of a son, and countless trips across the Atlantic to communicate findings and to lobby for funding for the research program at Gombe. In the haze of the complicated and busy way of life portrayed here, with endless professional and personal commitments, the romance of fieldwork at Gombe portrayed in the first part of the book retreats into memory.

Peterson's portrayals of people, themes, and events in the larger world of behavioral biology are largely accurate, although necessarily rather cursory. He makes a good-faith effort to situate Goodall's work at Gombe in the scientific climate of the times, and to identify the key figures who influenced her thinking and actions. Foremost among these is Louis Leakey, the legendary paleoanthropologist who first sponsored Goodall's work at Gombe. Peterson sensitively presents the complicated rela-

tionship between mentor and mentee over many years. More generally, the reader is introduced to the state of comparative psychology, physical anthropology, and ethology, with thumbnail descriptions of key authors and concepts in these various fields, all necessary background to enable the layperson to grasp the importance of Goodall's work. Reading about the people who passed through the Gombe Research Station as visitors or students is like reading a Who's Who in primatology and ethology today. For someone in this field, as I am, it is a fun read.

Some sections are not fun, however, and Peterson presents the tragedies in as much detail as the triumphs and joys. Of particular historical interest is the event that essentially finished the affiliation between Goodall and the Gombe Research Center and Stanford University, begun with high hopes on both sides in 1971. On the night of 19 May 1975, 40 militants loyal to Laurent Kabila came to Gombe by boat from the far side of Lake Tanganyika. They attacked the research camp and kidnapped four students. The students were eventually released unharmed by the end of July 1975, but the distress this event caused to all involved spelled the end of Goodall's formal affiliation with Stanford soon after.

Peterson's portrayal of the way science is funded deserves mention, because Goodall's continuing struggle for financial support for the work at Gombe is an important theme of the book. Peterson gives a particular account of this side of science, reflecting Goodall's unusual status as a research scientist unconnected to any university or government agency. She was essentially self-employed, sustaining her research program in the beginning with grants from the National Geographic Society and other societies, and later with speaking tours and donations from wealthy individuals. She seems to have remained outside the public funding system of science for her entire scientific career, with the brief exception of the affiliation with Stanford University in the early 1970s, which was supported in part by the National Institutes of Health. From Peterson's account, the reader may erroneously conclude that the National Geographic Society was the primary agency supporting biological field research throughout the second half of the 20th century. The reader may also conclude that decisions about funding research are made solely on the basis of the "newsworthiness" of the work. While this view may have some validity with regard to the National Geographic Society, a private organization, it is an unfortunate misrepresentation of public support for science in the United States.

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In the last section of the book, Peterson gives a moving account of Goodall's transformation since 1986 from a practicing scientist, completely bound up in running and funding her research program, to an activist bringing the world a personal view of the wonder of the chimpanzees and sounding the alarm that they will slide into the abyss of extinction if we do nothing to change our current ways. In the past 20 years, she has spoken to thousands of people in venues all over the world, explaining the chimpanzee's closeness to humans and asking for help to reverse their slide toward extinction; supported a sea change in how captive chimpanzees are treated; founded a global conservation movement; opened refuges for orphaned apes in several countries in Africa; and worked tirelessly on behalf of the apes, forests, and people in the Gombe region of Tanzania. In this way, she has become a global figure admired for her courage, persistence, diplomacy, and personal force of character. I got dizzy trying to keep track of how many plane trips her phenomenal speaking schedule requires. Peterson writes that, when asked where she lives, Goodall now points skyward and says simply, "Up there." Peterson presents this phase of Goodall's life as the logical culmination of her ethical engagement in her work.

Her desperate message about the plight of the chimpanzees, and more generally the planet, is counterbalanced by a broader vision of how the world ought to be, that is, how humans can act in ways congruent with our responsibilities to life on Earth. She leads here by example, showing with creativity and personal warmth how this is possible now, in our world. So the book ends, with Goodall gently suggesting a way forward to a better future—one lecture, one children's Roots and Shoots club, one zoo at a time.

Goodall's life is an inspirational story for young people everywhere. I am a beneficiary of this inspiration. I was a schoolgirl when I read her first reports about the chimpanzees of Gombe in *National Geographic* in the 1960s. When I went to college, what I knew about nonhuman primates I knew from those articles. I was already hooked. Forty years on, college students (especially young women) tell me that they have been inspired by Goodall's work to entertain the idea that they, too, might study primates in nature, or might work to improve the lives of primates in captivity. Fortunately, and thanks in no small way to her, they are right. Dale Peterson's biography will ensure that people continue to have access to that inspiration.

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