Book Reviews by Section Member, Michelle A. Rodrigues

Walking with Gorillas: The Journey of an African Wildlife Vet

by Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka. Arcade, 2023.

This book is a mix of personal and career memoir, detailing Kalema-Zikusoka's path to becoming a wildlife veterinarian and founding a successful conservation organization, Conservation Through Public Health (CTPH).

Kalema-Zikusoka comes from a prominent political family in Uganda, and the book begins with the history of the political assassination of her grandfather and grandfather, and her subsequent childhood education in multiple countries. It covers her veterinary training abroad, and her return to Uganda as she forged a path as a wildlife veterinarian. It chronicles her further education and embrace of the One Health approach, where wildlife and human health are addressed together, and how that led to founding CTPH. She ends with how CTPH weathered the COVID-19 pandemic, and the importance of women's leadership in conservation.

What I liked best about this book was the way that Kalema-Zikusoka describes negotiating changing dynamics of gender, race, and class in several different contexts. For example, in Uganda, at the conclusion of leading a stressful wildlife translocation, she hears one of her European colleagues making comments about how Africans couldn't do anything without white people leading them. This is one of just several examples across her experiences in a few different national contexts.

The best part of the book were the chapters on building CTPH, and negotiating the challenges of seeking funding when the African conservation model was based on white conservationists raising money from European and American donors. There were also difficulties in finding donors to fund both animal-related conservation and public health.

Overall, this really important book demonstrates the connections between human and wildlife health, and I really enjoyed Gladys' descriptions of gorilla fieldwork! My only critique is her repetition of some of the Trimate mythology, including the story that Dian Fossey first in conducting a long-term study of mountain gorillas which erases a few earlier researchers.

Apes on the Edge: Chimpanzee Life on the West African Savanna

by Jill Pruetz. University of Chicago Press, 2025.

One of the things I appreciated about this book, relative to other fieldwork memoirs, is that it does a good job of foregrounding the importance of the local human community to the project's success. It's clear from the beginning how essential the local community, and especially Mbouly Camara and Dondo Kante, were to every aspect of the project. I also appreciate that Pruetz addresses the issue that, although the human aspects of primatology research are crucial,

they can also be a challenge, particularly for introverts who might prefer watching animals to politicking with people and struggle with learning new languages.

The book covers all of the highlights of the research that have emerged from the Fongoli Savanna Chimp Project, such as adaptations to the hot savanna environment, coping with fires and other hazards, and tool-assisted hunting. My favorite parts of the book were those in which Pruetz just briefly mentions critiques that tool-assisted hunting should be called "gathering" or "extractive foraging", and, her decision to intervene to help the infant chimp, Toto even if it went against scientific norms that prioritize non-interference, along with her surprise at learning that other scientists were skeptical about chimpanzee empathy.

I really wish she'd explored these points in greater detail—I would have liked to see greater context about some of these topics, especially regarding how skepticism regarding empathy has hindered research on chimpanzee emotional lives (as well as pressured scientists to curb their own empathy or expressions of it). Nonetheless, I can see why expanding on these topics might have been a challenge to get through peer review, and the brief remarks work well being just a little bit pointed--like the sharpened point of a chimpanzee spear.

Since it's a fairly short but accessible read, I think it would be great to assign for students. It's also a good resource for anyone that wants to learn about these amazing chimps!

Chimpanzee Memoirs: Stories of Studying and Saving our Closest Relatives

Edited by Steve Ross and Lydia Hopper. Columbia University Press, 2022.

Sadly, this book came out shortly after Steve Ross had passed. The authors collate short memoirs from 16 chimpanzee experts, highlighting their personal journeys to chimpanzee research. Ross frames the memoirs explicitly as "hero" narratives. I've critiqued hero narratives in the past, and I wish they were framed differently.

The strength of this book is the narratives from African researchers, highlighting stories that are often overlooked in primatology. We hear from Congolese field assistant David Koni, and Ugandans such as Lilly Ajarova, executive director of Ngama Island Chimpanzee Sanctuary, and Caroline Asiimwe, a veterinarian at Budongo Conservation Field Station. We also hear from African American Raven Jackson-Jewett, about her work as attending veterinarian at Chimp Haven. I would have loved an entire book devoted to these narratives.

The rest of the book focuses on big names in primatology, often people who have told their stories in books and keynotes. They skew heavily senior, and draw from networks that wield power and prestige in chimpanzee research. That's why the hero narrative framing makes me uneasy; when we put people on pedestals, it makes it tougher for people to speak out about negative experiences. A year after the book was published, a former graduate student of one featured researcher wrote an open letter to professional societies about her negative experiences.

Sharing her stories led to others contacting her with similar experiences, predominantly within chimpanzee research.

That said, the narratives are accessible, feel-good stories, and each focus on an individual chimpanzee that's illustrated beautifully. It's a great book for the public interested in learning about chimp research, and I would have loved it as an aspiring primatologist. I just wish it drew from a broader swath of researchers, and that we could be more open about the gatekeeping and exploitation of power that also occurs in primate research.

The Spirit of the Rainforest: How Indigenous Wisdom and Scientific Curiosity Reconnects us to the Natural World.

by Rosa Vásquez Espinoza. Gaia, 2025.

Peruvian chemical biologist, Rosa Vásquez Espinoza, interweaves stories of fieldwork in the Amazon with insights on ecological and spiritual knowledge from Indigenous perspectives. Each chapter opens with a two-page natural history spread, with an illustration with scientific and traditional names, and short paragraphs about traditional uses and scientific information. The chapters cover field expeditions at sites throughout Peru, and, in a Nat-Geo style, are full of vivid description and adventure. Interwoven with that are conversations with Indigenous collaborators about the ecosystem, their beliefs, and cultural beliefs.

However, the introduction, which focuses on knowledge learned from her grandmother, a traditional healer, led me to expect more of an emic—or insider—view of Indigenous knowledge. But a lot of it is focused on the etic—or outsider—perspective of her learning from Indigenous colleagues. She seems to avoid directly addressing how colonial influences shape local cultures. Her family's religious background—a diverse group, but predominantly Christian—is hidden in the endnotes, and she describes Carnaval as an "Indigenous" holiday. She also describes participation in a Shipibo-Conibo ayahuasca ceremony without mentioning how these ceremonies are shaped by the tourism industry.

I really enjoyed this book for the beautiful descriptions of the rainforest ecosystems, and consideration of Indigenous Peruvian knowledge and spirituality, but the cultural aspects of the book left me feeling like I was missing some of the picture. That's a shame, because the story of how her grandmother integrates being a traditional healer with her religion (either Catholic or a Jehovah's Witness? The endnote was slightly confusing) is a story I'd love to read.

Fresh Banana Leaves: Healing Indigenous Landscapes Through Indigenous Science

by Jessica Hernandez. North Atlantic Books, 2022.

Environmental scientist Jessica Hernandez draws on her family's Maya Ch'orti' and Zapatac heritage and her scientific training, and experience with urban restoration work with tribes in Seattle to explore the history of environmental colonialism and neocolonialism while

providing a vision of Indigenous-led land stewardship as an alternative to Western models of conservation.

Hernandez draws heavily on family stories, including interviews with parents and relatives, juxtaposed with academic education and conservation practices. She illuminates the subtle and not-so-subtle ways Western cultural approaches to conservation inadvertently project colonial values. Her father is a Ch'orti' Mayan man who was a child soldier in Honduras, who fled to Mexico, where he met her Oaxacan Zapatac mother. This history provides context for the realities of colonial violence, and particularly, emphasizes how violence shapes the displacement and immigration histories that shape both politics and relationships with the environment.

The introduction is the best, clear and accessible description of positionality I have ever read, particularly in the way she describes how positionalities shift in cultural and national contexts, using the Salvadoran, Mexican, and US contexts as examples. I also appreciate how she reframes the Western concept of "invasive" species as "displaced relatives".

While I read this book for insight on decolonizing science and conservation, it impressed upon me how much the current political context reflects histories of colonial violence. The stories of how and why her father was pressed into being a child soldier, and then migrating to Mexico and later the US, was a reminder of how political violence is responsible for the displacement of Indigenous people, and how the Mexican and US approaches to dealing with Central American migrants compounds that trauma. This book is a reminder that colonial violence is not a historical event, but still an ongoing process.

Gods, Wasps, and Stranglers: The Secret History and Redemptive Future of Fig Trees

by Mike Shanahan. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2016.

Ecologist Mike Shanahan's book has engaging storytelling interweaving fig biology, folklore, and history, describing how intertwined fig trees are with human culture, ecology, and folklore throughout the world. The book's overarching story interweaves the tale of how scientists learn about fig trees with the role that fig trees play in different cultures. Shanahan intersperses stories of his own fieldwork adventures—which includes some scary fig-tree climbing—with the story of human's cultural history with figs, the history of scientific research on fig trees, and its very complicated relationships with fig wasps and pollinators.

My favorite part of the book was all the diverse folklore explored, particularly the wide variety of creation stories and cautionary tales surrounding fig trees. My only complaint is that at some points, Shanan's rapidly-fires through multiple cultural stories in a single paragraph. This left me wanting to research those stories in greater detail. I especially loved the story of how fig trees figure into Kikuyu culture and the story for Kenyan independence.

However, there's also some great stories about how scientists do their research, starting with Alfred Russell Wallace, and tracing back through a few key figures that played a role in

understanding fig trees' symbiotic relationships. Shanahan describes the foundations of his own research in a way that shows how it clearly builds on a lineage of researchers who came before him, as well as the cultural knowledge of peoples whose histories and cultures are also entwined with the trees.

Overall, this was a really delightful read with excellent science storytelling. There are places I wish he'd gone into more detail with the cultural stories. I also wish he had situated Wallace's story with more acknowledgement of how his research accomplishments and insights were so dependent on his large team of local field assistants, but nonetheless it's such enjoyable storytelling.

The Arrogant Ape: The Myth of Human Exceptionalism and Why it Matters

by Christine Webb. Avery, 2025.

Primatologist Christine Webb traces how ideas about human exceptionalism are embedded in scientific paradigms and broader culture. She discusses how that leads us to underestimate other animals' cognition and sensory abilities—and disconnects us from nature itself.

The book explores how these ideas emerged, how research on animal intelligence and sensory capabilities counteract them, and concludes with lessons from Indigenous scholars in constructing a relational approach to science. I appreciate these ideas are finally becoming mainstream and leading to a paradigm shift.

However, I felt she missed the mark at getting to the root of the issue. Early in the book, she introduces the concept of "WEIRD (Western, Industrialized, Educated, Rich, Democratic)", which gets used interchangeably with "Western" and "Judeo-Christian." These descriptors dance around the construction of whiteness. While Webb acknowledges the relationships to racial hierarchies and eugenics, the root cause—the construction of whiteness to justify white supremacy as part of a wider, linear hierarchy of nature—is not fully articulated and explored.

I was also disappointed that she shared so little of her own research with primates—there are only a few, short vignettes. In her final chapters, she concludes the solution is developing a place-based connection to nature, but it seems at odds with how disembodied her research descriptions were from their local context. I wish she had taken just one example from her own research and really explored it to articulate that point.

Overall, while I think the arguments she makes are so important, I finished the book feeling disappointed it misses the vivid descriptions of primate behavior and research that I love most in books by primatologists. And while Webb aims at dismantling human supremacy, I don't think that can be fully tackled without recognizing and dismantling white supremacy.