

A Primate's Memoir Study Guide

A Primate's Memoir by Robert Sapolsky

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Contents

A Primate's Memoir Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Part 1, The Adolescent Years, When I First Joined the Troop, Chapters 1-7, The Baboons, The Generations of Israel, Zebra Kabobs and a Life of Crime, The Revenge of the Liberals, The Masai Fundamentalist and My Debut as a Social Worker, The Coca-Cola Devil.....	4
Part 2, The Subadult Years, Chapters 8-14, The Baboons, Saul in the Wilderness, Samwelly versus the Elephants, The First Masai, Zoology and National Security, A Shaggy Hyena Story, The Coup, Hearing Voices at the Wrong Time, Sudan.....	7
Part 3, Tenuous Adulthood, Chapters 15-21, The Baboons, The Unstable Years, Ol' Curly Toes and the King of Nubian-Judea, The Penguins of Guyana, When Baboons Were Falling Out of the Trees, The Old White Man, The Elevator, The Mound Behind the 7-Eleven.....	10
Part 4, Adulthood, Chapters 22-29, The Baboons, Nick, The Raid, Ice, Joseph, The Wonders of Machines in a Land Where They Are Still Novel, The Blind Leading the Blind, Who's on First, What's on Second, The Last Warriors, The Plague.....	13
Characters.....	16
Objects/Places.....	19
Themes.....	21
Style.....	23
Quotes.....	25
Topics for Discussion.....	27



Plot Summary

A Primate's Memoir is the autobiography of American scientist and author Robert M. Sapolsky. He is currently the John A. and Cynthis Fry Gunn Professor of biology, neurology and neurological science at Stanford and serves the National Museums of Kenya as a research associate. Sapolsky is most famous for his work in neuroendocrinology or the study of the hormonal functions of the brain, with a particular focus on how stress affects the brain. A Primate's Memoir is built around Sapolsky's early life as a young research as an undergraduate, graduate student, postdoctoral research fellow, and professor during his time spend in Kenya doing his research.

The reader looking for a full autobiography of Professor Sapolsky will largely find tales of his experiences as a young scientist in Kenya and the tales of the baboon troop he studies and little more. But this is a far cry from saying that the book fails to be comprehensive in its profile of Sapolsky. It also accomplishes the task of depicting the social life not only of baboons but of many of the peoples of Kenya, particularly the Masai tribe that lived close to his baboon preserve.

A Primate's Memoir is divided into four parts, with each part covering an age period of both Sapolsky and his baboons. Part 1 is called The Adolescent Years because it explains how Sapolsky first came to Kenya and how he came in contact with his baboon troops and 'learned the ropes' as a researcher and as a resident of Kenya. Part 1 is also so named because many of his baboon characters are young at this time and will grow up with him throughout the book. Part 2 is called The Subadult Years largely because Sapolsky is still a student, though a graduate student doing work on his thesis. At this time, Sapolsky has made a number of friends in the Masai tribe and become a natural at avoiding the wide variety of scams and dangers in Kenya and his baboons are going through the process of overturning alpha males, getting pregnant and raising children.

Part 3, Tenuous Adulthood, follows Sapolsky's experiences as a postdoctoral student in Kenya. The baboons enter a period of instability as the ruling alpha, Saul, had been overthrown by a coalition of six baboons who then fought over who would be the next alpha. The stories of Part 3 have a similar instability and Sapolsky is also nearing holding an actual professorship rather than being a mere postdoctoral student. Part 4, Adulthood, has Sapolsky finally secure an assistant professorship and meet and marry his wife Lisa. A number of dangerous and exciting events top off A Primate's Memoir and several stories of Sapolsky and Lisa's happy experiences together in Kenya are discussed.

Ultimately the book ends with tragedy however, after being witty and amusing throughout. Chapter 29, The Plague, explains how Sapolsky's time with his baboons ended. Due to the negligence of local herders and their buyers, tubercular meat was in wide circulation in Sapolsky's area of Kenya. A baboon troop acquired bovine tuberculosis as a result and almost all of them died. A few years later, despite his best efforts, Sapolsky's baboons nearly all died as well, effectively ending his research of that particular group of baboons that he had known so well for so long.



Part 1, The Adolescent Years, When I First Joined the Troop, Chapters 1-7, The Baboons, The Generations of Israel, Zebra Kabobs and a Life of Crime, The Revenge of the Liberals, The Masai Fundamentalist and My Debut as a Social Worker, The Coca-Cola Devil

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Author Robert Sapolsky grew up wanting to be a primatologist. He read about primates before he was a teenager and wrote letters to primatologists. He even studied Swahili early in preparation for his future job. At age twenty-one he had the opportunity to study savanna baboons. While he had wanted to study other primates, like mountain gorillas, they were too endangered to be studied effectively. Robert was particularly interested in how primate stress affected their health. At the time, people were only first starting to think that stress could affect one's health. So Robert's job was to watch primate activity, sedate the primates during periods of stress, and then take readings of their biological stats. He began his work in 1978.

Robert gave all of the baboons names of Old Testament figures. The alpha male was named Solomon, who had three years ago become alpha male. Three years is a long time to be alpha male, but Solomon continued his rule by fighting rarely and using constant psychological intimidation. Leah was the alpha female and the most eligible female for mating was her daughter Devorah. Two low-ranking baboons are introduced to show how the baboon hierarchy works. Ruthie spent weeks trying to get males to mate with her but failed, so she finally took low-ranking Joshua as a mate. They had Obadiah, and Joshua was an excellent father. As for Solomon, he continued to rule until young, brutish and large Uriah was introduced to the group. Uriah immediately



challenged Solomon but Solomon easily fought him off. But every day afterward, Uriah challenged Solomon until he finally wore him down and Solomon submitted.

In Chapter 2, Robert tells the story of his first trip to Africa to study baboons. He thought he would be prepared, as he had studied the area for some time. Robert knew how to avoid diseases and how to handle major, dangerous animals and he had even learned some Swahili from a Tanzanian law student. When he arrived on the plane from Nairobi, he was initially in culture shock and his first interactions, he later realized, were successful attempts by locals to rip him off. One of his professors had notified a woman in the field office of his arrival but Robert barely knew her. While she helped him get settled, he was basically alone. Within a month, Robert had run out of money because his professor had repeatedly forgotten to have money wired to him, so he had to resort to a life of crime, inventing various scams and stealing just so he could eat.

In Chapter 3, Robert explains his darting practice. In order to take his blood samples from the baboons, he has to shoot them with tranquilizer darts. However, the tranquilizer takes three minutes to kick in and during that time Robert must track the baboon very carefully. Darting is easy; it's the chase that's difficult. While Robert practiced a great deal for darting, the trip in between darting and taking a sample would prove challenging. His worst experience darting was when he darted Uriah just before Uriah got involved in a serious squabble with some other males over who would get to eat an Impala. Robert had to both avoid getting ripped to pieces by Uriah and prevent him from getting ripped to pieces by the other males when he went down. Robert was barely successful, as he avoided the baboons but got kicked in the head by the not-yet-dead Impala.

In Chapter 4, Robert discusses his interactions with the local Masai people who were boxed into the baboon area by the British gradually, starting in 1898. They are a local pastoral tribe that seems to be about the same as they were centuries ago. Accordingly, they resisted new ideas. One day, when Robert had darted a baboon named Daniel, two Masai came up to him and ask him about it. Robert told them that there were similarities between humans and baboons and that they evolved from a common ancestor. After pushing it too far, the Masai threatened Robert with their spears though they quickly calmed down. In another incident, Robert got to know the Masai town's ambassador to the outside world, Rhoda, who was half-Masai, half-Kikuyu and who had a bit of education. They could communicate and she often protected Robert from the drunken old men of the village.

In Chapter 5, Isiah, the baboon Robert was studying, died and so Robert decided to take a break and travel around East Africa. He takes several lorries, encountering first two Islamic drivers, named Ismaeli and Mahmoud. The second lorry was run by Jeremiah and Jonah and on the third day he encounters a lorry run by a man named Pius who is heading for Rwanda. But Pius traps him in his home town of Eldoret, keeping him in his home and making him drink Coca-Cola constantly. After a few days, Robert finally escapes, catching a lorry with Jeremiah back to his home, where he rests and recovers. In Chapter 6, Robert describes how his home camp partially functions as



a health clinic for local Masai and how he explained to an old Masai man how to use maps.

In Chapter 7, Robert tells four stories about experiences of war in East Africa, not only his but those of others. In the first story, Robert met old men from the Kisii tribe who the British had used to fight white Germans and some Masai during World War I. The Kisii did not understand why the Europeans were fighting but some fought anyway.

In the second story, Robert pieced together the story of Wilson Kipkoi, the son of a scary former poacher and likely murderer named Kipkoi. Wilson was the oldest of around fourteen of Kipkoi's children and Kipkoi constantly physically and verbally abused him. When poaching in East Africa was banned, Kipkoi went to work for an anti-poaching unit run by a man named Palmer, who funded half the cost of the unit, while the Tanzanian government funded the other half. But due to economic struggles, Tanzanian funding dried up and the men began to go hungry. Kipkoi led his men to poach local animals for food in Palmer's absence. Out of hatred for his father (and because working for Palmer he had acquired some education), Wilson had someone draft a letter reporting Kipkoi's poaching to Palmer. Palmer and Kipkoi, who had fought together in the Mau Mau rebellion, then had a confrontation where Kipkoi was forced to retire. Wilson continued to work for Palmer but Palmer treated him as Kipkoi did. Eventually, due to outbursts of rage, Wilson attacked Palmer and was fired, spending the rest of his life as a drunken and dangerous thief.

The third story briefly explains the history of the Mau Mau rebellion and Robert's experience meeting some of the Mau Mau veterans, while the fourth story records Robert's trip to Uganda to view the overthrow of Idi Amin. Robert's year with the baboons was coming to an end so he decided to do some traveling to dangerous places, as he was young and wanted the rush. But the trip was horrifying and dangerous. Robert saw many dead bodies and was almost killed for committing an embarrassing act he wouldn't own up to in the book. After avoiding harm, he went to find the source of the Nile and found a dead soldier floating in the water. The image still haunts Robert and motivates his work on primate aggression.



Part 2, The Subadult Years, Chapters 8-14, The Baboons, Saul in the Wilderness, Samwelly versus the Elephants, The First Masai, Zoology and National Security, A Shaggy Hyena Story, The Coup, Hearing Voices at the Wrong Time, Sudan

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Chapter 8 opens with Robert revisiting the progress of the baboon tribe he had observed before. Solomon had sunk far below Uriah in the baboon hierarchy, all the way down to about ninth and he was ruthless harassed by everyone above him, and he became cruel to those below him. In the meanwhile, Devorah had her first child, which was probably Solomon's, though he could not claim her. Several other baboons are discussed but the most important ones were Isaac, Nebuchadnezzar and Saul. Isaac was an unusual young adult who developed a genuine friendship with a female baboon named Rachel. He also mated primarily with young female baboons in their first few estrus cycles. While they were not fully fertile, he could always claim their offspring as his own. Nebuchadnezzar was mean and foolish and tended to kidnap young baboons, hurting a child and killing a female baboon with a fetid mouth bite.

The most interesting story is that of Saul. He quickly overthrew Uriah after spending two years largely alone on the outskirts of the tribe. Uriah simply did not have the stomach to fight him seriously and Saul overthrew him in a day. Saul ruled viciously but was never aggressive. He could be provoked by anything, however, and so always got his way. He had no number two challenger, just a number of young males below him who eventually ganged up on him in a large group of six and attacked him mercilessly, almost disabling him and sending him to the bottom of the tribe.



In Chapter 9, Robert notes that he returned to Kenya for Saul's reign. He had to finish up his thesis or spend time in the bush avoiding his advisor, so he chose the latter. In his absence, he hired a number of Kenyans to take observational notes for him, such as Richard and Hudson. When he returned, he hired Samwelly, Richard's brother. Samwelly had a penchant for building projects and had some construction skill. He set about projects all the time and one day boarded up a local river, thinking that he could prevent the water from spreading out and drying up later in the year.

Sadly, Robert had to explain to him that by boarding up the damn, he would cause mosquitoes to collect and bring malaria and that he had cut off the water supply to the Masai downstream. Samwelly had been so proud that now his spirit was broken. In the next days he became depressed and went into an almost catatonic state of depression, sitting and laying in his self-built lean-to. That is, until one night elephants came and started to eat his mud hut, which caused him to get out and try vigorously toward them off. Fighting off the elephants, oddly, seemed to cure his depression and he was happy again.

In Chapter 10, Robert has a long discussion with some Masai and their leader, his friend Soirowa. They ask him about 'Merica' which he describes in terms he thinks they can understand though they do not believe his stories about skyscrapers. They then asked him why he studies baboons and he explained that this was because they were similar to humans, which the Masai denied. Robert then tried to explain the paleontological evidence of common ancestry and they could only think such ancestors could be the first Masai.

In Chapter 11, Robert introduces his friend Laurence, a large and hulking white man who had lived and traveled in both California and Scotland. They were good friends and by the time the book was written, had been friends for twenty years. Laurence was the closest thing to an older brother Robert had ever had. He also had a great love for hyenas which he had a passion for rehabilitating in the eyes of the public. Robert then relates a story of how Laurence and other carnivore biologists tried to get the army to share some of its reconnaissance equipment with them and failed.

Chapter 12 has Robert going to Kenya in 1982 despite the beginnings of a messy coup in Kenya, the background of which Robert explains in the chapter. Robert intended to skirt the violence and make his way through Nairobi to the bush but he quickly got caught up in the events of the coup, being carted off with tourists to a central hotel, wandering about town looking for acquaintances and ultimately running into soldiers at a checkpoint. When he tried to talk his way through the gate, they beat him and stole his watch.

Chapter 13 finds Robert caught up in an emergency in a Masai village with a very large, naked female Masai who appears to have 'gone mad', having killed a goat and smeared herself with its entrails. Several women grabbed and restrained her and threw her in Robert's jeep. He then proceeded to drive them to a nearby clinic where the woman was locked up. The Masai have no tolerance for mental illness and so the woman was locked up and died soon thereafter.



Robert is in Sudan in Chapter 14. He decides to vacation there after Saul was overthrown, so he travels to Khartoum and then to a small hamlet. At the time, the Sudanese Civil War was just heating up, but Robert still thought he could have a decent trip. So, he brought a book, Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*, a massive retelling of the Biblical Story of a similar name. But the choice of work was a literary disaster as it was set in the desert and Robert was vacationing in the desert, so the book constantly reminded him of the searing, dry heat.

Robert ended up in Juba, the city that would have been the capital of Southern Sudan if it were its own country. He was taken in by American Southern Baptist missionaries who oddly lived in their own compound and knew nothing of the city. Robert made his way to the University of Juba the next day, which was mostly empty due to fighting and made his way into the library, finding that some of his work in preparation on primate aggression had been scooped. This caused him to hyperventilate for a moment and realize that science marched on without him.

Robert continued his journey, next ending up in Torit and being taken by the local policeman's son Joseph to a dance on a mountain plateau that Robert calls a desert altitude euphoria, where young people dance, safe in a high elevation from the violence. There was also fresh water there. From the plateau, Robert explored the mountain and found a refugee village. He was also brutally attacked by army ants before he returned to Kenya. He was first transported from Torit by six Somali Muslims on two tanker trucks who were mostly very aggressive men who shook down local villagers for money and supplies. At one point, they were worried that they'd met their match from local Toposa raiders who specialized in counter-raiding Somalis like themselves. However, the Toposa they thought were approaching was actually a man named Baker on a large vehicle he used in his work for Wimpy, a British construction company. So Robert safely made it back to Kenya.

In a postscript, Robert notes that the massive civil war that later came to the Sudan had killed over two million by the time the book was finished. He sometimes hopes the villagers he met in the mountains are still alive, though he realizes that this is unlikely.



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The beginning of Part Three, in Chapter 15, brings an update on the baboon clan. The coalition of six who brought down Saul, Joshua, Menasseh, Levi, Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel, and Benjamin, had been successful but there was no line of succession among them. Chaos reigned as they changed ranks from day to day. Sub-coalitions formed, such as one between Joshua and Daniel. Some gave up their top rank deliberately to avoid the stress. Aaron, Uriah, and Levi disappeared. Some other males left and oddly, two new females joined the troops.

Chapter 16 shows Robert being forced to move his camp site downstream due to an increasingly influx of Japanese tourists who would watch him capture baboons and make him take pictures with it for their scrapbooks. Moving his camp required him to move close enough to the Masai village that he no longer had privacy. However, he did get somewhat involved in camp life and started talking with the villagers, learning their gossip. In this way he got to spend more time with Soirowa and Rhoda. At this point, Robert had his PhD and was in a postdoctoral program, though this meant nothing to the villagers. The villagers and Robert would often exchange stories, of which some were false and some were true. One true story concerned a Masai villager who went mad and lived with hyenas. Another story concerned a man who believed that he was the king of Nubian-Judea.



In Chapter 17, Robert was disappointed that he had to stop observing the baboons to travel to Nairobi in order to get his dry ice shipment so as to keep his blood samples frozen. However, in Nairobi, they had forgotten his shipment and he had to spend some time there waiting for another shipment to come through. In the meanwhile, he strikes up conversations with English tourists and a few Americans and remains impressed that all the different cultures in Nairobi can get along at all. In fact, they got along despite the fact that they constantly scammed one another; Robert then relates half a dozen types of scams, some of which he participated in. For instance, they were able to convince the Masai that they drank baboon blood to scare the dangerous Masai from harassing them. However, Robert admits that every once in awhile he could still be scammed.

Chapter 18 shows Robert and his R.A. Richard getting caught up in a dangerous scam. One day, an assistant warden came and asked them and a visiting research vet from Nairobi named Muchemi to come and help a baboon troop in a public dump that appeared to have some sort of disease. The baboons had been falling out of trees and many of them seemed to already have died. When Robert, Richard and Muchemi reached the baboons, they observed them but could see nothing obviously wrong. Richard asked the camp manager (where the dump was located) what he had seen and reported to the warden and the camp manager wasn't exactly sure. He gradually became irritated.

Eventually a baboon appeared who was very skinny and had a back arch, which is apparently what TB looks like in its early stages in non-human primates. The manager said that was what they looked like. Robert wanted to view the baboon a bit more, but the manager wanted to shoot him. Robert eventually gave the manager permission. The manager shot and missed and then the team split up to look for the baboons to see if he had been hit. But they did not catch the baboons, as they had entirely scattered. When they regrouped, the manager expressed frustration and left to tend to his camp. Richard, Muchemi and Robert went into the forest and started to think. They realized that the manager had wanted to shoot the baboons and wanted the warden to let him, so he had tricked the warden to trick the three of them to give him permission to shoot the baboons.

Chapter 19 is simply the record of a group of Masai in a tourist camp having a conversation about an old white man who had throat damage and so used a throat device, which gave his voice a monotonic, metallic sound. Initially the villagers began to joke that the man was a machine but as they watched the man, they whipped themselves into a frenzy that he might actually be a machine. Soon, the entire village believed it. Eventually though, they realized they were being ridiculous and returned to joking.

Chapter 20 has Robert take Richard to Nairobi for his first trip to the 'big city.' He introduced Richard to all manner of new things, such as traffic lights, ice cream cones and swanky hotels. Richard became briefly ill on elevators and initially thought that the people outside of the elevators were quickly rearranging the rooms, walls and furniture while he was in the elevator car.



Chapter 21 explains how Robert became increasingly interested in the brains of primates, particularly given that his father had Alzheimer's. As time went on in his baboon research, he focused more and more on diseases of the brain. However, he spent less time in the bush due to the fact that he was around dead baboons so often. He eventually decided to bury them when they died, rather than letting hyenas carry them off. But burying them only gave him a sense of sadness. At the end of the unstable years, after Nathaniel had risen to power and given it up, Robert decided to visit 'Fossey's gorillas' and 'Fossey's grave,' a site that conjures up the memory of primates who died needlessly.

Dian Fossey was a legendary, large, awkward female primatologist who much preferred to spend her time with mountain gorillas rather than humans. Her funders forced her to give a few lectures, finish her thesis and publish a few articles but she largely spent her time far away from everyone else. She did not get along well with the Batwa tribesmen in Rwanda, whose traps would from time to time lead to a gorilla's death through gangrene. Fossey began to unwisely destroy their traps after trying to talk them out of using them in the mountain gorilla habitat. Things escalated quickly, with Fossey making war on the Batwa, on poachers on the local government and so on. Her enemies started to deliberately kill the mountain gorillas, dismember them and place them at her cabin door. She, enraged, began to capture the tribesmen's children.

Fossey also began to travel the world, demanding funding to fight the enemies of the mountain gorillas but the conservation community through she was terribly rash. They decided to pour money into the Digit Fund, which was used to fund a functional, protective park service to protect the gorillas rather than buying arms for Fossey. Fossey was sent away and sank into depression and alcoholism in the United States.

Against the pleas of her community, Fossey returned to Rwanda and the gorillas and kept fighting the people she hated. Her health slowly faded with her excessive drinking and smoking. She got emphysema due to high-altitude, humid weather on the mountains. She was then murdered one night and no one was ever charged with the crime. She was buried near her mountain gorillas' graves.

Robert decided to visit her grave and hired a guide to take him there, though it was a long way and a stiff hike. Robert and his guide did not get along well and at one point Robert feared for his life, though he realized this was irrational. Eventually they reached Fossey's grave and Robert expressed his own depression and rage against her but identifying with her struggle to save fading primate populations.



Part 4, Adulthood, Chapters 22-29, The Baboons, Nick, The Raid, Ice, Joseph, The Wonders of Machines in a Land Where They Are Still Novel, The Blind Leading the Blind, Who's on First, What's on Second, The Last Warriors, The Plague

Part 4, Adulthood, Chapters 22-29, The Baboons, Nick, The Raid, Ice, Joseph, The Wonders of Machines in a Land Where They Are Still Novel, The Blind Leading the Blind, Who's on First, What's on Second, The Last Warriors, The Plague Summary and Analysis

Part 4, Chapter 22 tells the story of the reign of Nick, a baboon whose meanness exceeded even that of Nebuchadnezzar. He was initially a young baboon who looked on the fighting among the post-Saul coalition with disdain. As he grew up, he simply became mean to everyone, harassing the females, as none of them liked him and attacking the males. When one male raised his behind to display submission, rather than accepting it, Nick slashed him instead. Nick's rule was hard for many and many of the old characters passed into the night, leaving the camp such as Saul, Obadiah, Gums and Leah. A kind challenger named Gideon was not ready to fight Nick yet. A young baboon Absalom had discovered female baboons but could not challenge Nick either. However, one day, Benjamin, of all the baboons, scared off a lion who threatened to attack the baboon group, rather than Nick, the more obvious candidate. Rebecca became a mother at this time but learned only slowly how to do so.

Chapter 23 finds Robert as a full-blown adult. He was finally a professor and he met Lisa in San Diego as he was about to move to Stanford. They were both lapsed field biologists, Lisa a marine biologist. Their similarities were many and their differences complimented one another. They quickly decided to marry and Robert decided to re-experience Africa by taking Lisa there. Lisa did fine in Nairobi and the Masai women welcomed her like they had never welcomed Robert. Over the days they stayed, they spent time with Soirowa and Richard. Robert showed her how to dart. However, one day the peace broke when the Masai women started flooding out of the village. The Kuria tribe, old enemies of the Masai, was on a raid. They also had automatic weapons. Lisa and Robert hid. The Kuria stole Masai cattle and most of the men went to Tanzania



to get the cows back. The Masai won, with only one man injured. Two Kuria died and all but six cattle were retrieved.

In Chapter 24, Robert and Lisa go to visit Richard and Samwelly's home village by climbing up a mountain. The two of them found the village wonderful and they were well-welcomed. Everyone takes pictures with them. They sang and ate together. Robert had brought some dry ice to mix with water to show the villagers how they mixed (it can be amusing to view). They were amused and then they used the ice to mix with some of their food.

In Chapter 25, Joseph, a silent, innocuous Masai security guard at a tourist camp had gone crazy. He seemed intent on killing himself. Rumors floated around as to why and then, when he ran away, people thought he may have gone off with poachers or that he had become white. But then Joseph reappeared from annual leave in his local village. After the event quieted down, Lisa and Robert visited all the mental hospitals in Kenya and found how inhumanely and ignorantly they were treated. But, oddly, people with mental illnesses in Kenya rarely were violent.

Next, in Chapter 26, Robert and Lisa travel to Mombassa, an ancient port on the Indian Ocean. Many were dignified and happy there. There were many peoples, religions and nationalities there and a local woman who knew English invited them to tea. But they spent most of the afternoon trying to fix her refrigerator. Oddly, they were successful. In Chapter 27, Robert and Lisa are watching the baboons one day when an old man attacked by a hyena stumbled into their area. They did their best to treat him. He had been attacked by the Masai as well, for sleeping in the wrong tent. Lisa and Robert did their best to piece together the story but couldn't figure it out. When they got the man to a hospital, the newspapers reported a very different story, making the man into a cook who fended off a hyena attack. The company the newspaper said he worked for claimed that he had been fired, though he never worked for them. Eventually the rumors quieted.

In Chapter 28, Robert discusses the changing of the guard in the Masai village, where old warriors are replaced by younger ones in a festive ceremony. He notes that he admires the Masai for maintaining their culture but they could only resist other cultures by being fiercely militaristic and violent. While Robert admires them, he also realizes that they have paid great costs to preserve their way of life. So Robert then reports that the Kenyan government decided one day to outlaw warriors, and so to try to end the bush skirmishes and bring the tribal citizens of Kenya into the developing world. Robert knows that it is for the best.

Chapter 29, The Plague, is the final chapter. It is the story of how Robert's baboons ended. Robert was mostly alone that season, as Lisa was busy with career obligations. Richard was ill and the Masai were around but busy. So Robert traveled to a camp in Olemelepo to see a sick baboon who had died. He autopsied the baboon and found that his insides had basically melted from what was likely terminal-stage TB. Robert thought it could wipe out all the baboons in that tribe and eventually get to his group. And then the deaths started to roll in over the next few days. Robert radioed the primate research



center in Nairobi and structured to get a live, but sick baboon to Nairobi so she could be studied. But he was blocked from Olemelopo due to some officials trying to keep researchers out. So he could not get a permit to take a female baboon to the center. After bribing an official, Robert was successful, though it took a few weeks to confirm TB.

The TB was not human TB but bovine TB which could be a disaster for the baboons. They tried to make a scientific investigation of the corpses to learn more about how the baboons contracted the disease but learned little. They had to kill a number of the TB infected baboons. Eventually Robert forgot his research and started to dart stranger baboons. He was running out of supplies. After a week, he found no TB-positive baboons in his group, but the Olemelopo group was at 50% infection. Eventually the infection rate rose to 70%. Laurence of the Hyenas comforted him and Robert's work with fellow scientists Ross and Suleman helped him focus and work hard.

It turned out that the baboons were getting TB from eating cow's meat from Masai cattle. TB was identified in the cows and Robert became enraged with the Masai because he couldn't convince them to destroy their cows with TB. He also couldn't stop the rich hotels in Olemelopo from buying tubercular cow's meat, which only added to demand. He tried to talk a Masai elder into stopping the spread of TB but he failed.

Eventually Robert found a healthy-looking female who was positive for TB and killed her but found nothing. He did his best to collect his belongings and facts composed over the previous few weeks and had to leave, returning to his real world in the United States, stewing with Lisa and learning about TB. Robert's friend Jim, a veterinarian, and his team worked on several papers on baboon tuberculosis together and published them. All the while, Robert was fantasizing about getting revenge for his baboons that were surely doomed.

Robert returned to his baboons eventually and arrived just in time to watch Saul, David, Gideon, Absalom, Manasseh, Jesse, Jonathan, Shem, Adam, Scratch, and Benjamin die, which was disastrous for him psychologically.

In a postscript, Robert reports that he got some perspective on the deaths of his group of baboons since they died. He was no longer enraged and was working with a new troop. While he was doing some interesting science, he was not attached to the new baboons. However, the void was more than filled by his love for Lisa and their children, Benjamin and Rachel. Robert's old troop exists but it is small and everyone mentioned in the book is gone, save Joshua. After darting him to check for TB, Lisa and Robert sat with him and fed him cookies.



Characters

Robert Sapolsky

As mentioned in the summary, Robert Sapolsky is currently the John A. and Cynthis Fry Gunn Professor of biology, neurology and neurological science at Stanford and serves the National Museums of Kenya as a research associate. But he was not always so renowned. In *A Primate's Memoir*, Robert is a young man with a lifelong interest in primatology. While he initially wanted to work with gorillas, necessity pushed him into field research with baboons. While Sapolsky heavily researched the area in Kenya where he would be stationed, living in Kenya was an entirely different matter. As a young, green undergraduate student, he was easily scammed and left to his own devices by the administrative staff at his university. Over the months he studied and worked there, he learned the ropes.

As the book progresses, Sapolsky grows up and progresses in his research along with his baboons, but the reader gets a richer look at his personality. Raised in an orthodox Jewish home, his early fascination with science and evolution led him away from his faith. His parents had been communists and so he often jokes about his early political experiences as their child. In fact, Sapolsky's sense of humor shines through the entire book, with his often absurd and dangerous experiences peppered with jokes. Sapolsky generally has a very lighthearted approach to his life, and so his memoir is a fun read for the most part. However, surprisingly, the book ends in tragedy, revealing Sapolsky's deep attachment to his baboons and his incredible anguish over their fate, which was out of his control.

The Masai

A tribe of Masai are a very prominent part of *A Primate's Memoir* as a Masai village was located near the nature preserve where Robert worked. During his years in Kenya, Robert befriended the Masai and learned a great amount about their culture. Initially he approached them with trepidation but they became friendly and often shared tribal goings-on and gossip with him. When Japanese tourists started to flood in Robert's area of the preserve, he had to move down river and thus lived even closer to the Masai which made him a fairly regular part of their lives. When he brought Lisa to them, they immediately welcomed her.

The Masai, also known as the 'Maasai,' are a group of partially nomadic people divided between Kenya and North Tanzania. They had a number of unusually vivid styles of dress and practices which has made them widely known in the wider world, though this was not so in Robert's time. They often live near many of the game parks and preserves in East Africa, however, which is one of the ways that Robert got to know some of them. As of 1990, there were nearly 400,000 Masai in Africa. The Masai often engage in tribal warfare, which was part of their practice during Robert's time there. The Masai, claimed



Robert, were only able to maintain their unique form of life by viciously resisting all other cultures. When the Kenyan government banned such warfare, Robert was saddened that Masai culture might die but all in all pleased with the development.

Sapolsky's Baboons

Sapolsky's baboons are a major feature of A Primate's Memoir though they mostly show up at the beginning of each part and their personalities are not explored as deeply as many of the human characters. But the baboons are nonetheless among the most important characters, despite their large number. The most notable baboons are mentioned separately but the most important feature of the baboon tribe is their hierarchical social structure and the way that it develops over time and in particular the way that male and female baboons of various rankings handle the stress associated with those rankings.

Richard

Richard is a local Kenyan and Robert's hired research assistant throughout much of the book.

Samwelly

Richard's brother, Samwelly helped Robert build a number of needed structures in his camp but became depressed when Robert told him he had to tear down the river dam he built, which he was very proud of.

Soirowa

This is the leader of the local Masai tribe and a good friend of Robert's.

Rhoda

This is the half-Masai, half-Kikuyu member of the Masai village who had a bit of education, enough to make her stand out among the tribe and more willing to interact with Robert at first.

Solomon

The very first alpha male that Robert observed himself and who led the tribe until Uriah overthrew him.



Saul

Previously a loner, Saul quickly overthrew Uriah to become alpha male. While he was not aggressive, he was incredibly easily provoked and ruled the tribe ferociously for quite some time until he was overthrown by a coalition of six lower-ranked baboons who damaged him so badly in a fight that he was consigned to the lowest ranks.

Benjamin

A baboon particularly dear to Robert for his endearing qualities, Benjamin both warded off a lion who threatened his clan and helped to overthrow Saul.

Nick

This is the mean alpha who came to power after the coalition wars but who failed to protect the clan from the lion.

Lisa Sapolsky

This is a scientist who Robert met in San Diego who later became his wife and mother of their children, Benjamin and Rachel.

Dian Fossey

This is a large and misanthropic female primatologist who fought against local poachers and tribal trappers in order to protect her mountain gorillas. Her actions were so rash they caused the death of many gorillas and led to her being murdered.



Objects/Places

The Masai Village

This is the village located near Robert's headquarters where the Masai lived.

Nairobi, Kenya

This is the large Kenyan city where Robert flew into in order to get to the Masai and his baboons.

Tanzania

This is the country bordering Kenya and which divides a number of tribes from one another. Several conflicts in the book occur at the Kenya-Tanzania border.

The Refugee Village

This is the village of refugees from the Sudanese Civil War who lived high on a mountain that was particularly special to him.

The Baboon Camp

This is the area in the preserve where Robert's baboon troop lived.

Scams

Robert often had the sense that everyone in Kenya was trying to scam him. He was very often right about this and, when he was young, had to resort to scams himself.

Pre-Modern Culture

The Masai had a pre-modern culture and were widely unfamiliar with any number of features of the modern world, such as the theory of evolution, dry ice, and New York City.

Recreational Trips

When Robert would take breaks from his research in Africa, he took a number of trips around Kenya and surrounding nations. Many of these trips were quite dangerous.



Skirmishes and Coups

Robert barely escaped a number of skirmishes and coups during his stay in Kenya.

Darts

Robert used tranquilizer darts to knock out his baboons and take blood samples to measure their stress levels.

Blood Samples

Robert took blood samples from his baboons in order to measure their levels of stress hormones at various points in their lives.

Bovine Tuberculosis

This is the tuberculosis that infected cow meat eaten by baboons. Bovine TB ended up killing almost all of Robert's troop despite his best efforts to stop it.

Fossey's Grave

This is the grave where Dian Fossey and many of her mountain gorillas are buried which Robert visited during a time of distress.

Themes

The Meeting of Mind and Heart

Robert Sapolsky introduces himself as a young and aspiring scientist. However, the reader may have, upon opening the book, expected a story primarily about a scientist and his relation to his science. However, *A Primate's Memoir* is not primarily a work about science or about the scientific work completed by a particular researcher and it is not about a particular individual's struggles with science either. The life of 'the mind' is in fact not a particularly prominent part of the book. Instead, it is a work primarily of heart and humanity.

It was Sapolsky's mind that took him to Kenya in the first place and it is Sapolsky's mind that kept him coming back and continuing his research. About that there is no doubt. But the vast majority of the book's pages are not discussions of Sapolsky's research. In fact, most of the book is not even directly about Sapolsky's baboons. The primary chapters about his baboons come at the beginning of each of the four parts and in the final chapter. But so much of the book concerns Sapolsky's adventures in Kenya, his attempts to outsmart scam artists, his struggle to escape harm or death at the hands of bandits and tribal warriors, his quests to explore dangerous parts of Africa and all the various people he meets in Africa, most of whom are tribespeople, and most of those are Masai.

Mind and heart meet in *A Primate's Heart* because while Sapolsky's story is built around the life of the mind it is, more than anything, a tale of common humanity and common value among baboons, Africans, and researchers like Sapolsky.

Growing Up

The four parts of *A Primate's Memoir* are divided into periods of Sapolsky's young adulthood. While the story begins in his childhood, he goes to Africa for the first time as a college student. What is striking about the headings of each part is that it seems to take Sapolsky many years to become an adult. He does not even describe himself as an adult until he actually has an assistant professorship and is married. This self-characterization is significant.

Many of the events in *A Primate's Memoir* are built around Sapolsky's excessive risk-taking, adventurousness, naiveté and lack of responsibility, all characteristics of a child. On two vacations, he decides to (a) watch a coup in Nairobi and (b) visit the Sudan while a civil war is about to explode. Instead of getting over his pride to ask his parents for money during his first trip to Africa, he decides to become a scam artist and commits a number of minor crimes as a result. Sapolsky is nearly constantly threatened with scams and violence whenever he leaves the baboons and no one at all is dependent on him. He has no responsibilities to anyone.



As a result, an overarching theme of *A Primate's Memoir* is that Sapolsky was, in effect, a child until he was over thirty years old and that his years in Africa living out his childhood dream were just that. In fact, he arguably was never woken up until his baboons were all killed by bovine tuberculosis.

Social Life

By training, Robert Sapolsky is a neuroendocrinologist. During the time described by the book, Robert studied the chemical component of stress in baboons so as to gain insight into the neurological functioning of humans during periods of stress because he believed that stress could lead to physical problems, which was a controversial view at the time. His scientific work backed up in this claim. Baboons that lived at the bottom of the hierarchy tended to be more stressed out and less healthy as a result.

But in making his stress measurements, Sapolsky had to become adept at mapping baboon social relationships. So while the book describes very little of Sapolsky's work on stress-related hormones, he focuses quite a bit on the social structure of his baboon clan. The first chapters of each of the four parts outline the social structure of the clan in great detail and discuss how the hierarchy of males changes, how alphas are overthrown, what sorts of personalities tend to dominate, and who gets to mate with who.

Sapolsky also becomes an observer of human beings, learning a great deal about life in Kenya and all its various difficulties including massive corruption, tribal warfare, poverty, petty bigotry and a high degree of violence. All the same, he becomes close with several locals, including the local Masai tribe and spends a lot of the book discussing their social relations as well.



Style

Perspective

Robert Sapolsky makes his ideological biases fairly clear throughout the book. He was raised by communist parents as a 'red-diaper baby.' While he himself does not appear to have been a communist, he often makes jokes about his history as a child of Old Left parents. This seems to seep into his scientific work, as he finds that hierarchy, stress and health are all related. If a baboon finds himself at the bottom of a social hierarchy he will find himself with a increased level of stress which will in turn decrease his health. While such a view is not exclusive to those on the political left, it is most emphasized by them.

Sapolsky is what might be termed an apostle of science. For instance, while he never tries to convince the Masai that their religious beliefs are false he does, on two occasions, attempt to convince them that the theory of evolution is true. He explains early in the book that his love of science and evolutionary theory took him out of the Orthodox Judaism in which he was raised.

Sapolsky is also an inveterate comic and has a naturally lighthearted approach to his subject. He clearly loves the baboons and loves a good adventure. He constantly tells jokes that are often very funny. Thus, generally, while he has a particular perspective, he is upfront about it, kind and endearing.

Tone

Mirroring Sapolsky's personality and antics, the tone of *A Primate's Memoir* is primarily lighthearted in tone. Ultimately, the name of the book is significant. The 'primate' is Robert Sapolsky who sees himself as almost a child-like primate who is simply living out a silly life doing silly things. Consequently, the major elements in the tone consist of funny jokes, wry observations, and the kind of risk-taking that would make an adult shake her head in grief. In many of the chapters, Sapolsky will combine his general lighthearted tone with other elements, such as the frustration and annoyance that come from mean baboons in the clan. In other parts, Sapolsky will bring out a tone more appropriate for an adventure, such as when Sapolsky gets himself into trouble by taking excessive risks.

In contrast, the light-hearted tone will, from time to time, evaporate. In some cases, Sapolsky has gotten himself into so much trouble that he is scared for his life, so the light-hearted tone will evaporate. In other cases, some serious event like a coup or war is occurring, in which case the tone becomes much more seriously. Sadly, the tale ends as a tragedy when bovine tuberculosis kills nearly all of Sapolsky's baboons, which adds a note of sorrow to what was almost a purely comedic memoir. The end becomes

increasingly somber as it progresses and ends with a wistful tone that is regretful but looks forward to the future.

Structure

As stated elsewhere in the guide, *A Primate's Memoir* is structured into four broad parts. Part 1 cover Sapolsky's 'Adolescent Years', Part 2 his 'Subadult Years', Part 3 his 'Tenuous Adulthood' and Part 4 his 'Adulthood'. However, each of the parts of a complex of many short chapters that are stories or a combination of stories on similar themes. Some chapters are narratives, some character sketches, some extended jokes. The book has twenty-nine chapters in all.

In Part 1, Chapter 1, *The Baboons, The Generations of Israel*, Sapolsky introduces his baboons. He continues their story in Part 2, Chapter 8, *The Baboons, Saul in the Wilderness*, Part 3, Chapter 15, *The Baboons, The Unstable Years*, Part 4, Chapter 22, *The Baboons, Nick* and Chapter 29, *The Plague*.

Many chapters concern the Masai such as Part 1, Chapter 4, *The Masai Fundamentalist and My Debut as a Social Worker*, Part 2, Chapter 10, *The First Masai*, Part 3, Chapter 19, *The Old White Man* and Part 4, Chapter 28, *The Last Warriors*.

Still other chapters concern Robert's vacations and African travels such as Part 1, *Memories of Blood, The East African Wars*, Part 2, Chapter 12, *The Coup* and Part 2, Chapter 14, *Sudan*. In general, the chapters are less than ten pages. Put together, they give a detailed picture of Sapolsky's life in Kenya, his personality and the personality of the people and baboons that surrounded him. A book written with many short chapters in this form is meant to sketch out a picture of a life and a person rather than tell a sequential story.



Quotes

"I joined the baboon troop during my twenty-first year. I had never planned to become a savanna baboon when I grew up; instead, I had always assumed I would become a mountain gorilla" (Chapter 1, pg. 13.)

"So went my worst darting ever. Kind of a silly way to spend one's time. But writing nearly two decades later, darting remains in my blood" (Chapter 3, pg. 44.)

"The white people had a fight among themselves for some reason, so they started fighting here...One day, the British came and said we should go and fight also. We could not believe it—they would give us guns to shoot white people" (Chapter 7, pg. 72.)

"A just war, a nation freed, and a head jammed in the hole in the concrete. I stood watching for hours, mesmerized, as if to see how long it would take for this man to be washed away, bit by bit, by the Nile" (Chapter 7, pg. 91.)

"Eventually, he must have decided it was his time, because he came in from the periphery of the troop and deposed Uriah in one day" (Chapter 8, pg. 102.)

"And for years to come, Samwelly and I would always stay in camp together, and elephants would always be welcome for dinner" (Chapter 9, pg. 116.)

"You know, I have as healthy and varied a fantasy life as the next guy, but being strangled by a huge naked banshee smeared with goat bowels has never even once infested the darkest corners of my musings" (Chapter 13, pg. 137.)

"So went the unstable years, amid coups and countercoups and general chaos" (Chapter 15, pg. 174.)

"But of course, just when I had decided that all anyone did in Kenya was try to pull something off on someone else, I returned home from a field season and promptly fell victim to the most ornate scam I've ever experienced" (Chapter 17, pg. 194.)

"Oh, this old white man is a good machine" (Chapter 18, pg. 212.)

"Fossey, Fossey, you cranky difficult strong-arming self-destructive misanthrope, mediocre scientist, deceiver of earnest college students, probable cause of more deaths of the gorillas than if you had 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 of 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" (Chapter 21, pg. 230.)

"I couldn't believe it. That bastard had just taken credit for my darting" (Chapter 22, pg. 241.)



"The Masai rangers and the Masai warriors converged on the Kuria at about the same time and routed them—one injured Masai, two dead Kuria, all but six cows retrieved" (Chapter 23, pg. 248.)

"And the plague took Saul, who died in my arms, as I described many stories ago. And the plague took David. And Daniel. And Gideon. And Absalom. And the plague took Manasseh, who died writhing in front of a laughing crowd of staffers at the lodge. And the plague took Jesse. And Jonathan. And Shem. And Adam. And Scratch. And the plague took my Benjamin" (Chapter 29, pg. 301.)



Topics for Discussion

What was the point of Sapolsky's research on the baboons? How did his research interests change over time?

Discuss three facts about baboon society that Sapolsky uses to overturn common misconceptions about baboon social life.

How do the titles of the four parts of the book correlate to the events in those parts?

Discuss the ascendancies of three of the alpha males in Sapolsky's tribe.

Which of Sapolsky's stories did you find the most unbelievable and why?

Explain how Sapolsky ties together his research and his love for his baboons. To what extent does he balance them effectively?

What is the significance of the Masai to Sapolsky? Give at least two replies and explain them in detail.

Given how Chapter 29 ends, is *A Primate's Memoir* a tragedy? Why or why not?