



A Primate's Memoir

Robert M. Sapolsky

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Book-smart and more than a little naive, Robert Sapolsky left the comforts of college in the US for a research project studying a troop of baboons in Kenya. Whether he's relating his adventures with his neighbours, Masai tribesmen, or his experiences learning how to sneak up and dart suspicious baboons, Sapolsky combines irreverence and humour with the best credentials in his field.

A Primate's Memoir is the culmination of over two decades of experience and research - an exhilarating, hilarious and daring memoir, and an astonishing masterpiece of the people and nature of Africa.

A Primate's Memoir Details

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From Reader Review A Primate's Memoir for online ebook

What I Really Read says

A solid read.

What I expected

A book about baboons and neuroscience. A blend of naturalistic descriptions, biology and scientific findings about the way baboon brain works and how this is relevant to humans.

What it actually was

This was more of a memoir than science book: there was historical and cultural perspective on African tribes and their dynamics as seen by an outsider, and naturalism: descriptions of lives of baboons. And not much in the way of neuroscience or dry facts.

What I liked

About half (or maybe even more) of this book is not about baboons at all. Sapolsky walks us through his journey across several African countries, first as a newbie who falls for every scam and is ripped off by everyone, and later as an insider whom people trust.

He gives a great **historical perspective**: the impact of colonialism, people's attitude towards former colonialists and tourists, revolutions, corruption, native tribes and their wars with each other, relationships between traditionalists and more globalized urban population, etc. The book spans 1970-1990, so there is a big cultural and historical transition going on there.

I knew very little about Africa, so this was fascinating to me. There was some violence since Sapolsky has witnessed several military coups.

Most interesting were the **people**. He tells about all kind of people - other animal researchers, tourists, government officials, missionaries, members of warrior tribes, scammers, soldiers, workers... They are very different both culturally and in their perceptions, attitudes, ambitions and beliefs. So many contrasts.

This book also gave great insight into a **life of a field biology researcher working in the wild**. What it's actually like, day to day. Some of the details were gory, for he had to make autopsies, etc.. Sapolsky is a man in love with his work and it's great to read.

What I didn't like

Some of the things he said were creepy. Like the time he said he imagined darting people, calculating how much drugs it would take, because he was so used to doing such calculations for baboons.

He gave different names to baboons and told their stories, but some of them blended together and I couldn't remember nor care which was which. The same could be said for some human background characters.

I expected there to be more science, more facts and conclusions, but Sapolsky tells stories rather than educates about baboon brain anatomy. Which is fine, but I expected differently.

Erisa Isak says

I love this book! All the stories are immensely interesting, but what I liked most of all is how deeply Sapolsky cares about his baboons, the way he writes about them, with so much affection. He treats them like family. I love it! I will miss reading about them.

KatieSuzanne says

I loved this book! I loved it and then I loved it even more. It is written so well and has a little bit of everything in it. There's really cool science, history, humor, and more, all written in a way that anyone can understand and follow. I found myself reading out loud to friends the chapter about the man who was a machine. That part still makes me laugh and the end made me cry like a baby. Then I reread the end and cried some more. I think if I was having a kid or buying a dog anytime soon I'd find myself wanting to name him Benjamin.

For me it was like an African version of Desert Solitaire and it made me feel the same way when I was reading it. It was written in such a similar style and organized the same. Sometimes it felt like I was reading his diary and other times it was like a letter written directly to me. I wouldn't say everyone is going to love this book, but most will. It easily made it onto my all time favorites list and I might even read it again someday, a rare thing for me. In fact I already want to read it again right now.

David Sven says

I enjoyed this a lot more than I was expecting. I read it as part of a buddy read to expand my literary palate.

The story is the memoir of American Zoologist Robert Sapolsky, and his life studying baboons in Africa to determine the relationship between stress and disease in humans. The book was very easy reading and Sapolsky's humour was catching as he relates his first experiences as a young, naive, anything is possible, biologist encountering Africa for the first time, to working with the actual baboons, to having to deal with the various surrounding cultures between warring tribes and warring countries and corrupt bureaucracies.

Of course, the baboons were the stars of the book and it was hilarious hearing Sapolsky name them after Biblical figures as a kind of revenge on his Jewish upbringing. We learn the hierarchy of baboons, the endless struggle to be the alpha male, the individual relationships between various couples, coalitions and factions and more. Also hilarious was Sapolski trying to learn how to successfully dart the baboons, his success and failures at stalking etc.

But the baboons are not the only story. We also learn of the people of Africa, the good and the bad. We learn of ancient and not so ancient hostilities and how they affected his work. We learn about the corruption of officials and atrocities of bandits. But we also see a lot of the good, everyday Africans as well. And some of the experiences Sapolski went through were frightening, even though he told them in a humorous way. Like the time he was kidnapped and "doped up" on Coca Cola. maybe the thugs thought the "Coke" in Coca cola would keep him subdued.

Through the book I felt a variety of emotions, from delight at the baboon antics as well as the heart warming generosity of some of the Africans, to outrage at the corruption, indifference and callousness of others, and

then the ending was just gut wrenching.

As much as I enjoyed this book whilst I was reading it, Non fiction is still not something I read for pleasure and that is what is reflected in my rating, which is...

3 stars

Ensiform says

The author, a field biologist, recounts many anecdotes and events he participated in from twenty years of study and travel in Africa. A brilliant collection of essays, it uses his study of baboons in Kenya (measuring stress levels among members of various rank in the troop) as a starting point for some broader observations and comments on the African, and human, experience. It gives insight into the proud Masai warrior, the corrupt soldier and Nairobi bureaucrat, the dying breed of the old colonial white game warden, and more.

Because Sapolsky is telling stories from two decades ago, he's able to capture the tenuous balance between tradition and modernity among many African villagers that probably no longer exists (a bushman's first elevator ride, the fear that a man with an artificial trach is a robot, the tribal warfare with spears over stolen cows). Beautifully written, confident, hilarious, poignant, witty and wise, this book is like the best work of Oliver Sacks and Eddy L. Harris combined.

Anna says

Entertaining, informative and humorous. It deals equally with the baboons' antics, anecdotes about the people he encounters, and the history of the region. I liked the description of the baboons' behaviour and relationships the best.

The writing reminded me of Gerald Durrel's books about trips to foreign lands to capture strange animals for various zoos, it has the same humorous and self-deprecating style.

I enjoyed it, especially because I lived in that part of the world a few years before he started field work in Kenya, and his stories ring true.

Some favourite quotes:

"According to the books, the baboons were complex social primates living in open grasslands; they had organized hunts, a hierarchical rank system, and at their core was the alpha male. He led the troop to food, spearheaded the hunts, defended against predators, kept the females in line, changed the lightbulbs, fixed the car, blah blah blah. Just like our human ancestors, the textbooks ached to say, and sometimes even did. Most of that turned out to be wrong, naturally."

"Absolom was atypically friendly, spending an inordinate amount of time eyebrow-flashing and face-pulling at all and sundry. With the exception of Benjamin and of Rachel's family, his greetings were generally ignored. Once, in a particularly adventurous moment, he face-pulled at me; I returned the gesture, clearly a surprise to him that I was conversant in baboon. He face-pulled again, I reciprocated, and we established an almost daily interspecies ritual."

“Kenya’s first escalator, in a spanking new downtown building. It had become a local attraction, the thing for the young Nairobi swells to do, to hang out and ride the escalator, maybe take your date to it. It came with a large poster board of instructions, caveats, and disclaimers—face forward, one direction only, no goats, not responsible for pregnant women.”

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

If you ever doubt that we humans share an ancestor with other primates, just read a bit about the behavior of male baboons! You may recognize your husband, president, son, or even yourself.

Over a period of twenty years, Robert Sapolsky spent about three months of every year in Kenya observing the same baboon troop. He darted the male baboons with sedatives at different times and took blood samples to see what experiences caused the greatest production of stress hormones. (Couldn't do the females because of pregnancy and nursing.) He became very attached to this troop of baboons as his "friends" over the years, and gave them Old Testament names to tell them apart.

So anyway, that's why he was there. But some of the most interesting and hilarious reading is really about the people he met from many different tribes and different nearby countries he visited. Absolutely fascinating variations in customs and beliefs and attitudes toward outsiders.

The author took a lot more risks than I'd ever take as a female alone, and found himself in some pretty scary situations, often with the real possibility of death! He also found many reasons to laugh and scratch his head in wonderment. The Coca-Cola Devil thing was the weirdest thing I've ever heard! There seemed to be no purpose for what they were doing to him. Must've been smoking crack.

I found the last chapter difficult to get through simply because of the subject matter, but it was an important part of his work. The autopsy of the diseased baboon was a gagfest! His powers of description were just a little too good.

The organization of the book is a little wonky due to the long time period he covers, but otherwise very enjoyable reading.

Megan says

Read this This is coming from a right-brained person who never would have given this book a second glance had it not been forced on her by a friend. It's an irreverent and thoughtful tale of a neuroscientist's years observing a tribe of baboons in Kenya to learn about their social hierarchy and resulting stress levels. I loved it for its ability to make you relate to a tribe of alternately loving, back-stabbing, calculating, snobby, inclusive baboons like you would family; the fact that Sapolsky gets across the gist of his research without too obviously dumbing it down even though he obviously had to dumb it down; and the fact that I cried like a baby for an ancient, farting baboon named Isaac at the end. It's one of the most human books I've read in a long time, which is funny since humans are rarely mentioned and the ones that are are blood-drinking warriors. It's a beautiful book.

Christine says

I thought Sapolsky's writing rode a fine line between hilarity and being just a little too contrived to reach hilarity. However, Contrived or not, he brings home the reality and intrigue of an apparently fearless young man conducting research in a very foreign land. A Primate's Memoir leaves me also riding a line between wanting to move to Africa and become a primatologist who studies savanna baboons, and wanting to cower in my refrigerator next to my insulin, where I probably won't be eaten by army ants. Unfortunately he latches onto words like 'euphoric' and expressions like 'more than a little' and uses them over and over and over again, and this is very annoying, but overall the book was very readable and I'd read more of him in the future.

Jeanette says

Entertaining read. I was expecting a more scientific progression. Although non-fiction animal and bird observation based studies are some of my favorite non-fiction reading, this one was partially just that, but in far greater sense a travelogue/memoir. Robert being the star of the show.

The tone of self enjoyed hilarity upon his own jokes and comparisons, especially his own humongous naivete is about 30% of the total copy. Which has nothing to do with the baboons or the study but about the African experiences. It reminded me of some of the most popular current travelogue best seller fare. Nothing wrong with that, but what I crave in this field of work is nearly the opposite.

Saul, Isaac, Devorah, Bathsheba- all the baboons- I wanted to hear twice as much about them and half as much about Robert. Most readers probably like this balance better.

But even within the proportions I got, the baboon sections were 5 star- even to those who only got numbers and not names.

Reading about African tribes within his contact fields, and his assistants of years after he delegated was also high quality. The state of the countries and their boundaries, the tribal customs clash and especially the disease aspects! Somehow the telling of those within the tra-la-la "ha-ha" mood, like the relating of the impala being eaten alive while he was out darting within a small thorn bush enclave. There's just something in that mood connection that distracted me from the beauty and the core contact with Robert's work. Rather like the black humor used in medicine at times? Not really.

Glad he is still kicking after some of the decisions he has made.

Diane says

In 1978, one week after graduating from Harvard, Robert went to Kenya to study social behavior in baboons. He was one of the first to chart the effects of chronic stress on the brain.

Very much a research 'greenhorn', he learns as he goes ... and so does the reader. He grows to love the baboons he studies and his tales of their lives is very engaging. He also tells us about getting to know his neighbours, the Masai. He is humorous, emotional, intelligent, and enthusiastic ... everything you could want

in a memoir writer.

3 Stars = I **liked** the book. I enjoyed it. I'm glad I read it.

Weinz says

[image error]

Morgan Blackledge says

OMG. Sapolsky is an absolute treasure. His books and lectures are quirky, irreverent, funny as hell, brilliant, informative and utterly original.

His Stanford course on behavioral neurobiology (see it for free on YouTube) is a masterpiece. I have watched the entire thing (it's like 36 hours long total) at least 3 times. And I'm fixing to watch it again in preparation for the affective psychology course I'm about to teach.

As a psychology lecturer, I'd be green with envy if I was in the same species as him. But Sapolsky's in a class of his own. I do my best to ape his lecture style, but how ever good at it I get (which is not very) I'm afraid my lectures will always be a pale simulacrum.

Simply put. He's a fuckin genius. My only gripe with him is that he doesn't write enough. I would kill for a new Sapolsky text.

As should be obvious by now, I really love Robert Sapolsky's work. So why did I wait so long to read this book? Because it's a memoir and I typically can't tolerate them. No good reason. I just don't like them. With the exception of this one.

By the end of the book you feel real sense of kinship for Sapolsky and his baboons. He does a marvelous job of closing the empathy gap by rendering the baboons and the people (including himself) in endearing but strangely unsentimental terms. I don't want to spoil the book, but I will say that you really care about the lil guys by the end of it.

If you're a Sapolsky fan (or even if you're not and you just want a terrifically funny and interesting book to read) this thing should be your next read. I feel like I understand the guy and his work so much better now. For the life of me I can't figure out why I waited so long to read it, but I'm really glad I did.

Five stars!!!!

Hanne says

There is a way to read this book. It's difficult in the winter when it's snowy outside and you really need those five blankets closeby, even though the heating is on maximum. This is an outdoors book. This weekend we had beautiful spring weather, so I put on my walking boots, packed the book, food and water in my backpack and off I went. Then somewhere in the middle of nowhere, with only fields and trees

surrounding me, I finished this book. Now, that's the way to read it!

The baboon parts in the book are amazing! In some ways I like this even better than watching National Geographic, because you're imagining everything that happens instead of seeing it.

The below scene is my favourite of the entire book. Every time I think about it, there is a gigantic toothpaste-commercial-smile on my face.

It's about a baboon called Benjamin and I adored him, strange awkward baboon that he is! At one point in the story Benjamin happens to become the alpha-male (yes, it seemed more an accident than anything else). Then this happens:

"Benjamin was leading a procession as they were coming back at the end of the day along a path and through some bushes. He's leading the way, proud as hell of himself. But the fact is alpha male baboons do not lead processions because they just joined the troop a couple of years ago and they have no idea where anybody's processing – the 20-year old matriarchs do.

But Benjamin just happened to be in front of the troop, heading toward the forest, marching along, never looking back. Unbeknownst to him, the matriarch, who's two steps behind him, veers off into the bushes to the right, and 80 baboons follow her while he continues walking going straight forward. Eventually Benjamin stops, looks back and freaks out. His hair stands up, and he starts his wahoo calling, which is how he spent a large part of his adult life: "Where is everybody?!" And he then has a moment where you know exactly what he's thinking. He walks over to my Jeep and looks underneath, like — are 60 baboons hiding under there waiting to surprise him?"

This book has been good fun to read, even though I liked the people-stories of this book an awful lot less, especially the parts about these random strangers he sometimes put in. The stories about the people he lived with or closeby were good, but there were too many completely random anecdotes, which in my opinion were hurting the flow of the book. That's also why i kept it on three stars, i kind of wished they put a really good editor on it!

But yes, i'll admit it, I just wanted to read about the baboons!

An additional bonus is the strange looks you get when you head to the library to get this book. Although my story isn't nearly as much fun as the trouble some others had when lending this book...

Roy Lotz says

This book has been one of the many unread books sitting on my shelves and mocking me over the years. I had heard such good things about it, and the subject seemed so congenial to my interests, that I was excited to some day crack it open; but other books, seemingly more vital and pressing, kept popping up. Finally, I've burned through it; but I'm afraid the book didn't quite justify the long anticipation.

In his autobiography, George Santayana writes: "Ghastly are those autobiographies that contain nothing but old jokes and old anecdotes," and this book comes dangerously close to matching that description. Make no mistake: this is not a work of science; it is not even popular science. It is hardly even fitting to call this book a memoir, as it consists of little more than a series of anecdotes, loosely strung together. Sapolsky's main goal is neither to educate nor to reveal, but to entertain.

At this, he is quite successful. Sapolsky has both a large store of outlandish experiences, and a winsome way of putting them into words. Every time the reader thinks that Sapolsky can't possibly have any more good stories, he effortlessly comes up with three more, each more absurd than the last. These stories are mostly of ineptitude: the white American finding his way in the bush, the sheltered scientist getting wise to the ways of the world, the rash young man making foolish decisions, the misunderstandings between different ethnic groups, the collision of old and new ways of living, the country bumpkin in the city, the city slicker in the country, and so on and so forth. It is a parade of farce: when Sapolsky isn't making some kind of foolhardy mistake, somebody else is.

At first, this is all very fine; but it gets grating by about the halfway point. It feels too much like hearing your college buddy, who went on an exotic study abroad trip, tell you about all the cool things he did: fun for five minutes, dull for fifteen. Part of the reason so many of these stories got tiresome was because Sapolsky relied on too many clichéd tropes: the brainy scientist who can't tie his own shoes; the pure, untamed African savanna; the stubborn but noble Maasai people; the comical African yokels who don't understand technology; the clueless, tasteless tourists; corrupt third-world bureaucracies. I'm not saying that Sapolsky wasn't telling the truth; but he is overly attracted to the types of stories which fill up trite travel books.

The only thing which serves to offset these entertaining, but uninteresting, stories, was Sapolsky's scientific work among the baboons. This starts off strong, as Sapolsky describes setting up camp, getting into the routine, learning to anesthetize baboons with a blowgun, naming his baboons after figures in the Bible. He does a fine job of making the reader interested in the lives of his subjects; but then, after only a few dozen pages, the baboons drop out of the picture, only making a major reappearance in the closing chapter.

When they do reappear in the end, however, the book redeems itself. In the beginning of the final chapter, Sapolsky writes: "I have tried throughout this book to give some attention to the style of writing, to try to shape some of these stories. Here I will not try." If only he had done that the whole time! I will not spoil the final chapter; but I will say that it was orders of magnitude better than every other in the book. Here, Sapolsky drops the fun-loving, bumbling, naïve persona he adopts during his anecdotes, and emerges as a real, round person. The writing ceases to be cute, and becomes sincere and affecting. And we even get a decent dose of science!

The problem with this book is that it should really have been two books: one about the baboons, and one about himself. Trying to weld them together makes for a disjointed and disappointing work: we learn little about either the science or the man. For as soon as Sapolsky threatens to delve into his research—which promised to be fascinating, as he studied both baboon behavior and the neurology of stress—he backs off, as if afraid to scare the reader. But as soon as Sapolsky comes close to revealing what he is like himself, he backs away, too, into the land of jokes and anecdotes, the domain of harmless fun. Sapolsky takes everything potentially serious or challenging and removes it, leaving only the bubble gum of his life. This is a shame, because, as we find out when he finally drops the act, he is a fascinating man.

Lee says

I cannot remember the last time I read a non-fiction book; it has been a while. So it was with interest when a friend choose this book for a group of us to read. We have a bit of a buddy read group and once a month one of us gets to choose something completely different. The purpose is to get us out of our reading comfort zone.

A Primates memoir is way out of my normal genre, but I have to say I enjoyed the change. I also have to say

that I was expecting something completely different to what I got. Born Free or Gorillas in the Mist kind of story seemed obvious, but instead this book is more of a light hearted approach of a scientist cum writer who has set about revisiting his time in Kenya in the seventies. As I began reading the story I was expecting to hear a lot about baboons and how they interacted and what new scientific finds Sapolsky discovered with his intense study. But I guess I did not read the title properly, this isn't just about baboons, its a memoir of Sapolsky.

There is a lot of anecdotal stories in this book, surrounded the basis of the theme; a troop of Baboons that he studies over many years. Some of the side stories are just out there, 'I was wondering around Nairobi when I found an amazing rice shop, but the guy wanted my shoes' and other stories are really quite interesting from an historical point of view. I learnt something about how the Masai fought during World War 2 in africa, I read an interesting tiem spent hitch hiking through Uganda during the fall of Idi Amin, as you do.

But, I kept wanting to go back to the baboons, I was fascinated with the group and the Alpha Male battle, I wanted more of that. So all said and done, I enjoyed it, a great choice to break the Fantasy/SciFi habit. It is a nice easy read. Put it down, pick it up a few days later, no problems. I spent a Sunday morning with a cup of tea in bed finishing it off and **that** was a luxurious morning.

Adam Lewis says

Having recently finished a creative nonfiction class with a healthy reading list populated with memoirs, I can say that Sapolsky's "A Primate's Memoir" is the best one of that genre that I have had the chance to read.

In it we are treated to the author's adventures in Africa studying baboons over the course of about two decades. But the focus retains a healthy balance between two types of primates – the troop of baboons and that other most complex primate – homo sapiens. Sapolsky has to deal with the obvious cultural dissimilarities as a Westerner living in impoverished Kenya and on his numerous trips to other parts of Africa including Sudan and Uganda. We meet the Masai with their spears and crimson attire, we meet Northern Sudanese Muslims, we meet hunter-gatherers living on forest plateaus above the scorching Sahara, and of course we intimately peer into the lives of Benjamin, Rachael, Joshua, Devorah, and Saul (among many others) in the baboon troop.

Hilariously funny at times and thoughtfully serious at others, the book is a moving and absorbing read that imparts knowledge as it entertains.

Michael says

A fascinating and entertaining read about an idealistic young naïve man raised in New York City takes to the savannahs of Kenya to study baboons and how he matured through his decades there in the 70s and 80s through experiences with both the animals and the people. As a child he was enamored by the dioramas at the museum and later by the romanticism and dedication of scientists like Jane Goodall. However, instead of

chimps or gorilla his interest in the contribution of position in a social hierarchy to stress and disease led him to study of the more accessible and less lovable baboons. Monkeys with a lot more aggression and rigidity in their dominance hierarchy, with less cooperativity and altruism, and more of the element of enslavement to the hormone estrous cycles controlling sexual behavior.

His stories constantly impose a human frame of reference to primate society he comes to know so well. This is a separate issue from his science, which is not the major focus here. He can't resist giving them personal names and admiring or reviling the personalities of individuals. The nobility of Saul and his stable, benign dictatorship as alpha, and the vicious or incompetent regime of others who followed. The charming friendship of Ruth with a lower ranking male, Benjamin, who seems uninterested in becoming top dog. Conversely, his reflections on the Masai and Kipsagi tribesmen near the national park that he interacts with and befriends and on the truckers, beggars, government officials, and scam artists he encounters on trips to Nairobi or hitchhiking trips to neighboring Tanzania, Uganda, Sudan, and Rwanda are subject to comparisons with his baboon society.

The mix of tales about baboons and human society makes for a lively and often poignant or funny tour of primate nature with Sapolsky's own development as an overriding theme. The many vignettes and essays on particular topics are organized into the following sections: Adolescent Years, Subadult Years, Tenuous Adulthood, and Adulthood. Usually he is self-deprecating and humble, but other times he is sweeping in his critical outlook on the character of tribal groups, classes of workers, or individual personalities. That is somewhat the same contradictory perspective I get out of the travel writings of Theroux. But here there is more self-analysis and reaching for insight about the human condition.

For example, he recounts many cases where he is subject to shakedowns and scams. But he becomes more forgiving after he himself has to resort to subterfuge and theft to survive when his graduate advisors fail at one point to send him funds from his fellowship. At another point he learns that the park rangers are killing game like zebras and selling the meat, but his judgement is modified after learning how the government has been failing to meet their payroll. His biggest showdown over corruption comes when he gets involved with addressing a plague of tuberculosis among the baboons and learns its origin is from the baboons eating infected cattle refuse at the dump site of a tourist lodge. He is helpless to intervene with the guilty Masai individuals selling the cows, the lodge butcher making a profit from the cheap meat, and the bribed inspector because the government couldn't countenance the bad press and impact that an expose would have on the ecotourism economy.

Sapolski's writing style is sometimes transcendent and leaps off the page. For example, at one point he is suffering from diarrhea in the middle of the night:

During one wave, I suddenly found myself cramped over in front of my tent stark naked, painful, liquid acidic craps, and the humiliation of it all, surrounded by six elephants, quiet, quizzical, polite, murmuring, almost soliticitous, their trunks waving in the air investigating my actions and moans. They watched my agonized shitting as it were an engrossing, silent Shakespearean tragedy performed in the round.

In another section about his early inspiration and later disillusionment with the work of Dian Fossey, he ends with his responses upon visiting her grave among those of gorillas at the research station in mountainous reserve in Rwanda:

Fossey, FOSSEY, you cranky difficult strong-arming self-destructive misanthrope mediocre scientist, deceiver of earnest college students, probably cause of more deaths of the gorillas than if you never set foot in Rwanda. Fossey, you pain-in-the-ass saint, I do not believe in prayers or souls, but I will pray for your soul, I will remember you for all my days, in gratitude for that moment by the graves when all I felt was the pure cleansing sadness of returning home and finding nothing but ghosts.

In another story, he talks about a trip to Uganda he took in 1979 "to go see the overthrow of Idi Amin." At first he thinks this impulse has to do with challenging his Quaker ideals of pacifism from college days with

the witnessing an undeniably just war, but in retrospect he realizes:

Ah, this is nonsense. I was twenty-one and wanted an adventure. I wanted to scare the shit out of myself and see amazing things and talk about it afterwards. And for the previous month, I had been missing someone badly, and I thought going to a war would make me feel better about it. I was behaving like a late adolescent male primate.

Upon hearing a truck blown up in Kampala he gets quickly cured of his romantic foolishness. When the Tanzanian soldiers in the process of liberating the county assume he is a spy and threaten him with rifles, he is barely saved by a lorry driver's entreaties. On way back to Kenya he visits the site of the Nile's origin in an outflow from Lake Victoria and discovers a body suspended in the flow with a rope:

I must remember every detail, so I can tell people about this. I thought, I want to forget this, I want to get the hell out of here, to be home, to be safe. And I stood there, transfixed, unable to move from that spot. Decades later, in the neurobiology classes I teach, I always spend some lectures on the physiology of aggression. The hormonal regulation of it, the areas of the brain having some influence over it, the genetic components of it. ...But somehow, almost embarrassingly, I spend more and more time talking about aggression. I think each year I lecture longer because of that man with his head tied to the dam and because of how long I stood there looking at him, unable to leave. I think it is because of the ambiguity of aggression. It is the most confusing emotion to me, and with the defenses of an academician, I clearly believe that if I lecture about it enough it will give up and go quietly away, its simultaneous attraction and repulsion will stop being so frightening to me.

All in all, a worthwhile excursion to Africa and experience with its peoples and creatures by a scientist learning to become a better human.

Brenna says

Robert Sapolsky was already on my list of scientists I admire due to his groundbreaking research on chronic stress and its role in disease. But this memoir propelled him to the upper ranks of my personal heroes. I was so moved by Sapolsky's subject matter and his sensitive and emotional handling of it that I literally wept when I finished the book. I think my reaction freaked out James a bit when he came home from work to find me bawling on the sofa, but when I was enough under control again to summarize the book for him, he also got a bit misty.

"A Primate's Memoir" covers Sapolsky's scientific career, from his days as a grad student to his emergence as an eminent principal investigator running his own lab at Stanford. His central research question is the role of chronic stress on health – is it a contributing factor in disease and does it ultimately decrease longevity? To investigate this, he studied a troop of wild baboons in Kenya to figure out their social hierarchy, supposing that those at the lowest end of the social totem pole are subject to chronic stress – a fair assumption, as baboons vent their frustrations on each other in a hierarchical manner. The ones at the lowest end of the hierarchy live in constant fear of attack by the alphas whenever something doesn't go their way. So Sapolsky made behavioral observations of the baboons, then captured individuals so he could take blood samples to measure their levels of stress hormones. The process of capturing dangerous wild baboons involved using a blowgun to shoot darts of anesthetic at them, grabbing the downed baboon to protect him from others in the tribe who might take advantage, and collecting samples as hygienically as possible in a mobile lab run out of a Jeep in the African bush. And he did this for years all by himself. I'm seriously in awe – Sapolsky is a badass!

Part of the charm of the story is that Sapolsky from the get-go breaks an important rule of scientific objectivity: instead of giving the baboons "boring" numerical designations, he gives them all Biblical names,

Nebuchadnezzar, Saul, Benjamin, Rachel, Bathsheba, etc. He comes to know them as individuals. Considering that they are such social animals, and intelligent primates, his anthropomorphism of his subjects doesn't seem to be a stretch at all. They become the central characters in Sapolsky's story, their lives a strange and entertaining soap opera.

I really can't rave enough – this is the best book I've read so far this year. It has everything: a great cast of characters, including Sapolsky himself, his wife, his friends and neighbors in Africa, and of course, the baboons. There are funny cross-cultural anecdotes of Sapolsky's life in Africa, the trial and error of becoming a scientist, hilarious and heartwarming stories about his baboons, and through it all, philosophical ruminations on what it means to be human.

Rebecka says

This is a highly amusing, perhaps even too amusing, book. I wouldn't have minded more hard facts and less jokes, because this does end up in the "easy entertainment" camp. (Except for the ending, which is mostly just sad.) The insights into Kenyan corruption, Masai life and hazardous traveling in Africa are all great. The book deals as much with that as it does with baboons.
