

Chimpanzee memoirs

stories of studying
and saving our Closest
living relatives

edited by

stephen ross and lydia hopper
illustrations by dawn sherman

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Raven Jackson-Jewett

Dr. Raven Jackson-Jewett is the attending veterinarian at Chimp Haven, the largest chimpanzee sanctuary in the world. Nestled within two hundred forested acres in northern Louisiana, near the city of Shreveport, Chimp Haven is the forever home to more than three hundred chimpanzees, most of whom were once subjects of biomedical research in laboratories across the United States. In her role, she is charged with maintaining the health and well-being of the entire chimpanzee population at the sanctuary.

An Unlikely Inspiration

I have always been a nurturer by nature, drawn to the sciences, and intrinsically motivated to help those who are incapable of defending themselves or having their own voice. Those who know me might describe me as a protective, compassionate caregiver. These characteristics make up who I am as an individual, and early on they quite naturally led to my interest in the field of medicine and my love affair with animals.

As a child I enjoyed my life growing up in New York City, the Big Apple. I lived in a high-rise apartment building and was lucky to be surrounded by constant love and adoration. One day, my mother and I walked hand in hand toward the noisy elevator waiting to whisk us down to the first floor as we always did when we set off somewhere. But on that particular day, when I stepped into the elevator, I came face to face with

someone I will never forget.

He was dressed in a blue jacket, red shirt, jeans, and a baseball cap. He matched my height. The brown leather leash that was attached to him immediately grabbed my attention. I wondered why it was necessary, but then I focused my attention back to him and stared. I was fascinated with him, and I wanted to know more about him and get closer, but the more I tried the closer my mother held me. His bright eyes peered directly into mine as if he was as curious about me as I was of him. When we got off the elevator, I eagerly asked my mother, “What was that?” and she told me that he was a chimpanzee! That name was forever etched in my consciousness and that was the day I knew, somehow, I would have a closer connection with this species.

My initial encounter with that pet chimpanzee in a New York elevator led to my fervent explorations of wild chimpanzees. Inevitably, I stumbled upon Jane Goodall and her work with the wild populations in Tanzania. Even at a young age I admired her, calling her the “quiet storm” because I assumed she possessed an outward gentle spirit with a fiery heart nestled within. She seemed willing to withstand adversity for the sake of a completely different species and that was so admirable to me. My knowledge of her, coupled with my upbringing, inspired me to be the voice for those that couldn’t advocate for themselves.

I became even further interested in chimpanzees after completing a wildlife and ecology course as part of my undergraduate curriculum. At the time, I was conducting behavioral observations of a chimpanzee troop housed at Montgomery Zoo in Alabama. There, I met John Paul, a juvenile chimpanzee whose mischievous nature caught my interest. His behavior and unique mannerisms were intriguing, but I desired to understand him on a deeper level. I felt a connection with him that at the time I couldn’t explain.

His eyes said, “There’s more to me worth knowing.”

It was the “more” in his eyes that reminded me of troubled children I have encountered who are funneled through various facilities due to behavioral issues but for whom no one ever stops to see what is at the core. Like these children, it seemed like the zoo visitors only focused on the chimpanzees’ outward display of emotions, but I desired to understand the inward driving forces behind their behavioral tactics. It was increasingly clear to me that a chimpanzee is much more than just a physical being requiring medical care but one that is psychologically complex and emotionally advanced. Nothing would stop me from working with these amazing animals.

Buster and Me

As the attending veterinarian at the world’s largest chimpanzee sanctuary, I have been fortunate to meet many chimpanzees and build relationships with the chimpanzee residents for whom I care. Every relationship is a little different; however, one of particular importance to me is with an adult male chimpanzee named Buster.

My story with Buster actually began years before either of us got to Chimp Haven, when I was a student extern at a primate laboratory in New Mexico, which is where I got my first veterinary experience with chimpanzees. On my first day there, I was somewhat overwhelmed with the notable differences I was seeing between the research and zoological settings. My attention was immediately seized by a large male chimpanzee. His appearance was very distinctive: his face was much lighter and more mottled than the darker-hued chimpanzee faces I was accustomed to. But it wasn’t just his appearance that captured my enthusiasm to get to know him but the mischievous behaviors he displayed, not unlike John Paul from the zoo. I guess that is “my type”!

The staff quickly warned me about Buster's favorite thing to do, pelting them with well-aimed feces, and how it seemed to give him great joy at the expense of the target. I considered their warnings, but at the same time, I was very eager to know more about him. Each subsequent day, my visits with Buster and his group became my highlight. As soon as he would set eyes on me, he would seek out his large plastic barrel and begin to push it brusquely around the perimeter of his enclosure with much fervor and commotion. Of course, the intention of his display with the barrel was to ensure that I knew that he was the one in charge here, but each time he would abruptly stop and plop himself down in front of me. We would stay like that for a long time, simply staring intently into each other's eyes. When it was time for me to go, he would press his rotund belly up to the wire mesh for a quick friendly rub. These brief but meaningful daily interactions resulted in a lasting relationship between us.

One of the great aspects of this story is that we were reunited ten years later. In November 2015, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced that it would no longer support any biomedical research on chimpanzees and that all NIH-owned and NIH-supported chimpanzees would be retired to Chimp Haven. So, as the director of veterinary care and attending veterinarian at Chimp Haven, you can imagine my excitement when I was notified that we would be helping to relocate chimpanzees from the same research facility in New Mexico that housed the first chimpanzee to steal my heart, Buster.

I remember my heart beating rapidly as I scanned the master list of the chimpanzees housed at the facility in search of his name. One page down and fear set in as I did not see it. "Had he passed away?"

I asked myself. Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death in the chimpanzee population and Buster definitely fit the characteristics of young males who pass away unexpectedly due to sudden cardiac arrest. I felt the tears welling up, prematurely mourning the potential loss of my first chimpanzee love. But then, there was his name! On the day of his transport, I had the same feeling one has when anticipating seeing a loved one after a long period of time. When the truck pulled into the sanctuary, I felt my heart swell. He responded to my voice and, just like many years before, gestured for me to rub his belly. It was validation that chimpanzees are capable of building relationships that can last a lifetime. Buster and I have remained special friends, and ours is not unlike a close friendship between humans. We have our good days (sharing a secret hand gesture that no one else can decipher) and the occasional difficult one (grumpily not acknowledging one another when we have been offended). Buster and I are living proof that chimpanzees know the value of a long-term trusting bond; we have a friendship I will cherish for the rest of my life.

Recognizing strength and truth

As an African-American female, I have faced many obstacles personally and professionally. Stereotypical clichés depict women of my ethnicity as exuding strength that does not correlate to the emotional pain they’ve endured at the hands of others. This has desensitized other ethnic groups from recognizing our truth. Oppressive measures taken against minorities have forced us to demonstrate a higher capacity of strength to overcome various obstacles. Society has taught us not only to exhibit strength but also resilience.

While actively providing hands-on care to chimpanzees I am constantly awed by their physical agility and strength.

Observing a young male effortlessly toss a tire weighing forty-five kilograms across an enclosure quickly reminds you of chimpanzees' brute strength. However, it is not merely the physical strength of chimpanzees that encompasses who they are as a species but their spiritual resilience as well. As a medical professional, I can firmly attest to the chimpanzees' ability to recover rapidly from both physical injury and illness. Moreover, having knowledge of the research histories of many chimpanzees in the captive population for which I care, I can only imagine the psychological resilience necessary to recover from the invasive experiences they have experienced. Hundreds of chimpanzees have faced many extremely difficult research protocols for the purpose of advancing human medicine. It is truly amazing that they are able to build trusting relationships with the human population that also bears the face of their pain. I am honored to be a student of their astounding ability to endure insurmountable afflictions while continuing to exemplify strength and resilience.

My interactions with these chimpanzees have been an even greater influence on my personal ability to recognize that my strength is rooted in my willingness to walk in forgiveness and show love to those who have inflicted emotional pain on me. Although I can never forget the discrimination and social injustices that have occurred regarding minorities, I am that much more driven to be a productive steward to both humanity and the animal kingdom. Globally, the captive chimpanzee population has taught me to remain dedicated to my position in life and career by continuously exuding an attitude that promotes positivity and cohesiveness in a society that can appear to be solely focused on self-preservation. Fully aware of the sacrifices chimpanzees have made for the betterment of humanity, I am honored to practice sacrificial servitude in turn for them.

Dreams, nightmares, and salvation

Every day I arrive to work at Chimp Haven, it feels like I am walking in a dream. Forming and maintaining relationships with hundreds of chimpanzees who depend on me for their lifetime care is both daunting and immensely fulfilling. But, of course, there are always difficult days, both in terms of my professional life and how I balance my personal challenges as well.

Several years ago, I became the primary caretaker for my father as he suffered from end-stage disease. The requirements of my job make it extremely challenging to spend extended periods of time away from the sanctuary, so I struggled with finding the balance between being the primary caretaker for more than three hundred chimpanzees and the man who gave me life. Of course, I was able to take some time away from work to stay by my father's bedside, but even though I was only a phone call away, I worried about the chimpanzees all the time.

When my father eventually died, I was grief-stricken. Barely was I able to bury him before I, too, became gravely ill. I was diagnosed with a severe case of Stevens-Johnson syndrome (SJS) and toxic epidermal necrolysis (TEN) following an allergic reaction to an antibiotic injection. SJS/TEN leads to blistering and peeling of the skin and mucous membranes. Before I knew what was happening, I was lying helplessly in a hospital bed for the first time in my life. From the caregiver, I had become the patient.

Still grieving and experiencing excruciating pain, I was a complete mess. I was unable to speak and relied heavily on everyone around me to make medical decisions on my behalf. I remember thinking, "Is this what it feels like to have no voice?" I wondered if I would ever see the chimpanzees again. Even then, under those circumstances, I felt I was

gaining a better understanding of what it was like to be voiceless and I vowed always to be the fiery advocate for the chimpanzees moving forward. Of course, my family was at the helm of my desire to regain strength and survive, but the animals that I care for daily have also left an imprint on my heart that makes them family, too.

Although doctors told me it would be about three months before I would recover and could return to home and work, I was released after just one. My first day back at the sanctuary was very challenging. I was nervous how the chimpanzees would react to me after being gone for so long. I was so happy that they were ecstatic to see me but also clearly saw they noticed something different about me. They immediately began looking me over and seemed to notice the subtle variations in my skin pigmentation. Many of them peered deeply in my eyes, staring intently at me, and I tried to let them know that I was okay. I was amazed that they could so astutely recognize changes in my physical appearance. Although I have worked with this population for many years, they always allow me the pleasure of learning something new about them.

Innovation and the fight for life

As a clinician, my primary focus is direct medical management of the chimpanzees in my care. One of my early challenges as a veterinarian was providing clinical oversight of a captive population of chimpanzees that had been experimentally infected with diseases that do not naturally occur in the species. This required a global view of the animals' health, including the potential of future unforeseen complications associated with past research, to develop a comprehensive medical plan in the best interest of each patient. I had to gain a vast understanding of the pharmacokinetics of therapeutic options and the potential

benefits and risks of use of off-label medications in the chimpanzees.

Cotton's case was one that both challenged and inspired me to step outside of the box of pharmaceutical options for chimpanzees. He was born in April 1977 and arrived at Chimp Haven in November 2006. Cotton was known for his dramatic growls for treats and attention and the way he would present his entire bottom lip for his favorite juice. But his medical status was of particular interest to me as well. Cotton's research history involved experimental infection with simian immunodeficiency virus of chimpanzees (SIVcpz), the forbearer of HIV-1. I was able to determine from the research literature that chimpanzees with SIV not only suffer a negative impact on their health and reproduction but, in the wild, such chimpanzees can actually develop AIDS-like symptoms and can have up to a sixteen-fold increased risk of death. When I met Cotton, however, we knew virtually nothing about how to treat a chimpanzee experimentally infected with SIVcpz.

One's sense of urgency is impacted when you have the eyes of one you care about staring back at you. I knew Cotton's long-term prognosis was poor if I was unable to maintain his immune function and reduce his viral load. Ironically, my most advantageous innovation to date was the use of combination antiretroviral therapy that I gave him. This treatment was the product of biomedical research with chimpanzees that in turn was used to offer life-saving treatment in Cotton's case. Data from his case demonstrated that SIVcpz could cause immunodeficiency and other hallmarks of AIDS in captive chimpanzees but that combination antiretroviral therapy served as an effective therapeutic intervention. To this day, Cotton is the only chimpanzee in the world to have received this therapy, which enabled him to thrive for years at Chimp Haven. Later, we published a report on Cotton's treatment to ensure others could learn from our

success.

Finding purpose

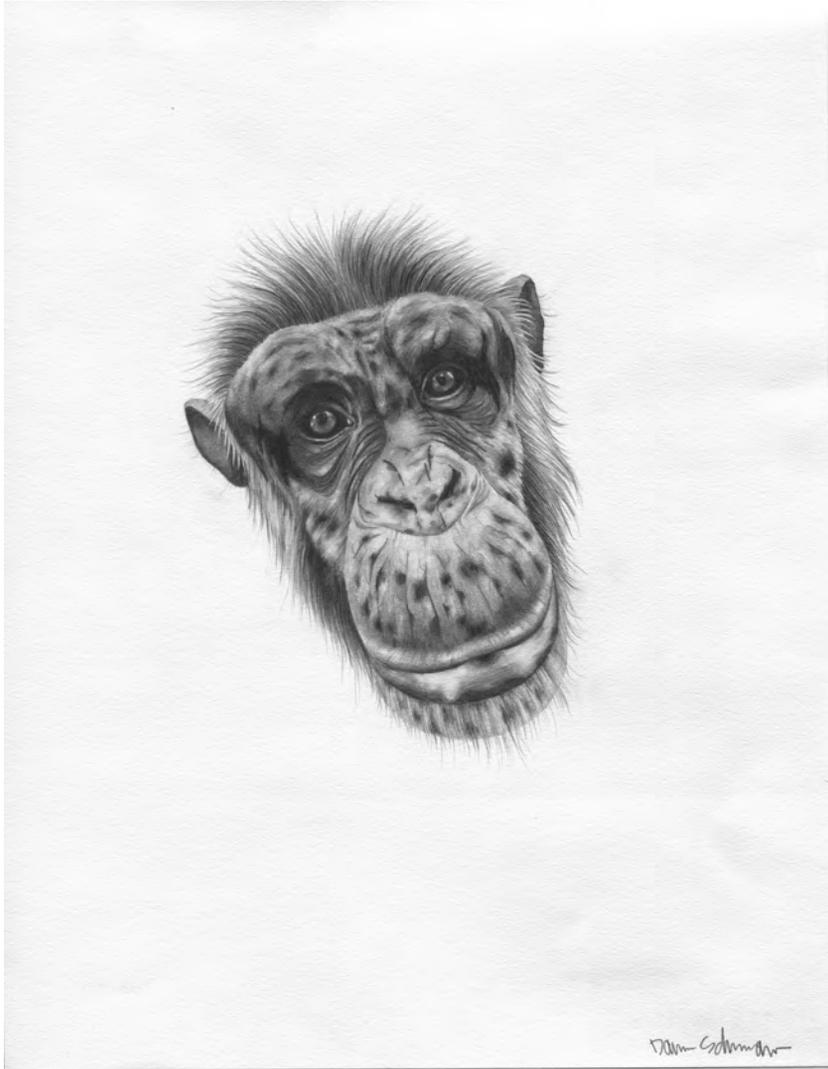
I entered into the veterinary profession desiring to specialize in chimpanzee medicine. I never imagined my dream would someday involve chimpanzees being retired from biomedical research during my tenure, and, furthermore, that I would be a key resource in relocation decisions and play an integral part in relocating hundreds of chimpanzees to their forever home.

I am most proud of the fact that I took the first steps toward realizing my dream of becoming a chimpanzee veterinarian. I did not allow the naysayers or my fears to deter me from what I was created to do. I believe that we are born with a key purpose to fulfill while on Earth, and our life experiences help us develop this purpose. In taking those immediate first steps in my own life, I placed myself in alignment for my part in the bigger picture of chimpanzee retirement from biomedical research. My life has been intertwined with that of the chimpanzee and I hope my legacy will demonstrate that nothing is impossible when you are in the proper position.

My advice to the next generation is to know the beauty behind why they were made—it is for a great purpose. We all have beautiful lives begging to be lived and, unfortunately, many people will never walk in that fullness because they will fail to embrace who they truly are. Our culture beats images of “success” into our brains daily. But truly accepting the magnitude of individual purpose begins with releasing misaligned ideas of self. Children should learn the importance of defining who they are at their core, standing firm in their personal values and vision. Success will forever be elusive if the world’s standards become theirs. I challenge the next generation of veterinarians to look within themselves to determine what inspires them, to set their

own goals, and to build authentic experiences, rather than conforming to others' expectations.

Life often requires us to move forward without seeing the entire plan, from a position of fear to faith. The best ideas in the world are lying dormant in someone's head. People should be inspired to invent a solution if it doesn't exist. I endorse evolving veterinarians to invest in the newer versions of themselves by becoming grounded in a community of people with whom they can create. This investment begins by giving themselves the freedom to make mistakes and embracing the unknown. There will forever be road-blocks between where one begins and where one desires to be. They should know that they will win at some things along the way and fail at others, but failures, too, are an integral part of the process of growth. My personal testimony is that all adversity faced continuously molds you into the person you are to become. Fear and self-doubt are natural, and life's encounters with perceived failures, heartache, and pain don't diminish you as a veterinarian because you have purpose. Fulfill that purpose.



Buster

This essay is excerpted from the new book ["Chimpanzee Memoirs: Stories of Studying and Saving our Closest Living Relatives,"](#) edited by Stephen Ross and Lydia Hopper. Illustrations by Dawn Scherman. Published May 2022 by Columbia University Press.

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ADDENDUM

FOR REFERENCE, here is the foreword by Stephen Ross

Stephen Ross

Dr. Stephen Ross is the director of the Lester E. Fisher Center for the Study and Conservation of Apes at Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago and coeditor of *Chimpanzee Memoirs*, *Chimpanzees in Context*, and *The Mind of the Chimpanzee*. He has studied chimpanzee behavior, cognition, and welfare for over twenty-five years working in lab, zoo, and sanctuary settings. He has served as chair of both the Chimpanzee Species Survival Plan (SSP) and the board of directors at Chimp Haven; he also founded Project ChimpCARE in 2009.

origins

We all love a good origin story. And the best origin stories are of course from those that become superheroes, such as Spiderman's fateful encounter with a radioactive spider or a young Bruce Wayne witnessing the murder of his parents, which eventually created his transformation into Batman. Such fanciful comic book tales are inspiring because they demonstrate how anybody, following a twist of fate or seemingly innocuous experience, can grow to become a transformative figure to others.

The psychologist Robin Rosenberg wrote that the importance of superhero origin stories are not that they show us how to become super, but how to be *heroes*, choosing altruism and the greater good over more materialistic pursuits. She describes the transformation of "ordinary people" into heroes as undergoing three relatable experiences: trauma, destiny, and sheer chance, themes you will hear repeated in this collection of essays. These familiar trajectories inspire us and provide us with models of

overcoming adversity and discovering inner strength with which to do good in the world. Not all of us aspire to fight crime, and frankly, the best origin stories are those from real life. As a youngster growing up in Canada in the 1980s and 1990s, I had my own set of heroes. I am so fortunate to count my parents among them, but also athletes like Roberto Clemente and actors like Harrison Ford. But as I grew increasingly interested in primates and especially chimpanzees, I became aware that even the field of primatology had heroes.

Over the past twenty-five years I have worked in this field, it has become increasingly clear that I am not the only one with a piqued interest in knowing more about the people who have dedicated their lives to studying, understanding, and protecting our closest living relative, the chimpanzee. In a way, these heroes are even more remarkable than the comic book characters fighting for humanity because they are fighting not for their own species but for another!

The origin story of this book itself is interesting. My coeditor, Lydia Hopper, and I had just finished hosting an international meeting of chimpanzee experts entitled *Chimpanzees in Context*. It was the fourth in a long-running series of such chimp-centric meetings held every decade and was a wonderful opportunity to interface with some of the greatest chimpanzee scientists in the world. As we wrapped up the organization for the event, two things became clear to us. The first is that we really were on the precipice of a new era: either retired or preparing to do so, and a whole new generation of bright minds was emerging in the field. Capturing this moment, the passing of the proverbial baton, seemed too good to pass up. Second, despite the vast collection of books about chimpanzees, there seemed relatively little in the way of coverage of the people who conducted such work. As such, this book is not about chimpanzees but about the people who study them and work to protect them around the world.

The collection of essays we've gathered here tell the stories of

these heroes: what inspired them, what shaped their career choices, and what motivates them to continue to find solutions for the many challenges that chimpanzees face today. Some of these heroes you know and others you don't. They are both junior and senior in their careers, and their work spans anthropology, psychology, ecology, conservation, biology, and environmental ethics. These are the stories of people growing up in the English countryside, the suburbs of Tokyo, and the villages in Congo. Of their first exposures to chimpanzees in a rustic zoo, a New York elevator, and in the forests surrounding their homes. And how they overcame unfair limitations placed on them by others because of their education, class, gender, and race. Sixteen chapters and sixteen stories answer the question that so many people have asked us: "How did you get to work with chimpanzees?"

different paths

A book about those who have dedicated their lives to chimpanzees could start no other way than with Dr. Jane Goodall. Of course, her name is virtually synonymous with the study of this species, and in many ways, she is the uber-hero of the community, having inspired the work of most of the other scientists voicing their stories in this book. Her beginnings are known to not only primatologists but a much broader swath of the world's population. Carrying not much more than the confidence placed in her by Louis Leakey and her mother, Jane's path from a university secretary to global conservation icon inspired so many other authors in this collection.

In fact, Jane's legacy is overtly on display here, with Jane's direct protégé Anne Pusey sharing her stories of meeting Jane and being thrust into the fieldwork at Gombe Research Centre in the 1990s. And, subsequently, Anne's student Elizabeth Lonsdorf represents the third generation of influential scientists to come out of this academic lineage.

But Jane is certainly not the only well-established chimpanzee expert with decades of field experience under their

proverbial belt. Richard Wragham, Tetsuro Matsuzawa, John Mitani, and Christophe Boesch have each studied chimpanzees for at least twenty years and collectively represent some of the most influential thinking about wild chimpanzee behavior, ecology, and cognition. Theirs is a legacy of a generation of intensive groundbreaking fieldwork that sets the bar for our understanding of wild chimpanzees and continues to produce the next generation of scientists dedicated to that topic, including two others represented in this book: Melissa Emery Thompson and Tatyana Humle.

While much public attention has been given to Western scientists crossing oceans to study chimpanzees in Africa, incredible work has long been accomplished in the very countries in which wild chimpanzees live. David Koni grew up in the Republic of the Congo and moved from the capital city of Brazzaville to a small town in the north. There he discovered the world of chimpanzees firsthand as a child visiting his uncle and began a journey that has led him to participate in critical conservation work protecting chimpanzees in his home country. Likewise, the story of Caroline Asiimwe is a remarkable tale of perseverance and compassion that started at the Uganda Wildlife Conservation Education Centre (“Entebbe Zoo”) and continues today high along the Albertine Rift at the Budongo Conservation Field Station.

Whether rescuing orphaned chimpanzees in Africa or providing a forever home for former laboratory subjects in the United States, sanctuaries are playing an ever-increasing role in caring for displaced chimpanzees. Lilly Ajarova established herself as a pioneer in her native Uganda, rising to lead the Ngamba Island Chimpanzee Sanctuary. Raven Jackson-Jewett, the head veterinarian at Chimp Haven, the world’s largest chimpanzee sanctuary, shares her experiences growing up in New York City and the challenges she faced overcoming the limitations that people unwisely set on her. And Brian Hare, among the first to recognize the vast research potential of African sanctuaries, weaves stories

contrasting his experiences with chimpanzees and bonobos, putting much of what we know about chimpanzees into context with their sister species.

Though much of the most iconic chimpanzee work has taken place in forests across equatorial Africa, such work has been complemented and enhanced by the behavior and cognition work taking place in captive settings. The work of Frans de Waal is well known to science-savvy audiences around the world through his best-selling books, but here he relates how he bucked traditional sociological paradigms in his native Netherlands and used the study of chimpanzee social lives to expand our understanding of the origins of human behavior. Likewise, Andy Whiten shares how using artificial fruits resulted in his seminal work, which explains the broad scope of chimpanzee culture and traditions that we know so well today.

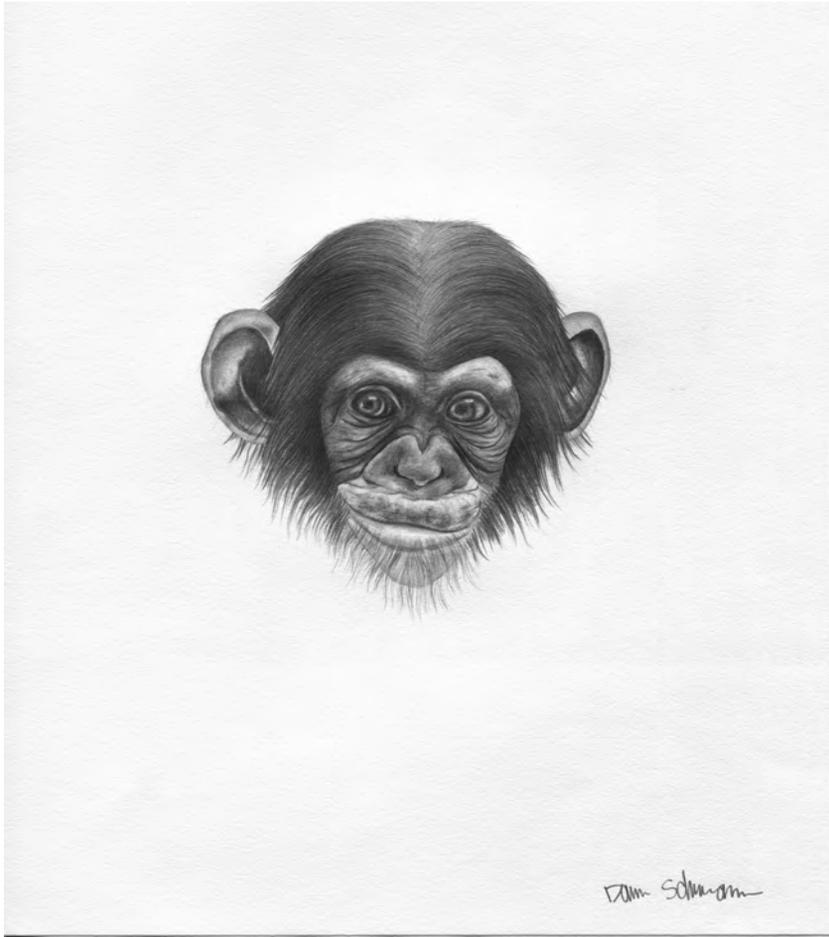
Convergence

For many reasons, this book is personal to me. Though I have been studying chimpanzees in a variety of settings for a quarter-century, I still remember clearly that feeling of wonder when reading about Jane's first moments at Gombe in a ragged copy of *National Geographic* and that spark of intense curiosity when I immersed myself in de Waal's seminal book, *Chimpanzee Politics*. And the deep admiration I felt when, as an early career scientist myself, I first met Tetsuro Matsuzawa in a crowded train station in Kyoto.

These scientists, like all the authors in this book, have taken very different and very unique paths to get to where they are today. The stories they tell here show that they are just like you and me, facing challenges and overcoming them to converge on a common goal: to understand and protect our closest living relatives on this planet. For those aspiring to follow a similar path, these stories may serve as a guide and as inspiration. But we must also remember what serves as inspiration for them—the chimpanzees themselves.

You will read how chimpanzees have inspired our authors

and how specific individuals have influenced them in ways they may not have expected. For me, it was a chimpanzee named Drew (see illustration) at Yerkes National Primate Research Center in Atlanta. When I met Drew, I was just starting my career with chimpanzees, but only a few years previously, I had spent much time dreaming of that opportunity. For me, chimpanzees represented that amazing dichotomy of being so remarkably similar to us and yet so different, so primitive and yet so complex, so savage and so gentle. Drew was all of that and getting to know him as an individual with specific needs, preferences, and moods was a turning point in my understanding of chimpanzees. Throughout the book, you will see illustrations of other such chimpanzees that have had made similarly powerful impacts. While we may hold up Jane Goodall and others as heroes, for many of the authors here the chimpanzees themselves are imbued with a superpower. The chimpanzees inspire and motivate us to understand, study, and protect them for future generations to witness.



Drew

These are the memoirs of the heroes who have dedicated their lives to chimpanzees, the chimpanzees that inspired them, and the life paths that converged to make these stories happen.