

SY MONTGOMERY

AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING *THE GOOD, GOOD PIG*



WALKING WITH
THE GREAT APES

JANE GOODALL, DIAN FOSSEY,
BIRUTE GALDIKAS

FOREWORD BY ELIZABETH MARSHALL THOMAS

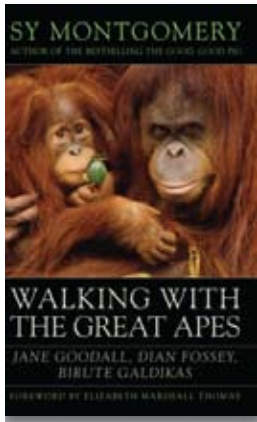
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WALKING WITH THE GREAT APES

Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, Biruté Galdikas

Sy Montgomery

Foreword by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas



From the bestselling author of *The Good Good Pig*, a classic book back in print!

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Three astounding women scientists have in recent years penetrated the jungles of Africa and Borneo to observe, nurture, and defend humanity's closest cousins. Jane Goodall has worked with the chimpanzees of Gombe for nearly 50 years; Dian Fossey died in 1985 defending the mountain gorillas of Rwanda; and Biruté Galdikas lives in intimate proximity to the orangutans of Borneo. All three began their work as protégées of the great Anglo-African archeologist Louis Leakey, and each spent years in the field, allowing the apes to become their familiars—and ultimately waging battles to save them from extinction in the wild.

Their combined accomplishments have been mind-blowing, as Goodall, Fossey, and Galdikas forever changed how we think of our closest evolutionary relatives, of ourselves, and of how to conduct good science. From the personal to the primate, Sy Montgomery explores the science, wisdom, and living experience of three of the greatest scientists of the twentieth century.

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Nature/Essays

Sy Montgomery is an author, naturalist, documentary scriptwriter, and radio commentator who has traveled to some of the world's most remote wildernesses for her work. She has worked in a pit crawling with 18,000 snakes in Manitoba, been hunted by a tiger in India, swum with pink dolphins in the Amazon, and been undressed by an orangutan in Borneo. She is the author of 15 award-winning books, including her national bestselling memoir, *The Good Good Pig*. Montgomery lives in Hancock, New Hampshire.

"Fascinating....Montgomery writes with a warm empathy for these innovators....artfully braided." —*Smithsonian magazine*

"Full of fascinating issues...Sy Montgomery explains the immense complexity of these women's science, the difficulties of observing shy creatures and the many subtle techniques by which this has been managed. Most important, she fends off the stock criticism that there must be something wrong with women who spend so much time with apes and demonstrates the arbitrariness of the notion that only humans are worth knowing...This is a fascinating, shrewd, sensitive, thought-provoking book." —*The New York Times Book Review*

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WALKING WITH THE GREAT APES

JANE GOODALL, DIAN FOSSEY,
BIRUTÉ GALDIKAS

SY MONTGOMERY

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For Dr. A. B. Millmoss

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Foreword

Many people, myself included, were elated to learn that *Walking With the Great Apes* would be republished, as the book is an in-depth account of three highly significant contributions to primatology, as well as an account of the three women who made these contributions—Jane Goodall with chimpanzees, Dian Fossey with gorillas, and Biruté Galdikas with orangutans. No other book presents these studies together as comprehensively or as well.

Their stories are no less interesting than that of Sy Montgomery herself, as she, too, is a courageous and fascinating woman. At the time she decided to write this book, her career had just begun. After this book was published to critical acclaim, she went on to become a famous nature writer with many award-winning books to her credit, some for adults, others for children. But when she made her plans to write *Walking With the Great Apes*, she was a freelance writer and reporter, and as such had no more money than do others in those professions. Yet she was determined to persevere. So she saved every penny—for more than a year her diet was little more than rice and water, and not very much rice. Finally, with a very minor advance from a publisher—about what an ordinary celebrity would spend for a designer dress or an evening’s entertainment—she had accumulated enough to buy an airline ticket. She planned her trip carefully and thoroughly in advance, arranging to visit and interview some of the researchers—the three primatologists and others involved with primate studies—via contacts in the United States and also by mail, since at that time telephones were unreliable or nonexistent in the remote areas of Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Indonesia—the countries she would have to visit. At last her arrangements seemed solid, and a schedule of travel was thoroughly planned. Her plane was to leave in the morning. That evening, she made a phone call just to reconfirm her arrangements

and learned to her horror that, without her knowledge, one of the most important appointments had been canceled.

What was she supposed to do? Her plane ticket was nonrefundable, nor could she change it, nor could she rearrange her other appointments by mail in less than two or three months. It was then or never. She had to leave, so she went.

In Nairobi, Sy had booked a small room in the least-expensive accommodations she could find—a place with the menacing name of Terminal Hotel, deep within the low-rent section of the city replete with drunks and robbers. Alone in her room on that first night, she was so frightened that she trembled. Her plans had fallen to pieces. She faced the very real possibility that she wouldn't be able to get the material she needed to write this wonderful book of hers, now in its eighteenth year of publication. She knew no one in Nairobi or, for that matter, in all of Africa, and she couldn't phone home for advice or help. In those days the phone call would have cost upward of \$40 per minute, and with only enough money for one frugal meal a day, she couldn't afford it.

Nevertheless, determined to try her best, she set out alone for Rwanda to visit the camp of the late Dian Fossey, with no idea of what she would find when she got there. She hitchhiked part of the way, walked part of the way, and traveled on matatu buses—the rickety little vehicles that provide transportation to much of rural Africa. Most of these vehicles are designed to carry six to ten people, but inevitably contain twenty to twenty-five people, often with livestock, and are so uncomfortable and scary that Sy learned to sleep at will, a skill she acquired from the other passengers who slept to escape the ordeal. Most people were very kind to her—friendly, polite, and helpful, as would be the way of rural Africans with a lonely stranger—but when she reached the base of the Virunga volcanoes, the guard assigned to accompany her up the mountain threatened to kill her if she didn't give him her money. She told him, truthfully, that she had no money but she did have had a very valuable bill in her possession which he could have. He

took it. It was an out-of-date British pound note, and it was worthless, but after all, as she said later, “So was he.”

Her marvelous book mentions none of these difficulties. She doesn't dwell on the dangers of travel, of the terrible fever she got in Dar es Salaam, of the leaches she found in her bra in the jungles of Indonesia, of the horrible fevers that she and the photographer, Dianne Taylor-Snow, both caught in Indonesia where they suffered together in an airless, filthy flop-house, agreeing that if one of them found that the other had died, she would inform the other's husband. She doesn't mention that she reached the research station deep in the jungle where the rescheduled visit was to take place, at the appointed time, only to find that the person she was to interview wasn't there and wasn't expected back until after Sy with her nonrefundable, nonchangeable air ticket would have to return to the United States. Again, no one had told her.

At the time, the American and British expatriates in Africa were a fairly rum crew, or many were—arrogant and thoughtless, disdainful of others but full of themselves beyond all reason, and thus in complete contrast to most of the African people themselves. Whether or not this mindset had permeated the remote jungle research stations is hard to say. But Sy has great charm and a gift for friendship—her social skills are rivaled by none, as is her perseverance. Somehow, this very young woman managed to interview all the people whose information she needed, to conduct all the many observations she had planned, and to befriend Goodall and Galdikas as well as the researchers in the late Dian Fossey's camp, so that when she boarded the plane for home, she had everything necessary to write a book—this book—which is unlike any other, but is exactly what Sy had wanted it to be. In short, the book is a multifaceted triumph.

It has often been said that one should never annoy the person who has the ink, as Biruté Galdikas was to learn from having angered one of her biographers. But Sy didn't use her ink to describe her difficulties because these didn't interest her, and this says more about her journalistic skills and moral compass than any

of the difficulties say about their possible perpetrators. She used the ink to honor the researchers and the animals, and to describe a field method that was very suitable for women—a method quite different from those of the prevailing, largely masculine, scientific community. Male researchers have certainly covered a lot of ground in the fields of zoology and animal behavior, but too often from a decidedly masculine point of view. At one time, for instance, it was assumed that a group of female animals (lions, for instance) was the harem of the male in their midst, yet this is seldom the case. The group is usually a cohesive unit of mothers, sisters, daughters, and aunts, along with their small children. If the species is territorial, these females are the owners. The adult male so prominent among them is there only temporarily and at their pleasure. Yet this arrangement seemed so foreign to our patriarchal culture that years passed before the implications of a nonhuman male surrounded by females came to be fully understood.

Then, too, male scientists had set the tone of the manner in which they interfaced with their subject animals, and were generally known for the emotional distance they made sure to maintain. The absence of personal involvement was assumed to indicate good science, so that many researchers, in presenting their material, went to ridiculous extremes to depersonalize their subjects, and would refer to an animal as “it” rather than “he” or “she.” To acknowledge that an animal had gender would be sentimental, it seemed. I can think of no male scientist working in the field who has made a lifelong commitment to any individual wild animal.

Fossey, Goodall, and Galdikas were exactly the opposite. Their methods of study were much more like those approved for anthropologists than like those approved for wildlife biologists: an anthropologist who thought it best to call the village headman “it” would be laughed out of existence. Normally, anthropologists form deep relationships with the villagers who are kind enough to help them with their studies—not a few anthropologists have married into such groups of people—showing a kind of commitment that the anthropology community applauds. Because women are less likely

than men to see barriers between themselves and animals, and are more likely to form permanent commitments, women are more perceptive about their subjects, and learn from them more easily. Louis Leakey realized this, and rather than encouraging male researchers to conduct the important great-ape studies that he envisioned, he chose Fossey, Goodall, and Galdikas. Thus Sy was the perfect person to describe them, as no one knows animals, or understands them, or respects them, or seeks out their individuality, better than she. The primary object of her work was to present the relationships between the women and their subject animals, and to tell the stories of the animals as well as those of their human observers. One of the most moving stories in the book is that of the relationship between Fossey and Digit, a wild gorilla. Both were murdered, first Digit by poachers, later Fossey by an unknown assailant. Their graves are in the Karisoke research station, side by side. How many male researchers are buried beside an animal? And how much greater insight into one's subject species is attained through mutual connection than if no connection exists? These three female primatologists formed lifelong relationships with their groups of study animals, cared deeply about them, and for the most part didn't pretend, in order to avert disapproval from the more restrictive scientists, that they were impartial. Today, these three women are lauded as pioneers and their studies have worldwide importance. In the accepted manner of anthropologists rather than in the more traditional manner of many field biologists, they conducted their studies by means of their deep, personal knowledge of individual animals, and this became the focus of Sy's book.

And as it happens, material for this book was gathered by methods that now seem familiar. You go to your study area, search for your subjects, try to reassure them by your demeanor that you mean them no harm, and then learn from them. You are there because you care about them and what they are doing. That's what Sy did. She approached her famous female subjects fully as empathetically as they approached theirs. Fossey was no longer living when Sy began her work, but Goodall and Galdikas, also primates, were not

unlike their own subject animals in that they probably had little knowledge of the woman who was trying to understand them and less knowledge of what would result from her work. It is not the task of scientists doing fieldwork to make life easy for a biographer or reporter, and I am sure that Galdikas and Goodall assumed that Sy would do whatever she needed to do pretty much on her own, but Sy was no more deterred by this than any good primatologist would be if a great ape gave a threat-grin or threw something at her. To understand the subject, no matter what it does, is the primatologist's task. It is also the reporter's task, and Sy was more than equal to it. The result is a hugely empathetic book that honors the researchers and their study animals alike, a book so beautiful that it lives in the minds of all who read it.

ELIZABETH MARSHALL THOMAS

Preface

This is a book about African and Indonesian apes and the women who studied them. But the book began to take shape, for me, not in Africa or Indonesia but in Australia, and not with apes but with giant flightless birds.

I was squatting, alone, amid a dry sea of angry-looking *Bassia* on a wombat preserve in South Australia. It was July, the dead of Australian winter, and the most challenging part of my task that day was to keep my equipment from blowing away. I was assisting with a study, sponsored by the Chicago Zoological Society, of the nitrogen cycle in this area. My scientific equipment, besides a case knife and a meter-square metal measure, was a bunch of thrice-reused paper lunch bags. I was supposed to lop off the plants in the sampling area, stuff them into the bags, and label them with the species names; later the plants would be dried and weighed. I looked up from my work at one point and saw, twenty-five yards away, three birds, each nearly as tall as a man, staring at me. Emus.

Emus are an ancient, flightless species, ostrichlike, with eight-inch stumps for wings, long black necks topped with periscope heads and goose beaks, and powerful scaly legs that can carry them over the outback at forty miles per hour. The emu stands beside the kangaroo on Australia's coat of arms, a symbol of that otherworldly continent.

After a few minutes the three who had been watching me strolled away, lifting their backward-bending legs with careless grace. Once their brown-feathered haystack bodies had evaporated into the brown bush, I realized I was sweating heavily in the forty-degree cold. I was stricken. I thought them the most alarming, most painfully beautiful beings I had ever seen.

For the next six months, whenever I saw them, I followed these three birds, recording their behavior and diet. After a few weeks, I was able to locate them daily, and I could approach and follow

them within fifteen feet. I learned to recognize the individuals, and I named them. I never knew their sexes—it is impossible to discern sex by appearance alone—but I knew they were subadults, for they lacked the turquoise neck patches that characterize the mature animals. They always traveled together. Probably all three had hatched from the same clutch of giant, greenish black eggs, incubated by their father.

During this time I thought often about Jane Goodall, the most famous of Louis Leakey's "ape ladies." In a way our studies could not have been more different: she was studying chimpanzees, animals so closely related to man that blood transfusions between the two species are possible. I was studying beings more closely related to dinosaurs than to humans. She worked in a jungle, I in a scrub desert. She has continued her study for three decades; I knew I had to return to the States in six months. Nonetheless, I modeled my approach on hers. I reminded myself that although I had no formal scientific training, neither did Jane when she began her study. I remembered how she acclimated the animals to her presence, and I did the same: each day I wore the same clothing—jeans, the shirt I slept in, my father's billowing green army jacket, and a red kerchief, so they could easily recognize me. Like Jane, I approached the animals only to a point where they were clearly comfortable; I never wanted them to feel I was pursuing them. I did not want to steal from them, not even glimpses; I asked only that they show me what they chose to. I would enter their lives on their terms.

In doing this, I began to think about the relationships that are possible between a human and a wild animal. A relationship with a wild animal is utterly different from the bond one shares with a domestic animal such as a dog or a cat or a horse. As Vicki Hearne writes in her wonderful book, *Adam's Task*, over the centuries that man has shared the company of domestic animals, we have worked out agreements, a sort of common language, with them. Whether we like it or not, our pets and livestock are dependent on us; we are the ones in control. Our agreement is that I, the "master," will provide X (food, water, shelter, and so on), and you, the animal,

will provide Y (companionship, transportation, sentry duty, and so on). The animal does not have the choice to live without us.

But with a wild animal we have no such agreement. Several kinds of relationship are possible with a wild animal. One is adversarial, like the relationship modern man has had with the wolf. Another is the relationship in which the animal is “tamed” through the provisioning of food, as children do with squirrels in the woods. Again the human writes the contract. And there is the relationship, if you can call it that, that so often exists between a field worker and the animals studied. He observes the animals from a hidden location or drugs them and outfits them with radio collars so they can be followed with tracking devices. The animals do not come in contact with the human willingly. The relationship is forced upon them independent of their own will.

But the relationship that Jane Goodall has with the chimpanzees of Gombe—and that Dian Fossey had with the mountain gorillas she studied, and Biruté Galdikas has with the wild orangutans of Tanjung Puting—is different. There is a trust between human and animal, a privileged trust unlike any other. The contract for that trust is not written by the human: the animals are the authors of the agreement. The relationship is on the animals’ terms.

The trust I came to share with the emus was no contract for my safety. This is not the kind of trust you have, for instance, with your dog: most medium-sized dogs could kill a person, but we have an agreement with dogs—one that we write and enforce with our food and care—that they will not kill us. I did not have this assurance with the emus, nor did Jane or Dian or Biruté with their huge, powerful apes. The emus’ legs are strong enough to sever fencing wire with a single kick. They could have killed me if they chose. Though I knew this, I didn’t fear them. My trust was simply this: being with them was worth a great price.

Dian Fossey and Biruté Galdikas modeled their approach on Jane Goodall’s: they began their studies by relinquishing control. In the masculine world of Western science, where achievement is typically measured by mastery, theirs was an unusual approach. It was no

accident that Louis Leakey, the paleoanthropologist who launched these long-term studies of the great apes, chose three women to lead the research. Although certain men have also learned how to relinquish control, the approach seems particularly feminine. This approach allows choice and the nurturing of a relationship on the Other's terms.

As I followed the three emus, I imagined myself walking in the footsteps of three women who had been my heroines. For six months, with joy indescribable, I simply recorded what the birds did all day: they rested, preened, grazed, browsed, played, traveled. They nearly always stayed within a hundred yards of one another, these three youngsters. When one wandered farther, it would look up, seem to suddenly realize the others were too far away for comfort, and jog nearer to the other two. I loved watching them preen; when their goose beaks combed roughly through the twin-shafted brown body feathers, it recalled for me those sunny, sofa-bound afternoons when my grandmother would brush my hair. I imagined this activity comforted them; it certainly comforted me.

Soon I could approach the birds within five feet, close enough to examine their massive toenails in detail, close enough to see the veins of the leaves they were eating. I could look them in the eye, pupils black as holes, irises mahogany; when our eyes locked I felt as if I was capable of staring directly into the sun. I collected a lot of data, but no scientific breakthroughs came out of my study. The revelations were private ones.

One revelation came when I was on a fossil dig I was committed to help with, which forced me to leave the birds for a week. Each night as I lay in a sleeping bag soaked with rain, I wondered what the birds were doing. Were they sleeping, their beaks tucked under their stumpy wings? Were they wandering in the moonlight? Would the volunteer I had trained to take data in my absence be able to follow them when I was not there with her? Each night I grew increasingly miserable. I left the fossil dig a day early, worried, I thought, about losing data.

My first evening back at the park, I found that my volunteer had

filled more than a hundred sheets of data. I merely glanced at them before leaving camp at dusk to look for the emus. It was windy and raining, and they were jittery, as they often were in such weather. I always had trouble keeping up with them in the evening, and this night I lost them as they faded into the darkening bush. I broke my own rule and ran after them, desperate to stay with them. But they ran away. Soaked and miserable, I embedded myself in a *Gigera* bush as the rain turned to hail, and I wept. I realized it was not just data I wanted. I wanted to be with them—and they had run away from me.

Only a few days later I would have to leave Australia. On my last day, of course, I went out again to the emus. They seemed to be looking for me. I followed them all day, and toward evening they stopped to graze on some wild mustard. Then I thought: I wish I could tell you what you have given me. How could I express to creatures whose experience of the world was so different from mine what they had allowed me to feel? I said aloud, in a low voice: “You have eased in me a fear more gripping than that you feel when you are separated from the others. You have given me a comfort more soothing than the feel of your feathers passing through your beaks under the warm sun. I can never repay you, but I want you to feel my thanks.”

This speech was one of those expressions like laying flowers upon the graves of the unknowing dead. The recipient doesn’t know or care. But the human species is like this: we have to utter our prayers, even if they go unheard. So while I sat with them that night, deep in the bush, I whispered over and over: “I love you. I love you.”

Five years after I left the emus, I began the research for this book. The relationships Jane, Dian, and Biruté have had with the great apes they studied were far deeper than that I had with the three birds I studied. Jane has studied generations of chimps for decades; she has known many of them from birth to death. Dian lived among the mountain gorillas for eighteen years; Biruté will doubtless live with the orangutans even longer.

All were passionate about the apes. Before Dian's murder I saw all three women together at a symposium in New York. I was warmly amused at the way each one tried to outdo the others in showing how *her* ape was the "most human"—trying to win the audience over to favor her animal. Orangutans, Biruté said, seemed the most human because of the whites of their eyes. Dian insisted that her gorillas were most humanlike because of their tight-knit family groupings. And Jane reminded us that chimps are the apes most closely related to man, sharing 99 percent of our genetic material. I was reminded of kids who insist "my dad can beat up your dad," or of grandmothers comparing their grandchildren. None of the women would ever think of disparaging the others' work, but each is firmly convinced that the animals she loves are the best. For they do love them. It is a love as deep and passionate as the love one has for a child or a spouse or a lover; but it is a love unlike any other. The bonds between the women and the individual apes they studied are complex, subtle, and almost universally misunderstood.

Some scientists who specialize in animal behavior believe one should not be emotionally involved with one's study subjects. But the relationships that these women dared share with the apes were the crucible in which their achievements were formed: the relationships informed their science, inspired their commitment, and transformed their lives. It is through their relationships with these animals that the women have transformed our views of ape and human, of animal and man. And it is to illustrate and honor these relationships, their power and their outcome, that I have written this book.

May 1990
Hancock, New Hampshire

PART I

NURTURERS

Biruté Galdikas and Supinah

Biruté galdikas sits cross-legged by the female orangutan, Supinah, who is lying spread-eagled in the dirt. Poor Supinah. Make you better, it will make you better, Biruté croons.

Though a circle of American volunteers stands by, and a tame gibbon spies on the scene from a tree, it is as if Supinah and Biruté are the only two beings on earth. Two large, powerful, rounded female forms. Both have auburn hair, though Supinah's is redder. Biruté's hooded gray eyes do not leave the orangutan's face, and she offers her high, light voice like cool water.

Supinah, a one-hundred-pound adult, has been anesthetized so that a young American radiologist can remove the maggots from the orangutan's infected vagina. "I got all the way through medical school without seeing a maggot on a bum's leg," Judy Weinstein murmurs into her white face mask, "and here I am fishing them out of an orangutan's vagina." The doctor scrapes another pale, squirming larva off her surgical tweezers, leaving it on the dirt.

Ants crawl to the blood-stained maggots and carry them away. Though it is only midmorning, the heat presses palpably, drawing beads of sweat to forehead and lip. Soon it will be 90 degrees in the shade, humidity 90 percent—hot enough to melt film in a camera, so humid that film and cassette tapes swell and jam. Biruté has lived here, among the orangutans and the heat, the fire ants and the leeches, the pit vipers and the sun bears, since 1971. Lithuanian by heritage, Biruté was born in Germany, grew up in Canada, and was educated in the United States. But Tanjung Puting National Park, a swamp jungle in southern Indonesian Borneo, is emphatically her home.

The doctor makes an incision with the scalpel, cutting away

dead flesh. With infinite gentleness, Biruté runs the long red hair of Supinah's face through the teeth of an outsized, Day-Glo-green comb. "When people do bad things to Supinah, we comb her hair, and she feels better." Biruté says this less to the gathered crowd than to the unconscious orangutan.

When Supinah first came here to Camp Leakey in 1981, having been confiscated by the Indonesian government from an illegal owner, the orangutan immediately attached herself to Biruté. By then Biruté had been living here for ten years; though she had come to study wild orangutans, she had also mothered dozens of orphaned ex-captives like Supinah, nurturing them, teaching them, until they could be released into the rain forest. Biruté guessed that Supinah might be six years old; Biruté herself was then thirty-five.

During Supinah's first year in camp, her home range was confined to the few hundred feet between Biruté's small wooden house and the staff dining hall. "She wasn't particularly clingy," Biruté recalls, "she just wanted to be with me." She would wait for Biruté on the front step of her house, lurk under the pilings of the dining hall, or watch for her from the dining hall roof.

At first Supinah showed no interest in other orangutans. When one of the dozen or so ex-captives in camp attacked her, Supinah would run to Biruté, who would soothe her, combing her hair with the big green comb.

But soon after that first year Supinah grew livelier and more mischievous. She began to play with other orangutans, wrestling and cuddling. She would leave camp for weeks at a time, foraging for fruit in the forest. But her enjoyment of human company did not diminish. Eyes gleaming, she would lurk behind a tree and wait for a passerby, leap upon the unsuspecting visitor to grab camera gear or notebook, then retreat to a tree to examine the prize and mouth it. She would wait on the dock to wrestle with visitors, spreading her lips in a play-face as she took their pale hands in her long black fingers for a game Biruté calls "handsies."

Biruté judged Supinah to be particularly intelligent. The orangutan quickly worked out the social hierarchy among the excaptives

who roamed the camp and made peace with the dominant females. Supinah learned how to break into the dining hall to retrieve warm Cokes and how to remove the bottle tops with her teeth before drinking the sweet contents. Several times she broke into the generator and dismantled it in a few hours.

After Biruté's work had been made famous by *National Geographic* articles and TV specials, Western volunteers streamed into her camp. Earthwatch, an organization based in Watertown, Massachusetts, recruits teams of laypeople who pay to assist with scientific field projects; the Orangutan Project is one of its most popular two- or three-week expeditions. The Earth watchers dubbed Supinah the camp mascot. Some wrote poems and myths and ascribed the words to her. One story, "as told to Mark Rosenthal by Supinah," went:

In the beginning the Great Orangutan created the *rawa*, the primordial swamp of cabernet-colored water. And in the *rawa* he hid all things nasty and mucky and oozy and told them, "Be still and bide your time." And to his people, the forest-men, he gave great long arms of such power that they could swing freely from the arches of the canopy so as to never dip their shiny red coats into the foul waters. But his people were without joy and went to the Great Orangutan and beseeched their lord, "Give us cause for laughter in our forest."

So, the myth continues, the Great Orangutan created

silly Americans with puny arms and stubby legs, and let them travel many days to the *rawa* to trip confusedly over hidden logs and into dark holes, and let them cover their bodies with rashes and bites. ... And that is why orangutans have such wide mouths: so they can laugh at Earthwatch volunteers in the *rawa*.

Supinah seemed to enjoy a good joke. She frequently master-minded raids on the guest house, working holes in the chain-link mesh over the windows to steal volunteers' towels, malaria pills, sunscreen. Once she found a can of paint in a room she had broken into and poured it over a bed in another room. She was often the first orangutan to greet visitors as they arrived by sputtering wooden motorboat up the Sekoyner-Cannon River from Pangkalanbuun, five hours away. She would wait on the dock and rush to newcomers with her long hairy red arms upraised, or poke her head under their raincoats or up the skirt of a sarong.

But then one year, after Biruté returned from her annual trip to British Columbia to teach at Simon Fraser University, she found that Supinah's bright eyes had turned haunted. In Biruté's absence Supinah had given birth to her first infant. It had died within days, for Supinah had no milk. Biruté tried to comfort the orangutan, grooming her with the comb, but Supinah would simply turn away. She no longer played with other orangutans or with visitors. And one day, said Biruté, she recognized the look in Supinah's eyes: it was the same look she sometimes saw in the eyes of one of the American volunteers. This woman's eldest son, a teenager, had committed suicide. "All of a sudden I realized the look was the same," said Biruté: "just pain, pure pain."

Biruté knows that as orangutans age they, like many other animals, tend to become less playful; adult orangutans are the most solitary of the great apes. A young adult female will sometimes spend more than a month alone without seeking contact with other wild orangutans. "But I don't think it was just that; it just wasn't typical of Supinah.

"I think," said Biruté, "that she understood the death of her infant."

Once Biruté was following a wild mother orangutan whose infant was dying. "As soon as that infant died, I have never seen such tenderness," she recalls. The mother groomed the corpse. She ate the maggots off it. She sucked the eyeballs. She carried the corpse gently, clinging to it for such a long time that the eyeballs finally

popped out. Only many days later did she lay aside the mummified baby, leaving it behind in the treetop nest where she had slept the night before.

Biruté knows, in a sense, what it is like to lose a child. Her first baby, Binti, was three years old when Biruté had to give him up to live with his father in Vancouver.

Rod Brindamour and Biruté had been married for two years when they first came to Indonesia in 1971; he was a young college student with dreams of becoming a helicopter pilot. Long-term use of an antimalarial drug was causing his retinas to detach. He realized that living in the jungle was doing nothing to advance his career. And besides, he had fallen in love with Binti's baby sitter, a young Indonesian named Yuni; Biruté formally thanked her for her help with the doctoral thesis she submitted to the University of California at Los Angeles in 1978. In the middle of the following year Rod flew home to Canada with Yuni. Binti joined them six months later.

Biruté didn't particularly blame Rod for leaving. For more than seven years, while Biruté was out observing wild orangutans, Rod was cutting trails through the sweltering, leech-infested swamps, or conferring with Indonesian officials. And within months of their arrival, the couple began to use their camp as a rehabilitation center for the captive orangutan orphans confiscated by the Indonesian government. From then on Biruté and Rod shared their bed with up to five clinging, biting, screaming infant orangutans at a time. The orphans ripped up their mattress to search for edible seeds in the stuffing. They tore apart the thatched roof of the house. At the table the orangutans would cram their mouths with rice and, while the humans weren't looking, spit the bolus into their tea. They would drink the shampoo, eat the toothpaste, and suck fountain pens dry. When Rod left Biruté, he said she loved orangutans more than she loved him.

Biruté agreed that North America would be the best home for her blond son. The couple had constantly worried that Binti would be eaten by Bornean bearded pigs. His main playmates in camp

were ex-captive orangutans. The child's facial expressions, posture, and sounds became increasingly orangutanlike; on occasion, Binti bit people. A visiting psychologist gave this advice: "You've got to get him out of here." But as Binti and his father boarded the plane that would carry them both away from her, Biruté stood on the runway with tears streaming down her face.

Biruté fell in love with a former employee, Pak Bohap bin Jalan, a man of the Dayak tribe seven years her junior. They married in 1981, and with him she had two more children: Frederick, born in 1981, and Jane, named after Jane Goodall, born in 1985. Biruté shares joint custody of Binti with Rod, and every year she visits him when she teaches at Simon Fraser.

At Camp Leakey, her children with Pak Bohap have human age-mates to play with. No more an isolated jungle outpost, the camp houses and employs dozens of Indonesian helpers and their families. Birute is deeply involved with people, but she remains bound to the lives of the orangutans; the rhythms of their lives are part of her own.

Three weeks before Supinah's operation, the orangutan again gave birth, in a small glade near camp. Biruté was with her, so close that they were touching. Birth, she believes, can be painful for an orangutan; she was the first primatologist to witness the birth of a wild orangutan, which occurred high in a tree. The mother animal moved about in her nest in obvious discomfort during labor and sometimes clung to the trunk of a tree as if to stop the pain. Biruté herself has given birth twice without painkillers; Binti and Frederick were born in Indonesian hospitals, where anesthetics aren't provided for laboring women. When she groaned in pain, the nurses hushed her angrily for making noise. An Indonesian woman, she says, gives birth in silence; in the hospital labor and delivery room you can tell a woman has delivered when the silence is broken by a long, loud sigh. Then you hear the baby cry.

Supinah's second birth seemed easy. Her labor appeared to last only minutes, and then the little female slid out all at once. The one-pound infant was premature. And again Supinah had no milk.

After three days the infant became feverish and dehydrated and fell into a coma. Swaddled in towels, she was nursed around the clock by American volunteers and Indonesian assistants. Finally her fever broke and her appetite returned.

Now it is Supinah's life that is in danger. Biruté was hesitant to have the operation performed because the risk from anesthesia is so great. In zoos up to one in five sick orangutans may die from the immobilizing drug. None of Biruté's orangutans have died from anesthesia, perhaps because she uses it so rarely. She is very worried now, as Supinah lies in the numbing grip of the drug.

Biruté's face is usually as smooth as a calm lake; normally she does not give herself away. Perhaps she was easier to read when she was younger, more angular, when she first came to the forest of Tanjung Puting in 1971. Then she was a twenty-five-year-old newlywed on a great adventure. But now, when Biruté looks at the old photos of herself in *National Geographic*, she notes that she was never smiling. She was supple and shapely, with the face and figure of an ingenue, but her heart-shaped face, framed with auburn hair, always bore a look of almost grim determination.

Today her hair is a bit gray at the temples. Her figure and features are rounded by childbirth and maturity. She radiates a Buddhalike serenity, seldom smiling or frowning, issuing words only. The words sound pleasant; the syllables are rounded with the open vowels of the Indonesian language, like stones worn smooth. Yet you can seldom tell what she is thinking.

Biruté is not a sentimental woman. She and Rod never celebrated their birthdays at Tanjung Puting, and she cannot remember the date of her marriage to Pak Bohap. But at this moment tiny dents burrow into her brow above her oversized plastic-rimmed glasses. This is not sentimentality; this is the expression you see in an emergency room when a mother holds a sick child's hand, when a wife wipes the brow of a pain-stricken husband. It is a deeply feminine expression; her own panic is subsumed by an overriding need to soothe.