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The Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy

בואו לסיים את הטרילוגיה המצליחה עם מועדון הקריאה!

מועדון הקריאה של חודש ינואר יעסוק בזוכה פרס גפן "עורבני חקיין", מאת סוזן קולינס (הוצאת כנרת, 2012).
המועדון יתקיים ביום חמישי, 23.1.14, בשעה 20:00, ב"קפה גרג" ברחוב ויצמן 2, ת"א. את המפגש תנחה דפנה קירש.

לצורך היערכות למספר המשתתפים, יש להירשם מראש דרך הדוא"ל של המנחה.
שימו לב – הקדימו להירשם! אם תהיה היענות רבה ייתכן שהמועדון יפוצל לשני מפגשים.
 רצוי להביא למפגש עותק של הספר.

הכניסה חופשית ואינה כרוכה בתשלום, בחברות באגודה או בהגעה למפגשים נוספים.
 מועדון חודש פברואר יעסוק בזוכה פרס גפן "שדים ברחוב אגריפס", מאת חגי דגן.
 לקבלת עדכונים שוטפים על מפגשי מועדון הקריאה ברחבי הארץ ניתן להצטרף לרשימת התפוצה או לדף
 האגודה בפייסבוק.

More Society information is available (in Hebrew) at the Society's site: <http://www.sf-f.org.il>

Book Review by Aharon Sheer

Congo by Michael Crichton (1980), 316 pages

Michael Crichton (1942-2008) was one of everybody's favorite authors. He wrote adventure, history, science fiction, and travelogues. He was widely read, and had a vast knowledge of science, which was reflected in his novels. This novel is science-based, with travel too.

Congo has three pages of references at the end. The references include general history, history of Africa, computer science, philosophy, science about apes, cannibalism, diamonds, travel in the tropical jungle of Africa, teaching language to apes. You can learn a lot from this book. And it's a great adventure too.

The science that most interested me was talking to great apes in sign language. I'd heard about that being done with chimpanzees. Here I learned that they have (1980) taught gorillas to speak sign language too. Admittedly, their language is perhaps at the level of a one and a half year old, but still – talking!

Another area that interested me was the African tropical jungle. Whether Crichton actually made a jungle trek himself (not easy), or relied on many books describing others' experiences I don't know.

The base of the plot is that an African expedition was attacked by a large animal, and its members were killed. Poor quality videos show that the attacker seems to be a gorilla. But gorillas are peaceful, unlike chimpanzees. The idea is to go back to the same area, but to take a talking gorilla along. From the gorilla it may be possible to learn things about these violent gorillas.

A scientist, primatologist Dr. Peter Elliot, has a six year old female gorilla named Amy that has lived in civilization most of her life. Apparently her mother was killed, and she was rescued, brought to America, and raised. Peter and Amy are asked to join their African expedition. It's an opportunity to see

how Amy responds to the jungle, and perhaps to meeting other gorillas in the wild. Could that be useful?

“...on closer examination, no one could figure out quite what the advantages were -- most language-using primates were as baffled by wild primates as human beings were. Some, like the chimpanzee Arthur, denied any association with their own kind, referring to them as ‘black things.’ (Amy, who had been taken to the zoo to view other gorillas, recognized them but was haughty, calling them ‘stupid gorillas’ once she found that when she signed to them, they did not reply.)

“Such observations led another researcher, John Bates, to say in 1977 that ‘we are producing educated animal elite which demonstrates the same snobbish aloofness that a Ph.D. shows toward a truck driver. ... It is highly unlikely that the generation of language-using primates will be skillful ambassadors in the field. They are simply too disdainful.’ ” [p. 66]

Going to the African tropical jungle and traveling around is not simple.

“The early days of African exploration were incredibly hazardous. Even carefully managed expeditions lost half of their party or more. Those who did not succumb to malaria, sleeping sickness, and blackwater fever faced rivers teeming with crocodiles and hippos, jungles with leopards and suspicious, cannibalistic natives. And, for all its luxuriant growth, the rain forest provided little edible food; a number of expeditions had starved to death.” [p. 71]

Later in this book we meet hippos, and hear about nearby cannibalistic

natives, although then the adventurers lie low so as not to arouse the appetites of these natives.

When in Nairobi Amy needs an injection, we have this delightful tale:

“After the blood samples were drawn, the orderly relaxed a little. Packing up, he said, ‘Certainly is an ugly brute.’

“‘You’ve hurt her feelings,’ Elliot said.

“And, indeed, Amy was signing vigorously, *What ugly?*

“‘Nothing, Amy,’ Elliot said. ‘He’s just never seen a gorilla before.’

“The orderly said, ‘I beg your pardon?’

“‘You’ve hurt her feelings. You’d better apologize.’

“The orderly snapped his medical case shut. He stared at Elliot and then at Amy. ‘Apologize to *him?*’,

“‘Her,’ Elliot said. ‘Yes. How would you like to be told you’re ugly?’

“Elliot felt strongly about this. Over the years, he had come to feel acutely the prejudices that human beings showed toward apes, considering chimpanzees to be cute children, oranges to be wise old men, and gorillas to be hulking, dangerous brutes. They were wrong in every case.

“Each of these animals was unique, and did not fit the human stereotypes at all. Chimps, for example, were much more callous than gorillas ever were. Because chimps were extroverts, an angry chimp was far more dangerous than an angry gorilla; at the zoo, Elliot would watch in amazement as human mothers pushed their children closer to look at the chimps, but recoiled protectively at the sight of the gorillas. These mothers obviously did not know that

wild chimpanzees caught and ate human infants -- something gorillas never did.

“Elliot had witnessed repeatedly the human prejudice against gorillas, and had come to recognize its effect on Amy. Amy could not help the fact that she was huge and black and heavy-browed and squash-faced. Behind the face people considered so repulsive was an intelligent and sensitive consciousness, sympathetic to the people around her. It pained her when people ran away, or screamed in fear, or made cruel remarks.

“The orderly frowned. ‘You mean that he understands English?’

“‘Yes, she does.’” [p. 113]

After Nairobi, they fly across the rain forest, which was immense.

“Five hours out of Rawamagena, the landscape changed. Once past Goma, near the Zaire border, they found themselves flying over the easternmost fingers of the Congo rain forest. Elliot stared out the window, fascinated.

“Here and there in the pale morning light, a few fragile wisps of fog clung like cotton to the canopy of trees. And occasionally they passed the dark snaking curve of a muddy river, or the straight deep red gash of a road. But for the most part they looked down upon an unbroken expanse of dense forest, extending away into the distance as far as the eye could see.

“The view was boring, and simultaneously frightening -- it was frightening to be confronted by what Stanley had called, ‘the indifferent immensity of the natural world.’ As one sat in the air-conditioned comfort of an airplane seat, it was impossible not to recognize that this vast, monotonous forest was a giant creation of nature, utterly dwarfing

in scale the greatest cities or other creations of mankind. Each individual green puff of a tree had a trunk forty feet in diameter, soaring two hundred feet into the air; a space the size of a Gothic cathedral was concealed beneath its billowing foliage. And Elliot knew that the forest extended to the west for nearly two thousand miles, until it finally stopped at the Atlantic Ocean, on the west coast of Zaire.” [p. 131]

A little history of cannibalism in Africa, where some people prefer human meat over all other kinds:

“In 1910, Herbert Ward wrote of markets where slaves were sold ‘piecemeal whilst still alive. Incredible as it may appear, captives are led from place to place in order that individuals may have the opportunity of indicating, by external marks on the body, the portion they desire to acquire. The distinguishing marks are generally made by means of coloured clay or strips of grass tied in a peculiar fashion. The astounding stoicism of the victims, who thus witness the bargaining for their limbs piecemeal, is only equaled by the callousness with which they walk forward to meet their fate.’

“Such reports cannot be dismissed as late-Victorian hysteria, for all observers found the cannibals likable and sympathetic. Ward wrote that ‘the cannibals are not schemers and they are not mean. In direct opposition to all natural conjectures, they are among the best types of men.’ Bentley described them as ‘merry, manly fellows, very friendly in conversation and quite demonstrative in their affection.’

“Under Belgian colonial administration, cannibalism became much rarer -- by the 1950s, there

were even a few graveyards to be found – but no one seriously thought it had been eradicated. In 1956, H. C. Engerrwrote, ‘Cannibalism is far from being dead in Africa. ... I myself once lived in a cannibal village for a time, and found some [human] bones.

“The natives ...were pleasant enough people. It was just an old custom which dies hard.” [p. 148]

In Crichton’s *State of Fear*, there is a fellow who claims that cannibalism has never existed. It’s just a racist story told by white people to attack the African blacks. As vengeance, Crichton has the fellow captured by cannibals on a South Pacific isle, who do with him just as Crichton describes in this book.

Once in the jungle, Amy was happy, but she was slowing down the group:

“Amy no longer kept up with the group.

“She insisted on foraging along the trail, pausing to sit and chew tender shoots and grasses. She could not be budged or hurried, and ignored Elliot’s requests that she stay with them. She ate lazily, a pleasant, rather vacant expression on her face. In shafts of sunlight, she would lie on her back, and belch, and sigh contentedly.

“What the hell is this all about?” Ross asked, annoyed. They were not making good time.

“She’s become a gorilla again,” Elliot said. ‘Gorillas are vegetarians, and they spend nearly all day eating; they’re large animals, and they need a lot of food.’ Amy had immediately reverted to these traits.

“Well, can’t you make her keep up with us?”

“I’m trying. She won’t pay attention to me.’ And he knew why -- Amy was finally back in a world where Peter Elliot was irrelevant,

where she herself could find food and security and shelter, and everything else that she wanted.

“School’s out,’ Munro said, summarizing the situation.

“But he had a solution. ‘Leave her,’ he said crisply, and he led the party onward. He took Elliot firmly by the elbow.

“Don’t look back,’ he said. ‘Just walk on. Ignore her.’

“They continued for several minutes in silence.

“Elliot said, ‘She may not follow us.’

“Come, come, Professor,’ Munro said. ‘I thought you knew about gorillas.’

“I do,’ Elliot said.

“Then you know there are none in this part of the rain forest.’

“Elliot nodded; he had seen no nests or spoor. ‘But she has everything she needs here.’

“Not everything,’ Munro said. ‘Not without other gorillas around.’

“Like all higher primates, gorillas were social animals.

“They lived in a group, and they were not comfortable – or safe -- in isolation. In fact, most primatologists assumed that there was a need for social contact as strongly perceived as hunger, thirst, or fatigue.

“We’re her troop,” Munro said. ‘She won’t let us get far.’

“Several minutes later, Amy came crashing through the underbrush fifty yards ahead. She watched the group, and glared at Peter.

“Now come here, Amy,’ Munro said, ‘and I’ll tickle you.’ Amy bounded up and lay on her back in front of him. Munro tickled her.

“You see, Professor? Nothing to it.’

"Amy never strayed far from the group again." [p. 161-162]

Gorillas are afraid of water. To get Amy on a boat, she had to be injected with a tranquilizer. Later on, Amy disappeared:

"[Elliot] could not believe it.

"At first he thought she was just punishing him, running off to make him sorry for shooting the dart at her on the river. He explained to Munro and Ross that she was capable of such things, and they spent the next half hour wandering through the jungle, calling her name. But there was no response, just the eternal silence of the rain forest. The half hour became an hour, then almost two hours.

"Elliot was panic-stricken.

"When she still did not emerge from the foliage, another possibility had to be considered. "Maybe she ran off with the last group of gorillas, Munro said.

"Impossible," Elliot said.

"She's seven, she's near maturity." Munro shrugged. "She is a gorilla."

"Impossible," Elliot insisted.

"But he knew what Munro was saying. Inevitably, people who raised apes found at a certain point they could no longer keep them. With maturity the animals became too large, too powerful, too much their own species to be controllable. It was no longer possible to put them in diapers and pretend they were cute humanlike creatures. Their genes coded inevitable differences that ultimately became impossible to overlook.

"Gorilla troops aren't closed," Munro reminded him. "They accept strangers, particularly female strangers."

"She wouldn't do that," Elliot insisted. "She couldn't."

"Amy had been raised from infancy among human beings. She was much more familiar with the Westernized world" [p. 208]

Indeed Amy had joined a gorilla troop. But later she came back.

One of the most interesting questions about talking apes, is, will they teach the sign language to their offspring? Crichton says yes:

"This had been a longstanding question among researchers. But Washoe, the first primate in history to learn sign language, taught ASL [American Sign Language] to her offspring. Language-skilled primates freely taught other animals in captivity; for that matter, they would teach people, signing slowly and repeatedly until the stupid uneducated human person got the point.

"So it was possible for a primate tradition of language and behavior to be carried on for generations...." [p. 250]

Well, enough of these fascinating quotes about gorillas. While all of this is science, within a fictional form, toward the end of this book it becomes science fiction. A variety of unlikely things happen, based on clever speculations on history and science. Nicely done. Adventurous things happen to the group. Read the book and see. I enjoyed it.

But the stuff about gorillas is what I really liked.

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