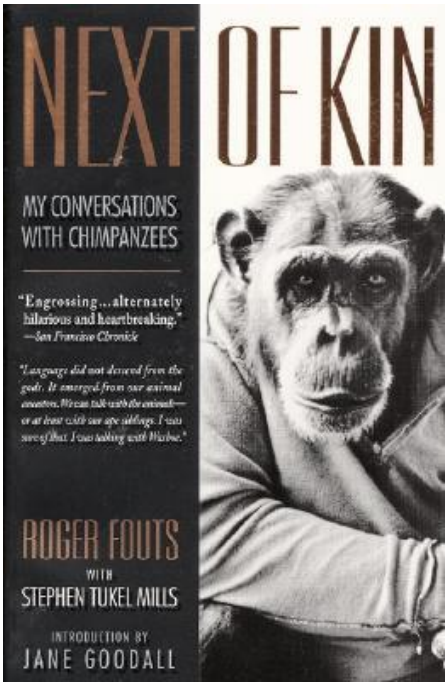

Next of Kin: My Conversations with Chimpanzees

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For 30 years Roger Fouts has pioneered communication with chimpanzees through sign language--beginning with a mischievous baby chimp named Washoe. This remarkable book describes Fout's odyssey from novice researcher to celebrity scientist to impassioned crusader for the rights of animals. Living and conversing with these sensitive creatures has given him a profound appreciation of what they can teach us about ourselves. It has also made Fouts an outspoken opponent of biomedical experimentation on chimpanzees. A voyage of scientific discovery and interspecies communication, this is a stirring tale of friendship, courage, and compassion that will change forever the way we view our biological--and spritual--next of kin.

Fouts is a professor of Psychology.

Next of Kin: My Conversations with Chimpanzees Details

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From Reader Review Next of Kin: My Conversations with Chimpanzees for online ebook

Lisa says

When I was a little girl and signing as a means of communicating with chimps was covered in documentaries and in the pages of Life and Look and National Geographic as a sort of miracle, I thought that Jane Goodall and her colleagues lived unimaginably charmed lives.

At the start of this memoir, one has that same sense: what could be more magical and marvelous than learning how to communicate with animals? Fouts gives you a front and center peek into our closest animal cousins' perspectives and experiences of the world. It dazzles. You begin the memoir thinking that he is the luckiest guy in the world, having, through several twists of fate (described with appealing self-effacement), landed in a particular academic program, which, in turn, leads to life-long work with chimpanzees.

After an extended (and very enjoyably described) honeymoon period, he methodically breaks your heart. You learn, alongside the author, about the tortures endured by chimpanzees (both in the wild and within animal research facilities). Ultimately, though, the book is inspiring: the author acts with uncommon decency and is able to use his stature to ensure the safety of a number of chimpanzees in an enduring way, and encourages the reader to become active in efforts to remove chimpanzees from animal testing facilities.

Kelsey says

A completely amazing, emotional book. A must read for anyone interested in human and animal welfare. I haven't been so emotionally affected by a book since "the only kayak."

p. 88 "I often found myself in heated exchanges with Washoe that reminded me of my own childhood. For ex., in early 1969, I had the thankless job of keeping her in the garage on laundry day while Susan Nichols used the washer in the Gardner's home to clean Washoe's clothes. Before, whenever Washoe had seen us gathering up her clothes, she'd know that the Gardner's backdoor would soon be open and she could sneak inside, where she would launch a chimp style raid: emptying the fridge, romping through the beds, and ransacking the closets. I always wound up frantically chasing her around the house. One time I turned on the vacuum cleaner to scare her out. This worked a little too well. in her panic to escape, she began defecating all across the Gardner's Persian rug.

The new laundry day strategy had me luring Washoe away from the trailer by suggesting that we GO GARAGE PLAY before Susan gathered up the dirty clothes. Washoe was usually enthusiastic about this b/c we had fixed up th garage as a rainy day playroom. We painted jungle scenes on the walls and put in a mattress for Washoe to bounce on, a parachute to swing on, and rugs to roll in. It was big enough for her to ride her tricycle around or to have wagon rides in. Once we were inside I would surreptitiously paddock the door.

This worked fine until Washoe looked out the window and saw Susan on her way to the Gardner's with the laundry. Then the garage became a prison and I was the big, bad brother. First she asked GO OUT. When I refused she signed, OPEN KEY, just in case I had forgotten how to get out. She even resorted to her most polite PLEASE OPEN. When I signed my refusal, she first began tickling me, then pinching and scratching,

and finally tearing my shirt off. I was bigger than Washoe, but nowhere near as strong. I had to do something fast of these games would turn into major brother sister brawls.

It was during one of these brawls that I remembered a trick my older brother played on me when they wanted to keep me from going into a forbidden room. They would tell me that the "bogeyman" was in that room and he would "get me if I went inside." There was no question that Washoe's bogeyman was big black dogs so I pointed to the locked garage door and signed BIG BLACK DOG OUT THERE. EAT LITTLE CHIMPANZEE. Right away Washoe's eyes got big and her hair stood on end. She stood up on two legs and began swaggering like one angry ape. She hammered on the wall with the back of her hand. Then, suddenly, she charged across the garage, leaping into the air at the last moment and slammed into the locked door with both feet. Then she came back over to me.

This was working better than I had ever imagined. Washoe had ripped so many of my shirts on laundry day that I decided it was time to even the score a little. I asked her, YOU WANT GO OUT AND PLAY WITH BLACK DOG? She retreated to the farthest corner of the garage.

These exchanges went considerably beyond the kind of non-verbal communication one can have with a chimpanzee using facial expression and body language, or with a dog through barks and single word commands. Washoe and I were communicating. Symbolically she gave me symbolic information - telling me to open the door and suggesting that I unlock it using the key. I responded with symbolic information, false though it way, about the big black dog. If I hadn't been able to conjure up a non-existent dog, and if Washoe hadn't been able to comprehend it, I might not have been able to defuse our conflict. My soon might have been acquiring English faster and more comprehensively than Washoe was acquiring American Sign Language, but they were both using language to communicate abstractly and effectively. For me, this was the most powerful evidence supporting Darwin's theory that human language emerged from our ape-like ancestor."

Katherine says

I worked with these chimps one summer. They really are as amazing as the book portrays them.

Peacegal says

Awe, humor, humility, and sadness are on display in the story of Washoe, the first signing chimpanzee. Fouts takes you into the world of Washoe and her family and traces his journey from a naïve young scientist who never thought about the ethics involved in the 1970s rush to raise baby chimps in human families, to a seasoned advocate for chimpanzees both in captivity and the wild.

Washoe herself is a delight. Imagine an especially clever kindergartener with the strength of multiple human beings. Her antics in the first section of the book will both amaze and humble readers. At the same time, there is a grimness behind it all. Washoe is a piece of property, a laboratory animal kidnapped from her natural habitat and subject to the whims of her owners. She is bought, sold, and transferred—sometimes to pleasant places, other times to conditions that would be considered inhumane for the world’s most violent criminals.

Fouts’s recollections of animal researcher Dr. William Lemmon, Washoe’s owner, are especially disquieting. The animal research community has long insisted their ranks care about animal welfare and don’t wish to cause unnecessary suffering, but the history of the behavior of some prominent researchers sheds light on why people who care about animals tend to distrust these assurances.

In addition to his insights and observations of chimpanzees, the author also makes frequent side-trips into evolution, communication, linguistics and legal personhood, which readers may or may not find interesting depending upon their point of view.

It is notable that this book was published over twenty years ago, so some things have changed for chimps, at least in the United States. When Fouts was writing, chimps were still being subjected to invasive research. Today, invasive research on great apes has mercifully ended (although such research on all other animals, including monkeys, continues), and many chimps have been retired to a sanctuary system (although many more still remain on laboratory property). We even have a quote from a National Institutes of Health spokesperson stating that chimps are “very social and sensitive animals” who deserve a peaceful retirement, conflicting mightily with the NIH’s successful battles against even the most conservative welfare improvements for apes in laboratories twenty and thirty years ago.

Lauri says

This is one of the most powerful books I've ever read. At once, it is eye-opening, heartwarming, and heartbreaking. I cried and smiled and laughed and cried some more. You'll learn about everything from childhood autism, to the evolution of language, to the fight for the humane treatment of lab animals. This book is flawlessly constructed and flows effortlessly from start to finish, making it a book that I couldn't put down for two days straight. What started out an experiment to teach one chimp how to communicate using sign language, exploded into a phenomonon. The auther dedicated his whole life to humanely working with and protecting these chimps (often times, at the expense of his own personal gain). As a side note, the author and Central Washington State cooperated some years ago to create a permanent home for a handful of the signing chimps. Called the Chimpanzee & Human Communication Institute, it can be toured for a small donation.

Jonathan Ashleigh says

This is probably my favorite non-fiction book. If you are wondering why I only gave it four stars: that is because some would say there is more truth in fiction. As a linguist, I loved reading the way the chimps learn language. Before the project fell apart, chimps were already teaching there young without any outside assistance. I wish that there project would not have fallen apart for two reasons - first, the language development in the animals as future generations learned sign language would have gotten even cooler and second, because reading about tortured chimps is depressing.

John says

This book gets 5 stars because of all that it taught me about chimpanzees and scientific study. I never realized just how intelligent chimpanzees really are. I always thought that chimps using ASL were only using

1 or 2 word combinations, and only with nouns. It is amazing the complex sentences, thoughts, and emotions that these "animals" are sharing. I'll never look at a chimp the same again.

There is an ethical dilemma with using primates for scientific study, or for using any animals for that matter. The author has the extremist view of removing all forms of non-observational animal research. However, he never pushes this view onto the reader, and his reasons for his stance are clear and logical. I may not share the same view for all animals, but I also didn't spend 30 years of my life working with a chimpanzee family that I love.

Antonia says

TEN STARS! This is an amazing book, the engrossing story of primatologist Roger Fouts and the several chimps, including the famous Washoe, to whom he taught American Sign Language. I'm sure I'd have enjoyed reading it, but oh man, the audio is so, so good. Fouts narrates. As is often the case when a book is narrated by its author, it doesn't sound as though he's reading a book to you, but rather as though he's talking to you. Besides, there are sound effects. Fouts was a dedicated teacher and friend to several chimps. His story is tender, insightful, and passionate. Both heartwarming and heartbreaking. Fouts reveals the dark side of some of the animal research carried out in the latter decades of the last century, the inhumane treatment of the animals, and his path from researcher to animal rights advocate.

Do listen to this! It could be a life-changer.

Matt says

This is a powerful, life-changing book. It is a fluid mixture of entertaining narrative, heart-breaking details about the treatment of chimpanzees in laboratories, and engaging discourse about evolutionary theory, the development of language in chimps and humans, etc.

Through the entirety of the book & the microcosm of Washoe (the central chimp in the story) the message comes across that these animals are individuals, complete with personalities, moving emotions, and complex thoughts. They show a sense of humor, personal characteristics, and even compassion (such as when Washoe rescues another chimp from drowning). The narrations of the conversations had with the chimps are some of the most powerful aspects of the book: you have a sense of meeting a mind not much different than your own.

Fouts humbly highlights his journey from almost-accidental chimp language researcher, to despondent alcoholic, to activist working on behalf of these amazing animals. He highlights a central contradiction in medical research involving chimpanzees: they are studied because they are so similar to humans, yet shouldn't this similarity also cause us to see and respect their personhood? His tours of medical research facilities and the tiny, isolated cages in which chimps are essentially poisoned and tortured, will break your heart. Aptly he uses Shakespeare's quote to warn us against having "All pity choked by custom of fell deed" (p. 318).

This book will make you laugh, cry, and--above all--think!

Megan says

It was Washoe who taught me that "human" is only an adjective that describes "being", and that the essence of who I am is not my humanness but my beingness. There are human beings, chimpanzee beings, and cat beings.

How often do you read a book that changes your life? I will never be the same now that I have read this. At times charming, funny, eye-opening, and devastatingly heartbreaking, Roger Fouts describes his research on communicating with chimpanzees using sign language. Chimpanzees have feelings, social lives, and (he proves) the ability to communicate not only with each other, but with us. This book has broadened my horizons, made me laugh, and broke my heart.

Charity says

Holy moly. This book is awesome.

I can't remember how we found this book. I think some website (maybe Goodreads) recommended it because my nine-year-old was reading every single thing Jane Goodall wrote. My daughter read it first, and then as she was getting ready to return it to the library said, "Mom, I really think you should read this book. It's really good."

Once I started the book, it didn't take me long to agree with her.

I was probably already primed to find this book amazing. Whenever I go to a zoo or an animal sanctuary, I always have mixed feelings, especially when I see the captive primates, whether they're gorillas, chimpanzees, golden lion tamarins, capuchin monkeys, or marmosets. I was reminded of this when my family visited the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., last month and observed the gorillas. I recognize the realities of habitat loss and other aspects of modern life that make it impossible to return many of these beings to the wild, but they're just a little too close for comfort. I empathize with them a little too much to make watching them in captivity completely comfortable.

Reading Fouts' book emphasized all of these feelings I was already having. It was a very emotional read.

In this book, Fouts (with Stephen Tukel Mills) addresses issues of language acquisition, how learning happens (especially the use of rewards and punishments in learning), the close evolutionary relationship between chimpanzees and humans, the bias of the speaking/hearing population for spoken language, the morality of using non-human animals for biomedical testing, and the arbitrary boundaries we use to define "human" and "non-human." While imparting all of this information, the book reads like a memoir---a very compelling memoir.

Near the end, I started asking "where are they now?" about the chimpanzees in the book, which Fouts wrote in 1997. After an internet search, I learned that Dar, Moja, and Washoe have since died, and that Tatu and Loulis are now living at Fauna Foundation in Quebec, only a few hours' drive from where we live now. My

daughter and I are now looking at the adopt-a-chimp and membership options at the foundation, and wondering if we can swing a visit.

I also began reviewing all of my household purchases. I lean towards products not tested on animals anyway, but sometimes---I admit---I am swayed by a good price. There are a surprising number of products in my house that wouldn't make the cut if I were really serious about avoiding products tested on animals.

So basically, this was a compelling and poignant read that has compelled me to make some changes in my everyday life. I'm now thinking of buying this for a half-dozen people for Christmas. Although since they're all primates, maybe they'd appreciate dress-up clothes and a bouquet of bananas more.

Here are some of my favorite quotes from the book:

"Once triggered, learning will not stop---unless it is hijacked by conditioning." (83)

"Creativity and learning are examples of innate behavior that can only be hindered, not helped, by rewards." (84)

Of a baby chimpanzee: "Until she grasps her groups' specific gestures and social cues---its dialect---she won't be able to learn important skills from her mother, form alliances with her peers, attract a mate, and raise her own children." (87)

"If our ape ancestors communicated gesturally, were early man's first languages signed? If so, how and when did these signed languages become spoken?" (90)

"In fact, during the first half of this [the twentieth] century, educators tried mightily to eradicate American Sign Language because they thought its gestures were too monkeylike"; speech was seen as the 'higher and finer part' of language." (96)

"Science that dissociates itself from the pain of others soon becomes monstrous." (372)

"Some scientists love to measure an animal's mind by comparing it to the human I.Q. In these tests chimpanzees come off like mentally disabled children or adults. But when *we* are dropped in the jungle, we suddenly test like mentally disabled chimpanzees, and the chimpanzees look like certified geniuses." (376)

Ariel says

This book was a heartwarming and heartbreaking story about people--not all of them human people. It tells the story of Roger, a chimpanzee language researcher, and his companion and colleague in his study, a chimpanzee named Washoe. Washoe is crossfostered with humans in her early life, where she learns to use American Sign Language. Along the way we meet other chimpanzees, each with their own personality and style. Sadly Roger helplessly watches many of them head into biomedical research laboratories, where they are considered property without any rights. (view spoiler) I would recommend this book to anyone, although I caution that some of the things the chimps endure (Never with Roger, who is a respectful man now dedicated to animal rights) are so horrible I felt nauseated. This book was published in 1997, about two years after I declared my vegetarianism at eight. I feel heartbroken that this was happening while I doted on my stuffed animal companions and hamsters. This book was a wake-up call to me about makeup. I just started

using makeup about a year ago, and for some reason it never occurred to me they'd test it on animals. I am giving up some favorite brands and using only cruelty free ones. This book is wonderful and thought provoking.

Hannah Greendale says

Click here to watch a video featuring this book on my channel, *From Beginning to Bookend*.

Zbigniew Podedworny says

Fantastyczna opowie?? o naszych kuzynach- szympansach. Wywo?uj?ca wiele emocji- od ?miechu przez z?o?? do ?ez wzruszenia.
Bardzo polecam!

Louisa says

Is the use of language unique to humankind? How and when did our hominid ancestors acquire language? Do chimpanzees - who are genetically closer to humans than they are to other apes - have language abilities? Is sign language useful where other communication channels fail, for example in children with autism? *Next of Kin* addresses these and other questions through the story of a young female chimpanzee who was taught American Sign Language in the 1960s. Roger Fouts was assigned to Project Washoe, an initiative of Dr. Allen Gardner to raise a chimpanzee as a human child and communicate only through sign language (everyone who worked with Washoe had to take a vow of silence) and his observations are recorded in this book.

Fouts argues that it is a mistake to equate language with speech, that speech and the communication through gestures require the same cognitive basis for language in the brain, and that primates have had language capabilities for millions of years.
His experiences with Washoe - carefully recorded and scientifically tested - proved Chomsky and Descartes wrong and Darwin right: the use of language is not unique to humankind. Chimpanzees really are our next of kin.
An excellent, excellent work.
