



Songs of the Gorilla Nation: My Journey Through Autism

Dawn Prince-Hughes

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“This is a book about autism. Specifically, it is about my autism, which is both like and unlike other people’s autism. But just as much, it is a story about how I emerged from the darkness of it into the beauty of it.”

In this elegant and thought-provoking memoir, Dawn Prince-Hughes traces her personal growth from undiagnosed autism to the moment when, as a young woman, she entered the Seattle Zoo and immediately became fascinated with the gorillas.

Having suffered from a lifelong inability to relate to people in a meaningful way, Dawn was surprised to find herself irresistibly drawn to these great primates. By observing them and, later, working with them, she was finally able to emerge from her solitude and connect to living beings in a way she had never previously experienced.

Songs of the Gorilla Nation is more than a story of autism, it is a paean to all that is important in life. Dawn Prince-Hughes’s evocative story will undoubtedly have a lasting impact, forcing us, like the author herself, to rediscover and assess our own understanding of human emotion.

Songs of the Gorilla Nation: My Journey Through Autism Details

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From Reader Review *Songs of the Gorilla Nation: My Journey Through Autism* for online ebook

A says

I found it almost impossible to review this book straight away, because there aspects of it I strongly dislike and aspects that I find very valuable.

I think it is an important book: It gives a great glimpse into one person's reality of coming of age with undefined high functioning autism. Most importantly, it describes a strategy for overcoming autistic isolation. Not a cure but a way to kick start the positive feedback loop of social relationships that social learning requires in order to happen.

Dawn is a gifted writer, and the book has brilliant passages and good integrity. Its structure is meaningful, organised into 3 sections:

Part 1. Dawn's childhood and youth history growing up with undiagnosed autism, knowing something is wrong with her socially, but unable to figure out what it is. She is severely bullied and drops out of school, becomes homeless and hungry, and later finds a way to make a living as an erotic dancer. The roots of her passion for primates is her childhood fascination with ancient humans; and that fascination runs through her life story as a sub-surface theme waiting to unfold.

Part 2: Dawn discovers the gorillas. She is lucky and gets a job in the zoo, and gets more and more involved with the gorilla family. They become her family, and she learns social skills by observing and interacting with them

Part 3: Dawn's life post-zoo, with the social skills she learned from the gorillas. She establishes a family, works through relationship problems, discovers the name of her condition and gets a diagnosis, gets on meds, and makes her special interest into her study direction and career.

Out of the "autism memoirs" I have read, this is the one I relate strongest with on a personal level, it made a strong impression and very much came "under my skin"; so it was uncomfortable yet fascinating to read. Despite differences in personality, life style and sexual orientation (and my lack of fascination with gorillas), the core theme really strikes a note with me:

1. Youth as a time of stumbling through life randomly, frantically, alien, always aware something is terribly socially amiss yet not able to pinpoint the key error.
2. Learning social skills from animals as a turning point that creates a "before" and "after" social timeline.

Observing the social dynamics of the gorilla group and building relationships with them, gave Dawn the basic social infrastructure she needed to begin to make sense of human sociality and learn from that too – creating the crucial positive feedback loop she had been lacking, kick starting her social development.

In my own life, group dynamics began to make sense when I worked with pigs (for seven years), although that wasn't a fixed group but many groups that were slowly replaced by new groups over time.

My first real close, trusting, stable, deep long term friendship was with my old dog. She passed away many

years ago but I am still using some of her “tricks” – social attitudes and habits, in social interactions and relations with people; especially in my marriage.

Just like Dawn describes it with the gorillas, my bond with the dog was a safe base for learning social relationship skills and pick up attitudes I could use to connect with people – and then the relations with people gave social insights and enabled me to pick up more social insights and skills, which gave more social opportunities et.c. – the crucial positive social feedback loop gradually gained a foothold and developed its own permanent, positive inertia.

That is why the book is important. People rarely point this out, but social insights and habits required for interacting and relating with people can be learned from observing and relating with social animals, as an easier (or even just possible) starting point. Relationship skills are somewhat universal: the attitude and behaviours your dog uses to connect with you and build unique emotional bonds, is similar to what you need to connect and bond with people (in a modified version).

That’s the core point of what I want to say, but other aspects of the book hit home too – like the attachment to places more than to people, and the traumatic dislocation and alienation caused by moving from a childhood home, having one’s roots pulled up. And of course the passion for animals (although in my case not particularly primates).

As I said initially, there are also aspects of the book I found hard to bear and strongly distasteful. The worst is the sentimentalism and idealisation of the gorillas. I hate when Dawn calls the gorillas for “people”, and humans for “human people”. Essentially she insists on re-categorising gorillas as a type of ancient humans; and projects her special interest for ancient humanity onto the gorillas. I find that re-categorisation wrong on many levels, none of which denies that gorillas have personalities and social relations and social group dynamics, just like people do. However, so do many other animals... That makes them relatable, but not human. Dawn does explain why she tries to include the gorillas in humanity; I see her views but didn’t like to be force-fed them semantically.

That said, overall I think this is an important, strong, beautifully written book with strong integrity, and despite finding some aspects of it repulsive, I’ll absolute recommend it as a great source of insight and inspiration for social self-help.

I also appreciate very much that Dawn doesn’t generalise herself and try to speak on behalf of all autistics; she doesn’t “We” herself but emphasises that this is her version of it, and that it is both unique and overlaps with some others peoples’ experiences of living with autism, but not all.

Molly says

I grew up knowing I was different, but, thanks to my classmates, my extent of understanding of myself was that I was a "freak." In eighth grade, I was diagnosed with Aspergers, but never really understood any of what that meant. In eleventh grade, I discovered this book in my school library. For the first time in my life, I finally understood who I was and WHY I was different. [return]Though we'll never meet, and you'll probably never read these words, thank you Dawn for helping me feel not so alone in the world.

Amiad says

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Irene says

Wow. This is quite a book. The author has a remarkable tale to tell and she tells it beautifully. It is a story of growing up with undiagnosed autism (Asperger's Syndrome), of finding herself, of her work with apes. But it is so much more than that. She is a poet and wrote prolifically in her journals from an early age. She shares many poems in the course of telling her story. She is a survivor. She used the positive attributes of her autism to cope with the pain and confusion it caused as she struggled to learn how to get by in world. She is a deep soul. Integral to everything is her innate desire to relieve suffering. And that's before we even get to the apes. Her observations of these wonderful beings is rich and enlightening. I am really quite awed by her talents and her life.

Carol Meyer says

An odd, wonderful book. Dr. Prince-Hughes' journey from childhood through her eventual success as a primate researcher is at times painful as she documents bullying and assaults from her teachers and classmates, substance abuse, homelessness, and experience in the sex trade. It is difficult to read as an obviously talented and intelligent individual is so misused by those who do not understand her and those she does not understand

Her experience with watching gorillas in the zoo started her on the long path to self-recognition and an eventual diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome (now classed as an Autism Spectrum Disorder). Her meticulous attention to the social mores of her gorillas taught her how to be around humans.

This biography is not always linear--we hear about the gorillas before we meet them in her chronology; we know about her diagnosis long before the story takes us there.

I was struck by the amazing amount of energy Dr. Prince-Hughes must expend just to function in our neurotypical world--counting beats while deciding how long to maintain eye contact; practicing her "rule of threes" in an interview (1/3 talk about herself, 1/3 about the field, and 1/3 about the other person).

The narrative is interspersed with her poetry illustrating revelations at critical life events. She also features an old Quaker hymn, which is one of my favorites: How can I keep from singing.

A short read, not an easy read, but a worthwhile read.

Sue says

I found this book really remarkable. Dawn Prince-Hughes has a form of autism called Asperger's Syndrome, which is a less noticeable form of autism. You might know someone with Asperger's and merely think they are eccentric or sometimes uncommunicative, and barely sociable, fascinating in their detailed interest in something or other descriptions that can describe peculiarities.

She is a wonderful writer, and even if you don't think you are interested in autism, if you like memoir's, I very highly recommend this book.

I have read other books on Asperger's written by authors who have it, but because of Dawn Prince-Hughes' close observation of gorillas and her ability to truly understand them and communicate with them, she is able to clarify many aspects of Asperger's that "neurotypical" people just simply cannot grasp. One reason neurotypicals cannot grasp and empathize with people with Asperger's is that those who have it don't experience the world the way we do and often can become adept at imitating neurotypicals much of the time. When they don't we think they are "being difficult" in some way they really could control. Not so.

It is really sad that the people with Asperger's and the neurotypicals cannot just sit down and listen and talk. After reading this book, I strongly believe that people who put labels on others in an attempt to describe them, or call them various things which mean mentally off are really missing out in developing human understanding and wisdom.

Amy Alstrum says

This book was beautiful and so very meaningful to me. If you don't understand or have experience with autism, you may find the writing style a bit difficult to follow, but the author's voice and experiences are so worth any effort you may put in to understand her.

Lobeck says

I couldn't put this book down. The author of the book and main character, Dawn Prince-Hughes, describes her experience of growing up autistic, which is an amazing mind-opener for those who have never experienced it. It is through observing gorillas at a zoo that she finally begins to understand human connection. This is a beautiful story about Prince-Hughes's life, and it has allowed me to understand autism more and accept it as simply a different way of being in the world.

rosamund says

I heard about this several years ago: I spoke to my friend about autism, and she suggested this book as she knows I have an interest in great apes as well, and this book combines the two subjects. I did not seek it out until just now: I wish I had read it sooner.

Prince-Hughes writes a lot about captive gorillas and their rights to personhood. I love reading about her close observation of the gorillas, the unique insight they gave her into her self, and how she developed such strong relationships with them. She talks about how the way autistic people naturally look at others, such as sideways and without close contact, are the same as how gorillas connect with one another, and when she spent time with them, she felt for the first time like she could connect with someone.

She has lovely descriptions of the gorillas' individual personalities and their ways of being. I really like how she draws wisdom from them and talks about how they are different from people but that does not mean they are not intellectual thinking beings who deserve rights. This is something I have always felt. The book is not perfect: I think some of Prince-Hughes' arguments are racist, and I also think she falls into an ableist trap of considering herself and other autistic people of having a closer relationship with nature and a special wisdom that sets them apart from others.

But the book was profoundly moving and important for me. I still vacillate on whether or not I have the symptoms of autism, but there were moments in this book that made me cry because they put into words things I have felt for a long time, and I felt a huge kinship with Prince-Hughes, especially when she described herself as a child. Her experiences and confusion are so similar to my own, and I felt less alone when I read her feelings. It was also very overwhelming because it brought back the bullying and injustice I had experienced, and I felt angry that this happens to so many children.

There are also moments I think we can all relate to: for example she describes being at a playground with her small son and how when another parent talks to her she has to have the same conversation following the same script every time, and she's thinks if she had to do it again she'll die. I've been there!

Like I said, this book is not perfect, but I would definitely rate it 5-stars because it is so moving for me personally, about such an important subject, and so evocative and beautifully written.

Leanna Manuel says

While traveling to Arizona a while back I read *Songs of the Gorilla Nation: My Journey Through Autism* by Dawn Prince-Hughes, Ph.D. As the secondary title indicates, this is a first-hand account of autism. The author offers a vivid and insightful account of Asperger's Syndrome.

She was diagnosed rather late in her life, after a childhood punctuated by misunderstanding and isolation. Fortunately, she was able to learn about human socialization and relationships through her keen observation of gorilla communities. She writes, "This is a book about autism. Specifically, it is about my autism, which is both like and unlike other people's autism. But just as much, it is a story about how I emerged from the darkness of it into the beauty of it. It is about how I moved full circle from being a wild thing out of context as a child, to being a wild thing in context with a family of gorillas, who taught me how to be civilized. They taught me the beauty of being wild and gentle together and as one."

While there are many excellent texts about Asperger's Syndrome and autism, this was the first book I read that described it from the inside. Dr. Prince-Hughes is eloquent in her poetry and prose. She describes confusion, rage, fear, and joyful discovery in a way that touches the readers heart and understanding. Instead of lists of characteristics or clinical observations, this book placed the experience into context.

My understanding has certainly been expanded by this book. I am hopeful that it will change my acceptance

of the more "annoying" behaviors often associated with Asperger's. It is harder to remain annoyed when I remember that the strong need for repetition exhibited by persons with Asperger's can be the result of panic. Dr. Prince-Hughes had this to say, "Most autistic people need order and ritual and will find ways to make order where they feel chaos. So much stimulation streams in, rushing into one's body without ever being processed: the filters that other people have simply aren't there. Swimming through the din of the fractured and the unexpected, one feels as if one were drowning in an ocean without predictability, without markers, without a shore. It is like being blinded in the brightness of a keener sight."

There are also examples of wonderful and intricate coping mechanisms. She used a formula to get along with people in the workplace. This included talking about her skills a third of the time, talking with colleagues about how their interests merged for a third of the time, and talking about current events and "softened" opinions about them a third of the time. This had to be approached consciously. She also counted seconds to know how long to look into another person's eyes and when to look away. Each of these required deliberate practice and application.

This book is a great source of information, but is also an incredibly engaging autobiography. Dr. Prince-Hughes has a wonderful command of language. Consider this self description, "I am an individual. I am different, for reasons germane to the phenomenon of autism and reasons mundane. All that is in between and at both ends have made my life. Within these pages, an archeology cleared of dust and fear, I talk about this life. It is the archaeology of a culture of one."

Caren says

This was a book that had two intersecting themes: the author's experience with Asperger's and her experience with and subsequent research about gorillas. Her observations of gorillas in a zoo helped her learn to relate to those around her, human and otherwise, and to better understand her own unconventional orientation toward living. To me, some of her difficulties were not only with her autistic orientation, but with the poor way it was handled. Certainly, not as much was known at the time she was growing up, but her experiences in school were truly horrendous and then her family's response after she left school at sixteen was, to me, incomprehensible. Would you just turn your troubled sixteen-year-old loose and let her fend for herself? I would not. So, the author had some pretty desolate years, including being homeless and working as an exotic dancer. In her telling, observing and later working with the gorillas turned her life around. It's interesting that she could closely observe the gorillas in a way that would not be socially acceptable with humans, and her observations were really fascinating. For me personally, I was probably more interested in what she had to say about gorilla life. I felt sad, as did she, that these sensitive creatures had to live imprisoned. As I mused on the meanings of what the author had to say, a couple of insights struck me. One, all of us humans are on a "spectrum" of sorts. In this country, "normal" is being an extrovert. If you at all are overwhelmed by too much interaction with other people, as many introverts are, you will have to come up with some coping mechanisms. Perhaps it is only in the extremity of the coping reactions that a person tips over into what is then considered a disability. In other words, we have a rather narrow understanding of "normal". Two, when we believe that humans are the superior creature on this planet, we are kidding ourselves. In the variety of experience of life, whether from a person on the autism spectrum, or from a non-human fellow creature, there is so very much we don't know. Perhaps a humble acceptance of our limitations and an openness to alternative experiences of life make for the best approach.

Robert says

Song of the Gorilla Nation by Dawn Prince-Hughes is not just about what is like to be a person with Asperger's Syndrome whose disability led to her become a homeless street kid whose falling in love with gorillas freed her soul so that she could become a university instructor of anthropology, a loving spouse, and a mom. That alone would make it a fascinating read. It is a meditation about personhood, including parenthood, about valuing uniqueness and not letting ourselves exile and exploit fellow salient creatures, including our own children, because we don't understand their "song."

"The components of prejudices—such as the way we are trained to see bodies of other species as different and inferior, and our belief that they are not as smart or as evolved as we are—are changed at different rates as human people become used to the idea that their assumptions could be wrong. The by-products of these prejudices—using other species for profit or believing that they need human people to keep from damaging themselves or others—could take generations to overcome. [Yet] "apes fulfill all the criteria that currently define personhood: self-awareness; comprehension of past, present, and future; the ability to understand complex rules and their consequences on emotional levels; the ability to choose to risk those consequences; a capacity for empathy; and the ability to think abstractly."

"The gorillas have given me strength to see that if I am to be effective in bettering the planet [by advocating for the rights of apes to personhood], my responsibility outweighs my discomfort." If only every person on this planet would take this as a creed for living: MY RESPONSIBILITY OUTWEIGHS MY DISCOMFORT.

"I have read about the relationship between Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan. Perhaps in defying normal boundaries love can create us in its own image."

Lindsay says

Songs of the Gorilla Nation is a must-read for anyone who thinks they *know* what autism is, or who thinks there is a clear dividing line between human and animal. It's the story of Dawn Prince-Hughes's journey "from the darkness of autism into (its) beauty," with a group of gorillas helping her along the way. It's fascinating to see Prince-Hughes explain why she was able to have meaningful interactions with the gorillas at a time when she couldn't yet handle human contact. Her testimony here is a valuable addition to the growing body of autism literature written by autistic people themselves.

Steph (loves water) says

FABULOUS, incredible must-read for anyone who knows someone who has a family member or friend on the Autism spectrum, is interested in conservation of endangered animals, or spirituality. Dr. Prince-Hughes writes an eloquent, honest memoir that puts to rest the idea that ASD folks are "different, stupid, weird, or wrong" and brings hope for a better future in which our society treats each other with dignity and respect.

I could not put this book down. I've learned so much and am forever grateful for finding this little gem. If I could give it 10 stars, I would. Thank you, Dr. Prince-Hughes.

Ruthie says

This is a really cool view into the mind of an autistic woman. I love that she gives you a new perspective on the thought processes of someone with Asperger's Syndrome than what you hear about in the media. I also loved her relationship with the gorillas and I definitely think of them differently now.

I happened upon this book when I was desperate for something to read while on vacation because the books I was finding in hostels were totally lame and the one I brought just wasn't capturing my attention. I probably would have never read this if it hadn't been in a used book section of some random coffee shop in Costa Rica, but I am really glad it was!
