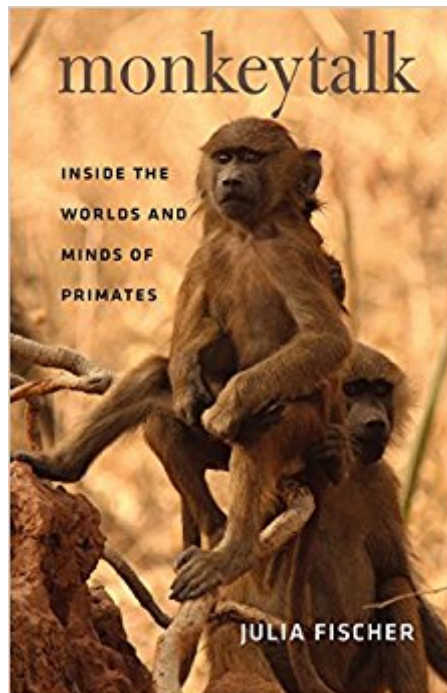




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Monkeytalk: Inside The Worlds And Minds Of Primates



Synopsis

Monkey see, monkey do— or does she? Can the behavior of non-human primates— their sociality, their intelligence, their communication— really be chalked up to simple mimicry? Emphatically, absolutely: no. And as famed primatologist Julia Fischer reveals, the human bias inherent in this oft-uttered adage is our loss, for it is only through the study of our primate brethren that we may begin to understand ourselves. An eye-opening blend of storytelling, memoir, and science, *Monkeytalk* takes us into the field and the world's primate labs to investigate the intricacies of primate social mores through the lens of communication. After first detailing the social interactions of key species from her fieldwork— from baby-wielding male Barbary macaques, who use infants as social accessories in a variety of interactions, to aggression among the chacma baboons of southern Africa and male-male tolerance among the Guinea baboons of Senegal— Fischer explores the role of social living in the rise of primate intelligence and communication, ultimately asking what the ways in which other primates communicate can teach us about the evolution of human language. Funny and fascinating, Fischer's tale roams from a dinner in the field shared with lionesses to insights gleaned from Rico, a border collie with an astonishing vocabulary, but its message is clear: it is humans who are the evolutionary mimics. The primate heritage visible in our species is far more striking than the reverse, and it is the monkeys who deserve to be seen. "The social life of macaques and baboons is a magnificent opera," Fischer writes. "Permit me now to raise the curtain on it."

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Customer Reviews

“A delight. . . . Fischer adroitly explores the big questions now being asked about primate minds. Can they understand the intentions of others? Are they able to estimate travel time and plan for the future? How much can they learn by watching others? Are they capable of metacognition, of knowing what it is that they know? . . . You discover an unusual mix of science and insight, interspersed with funny anecdotes from African field work, including how to dress for survival in the bureaucratic jungle. Pink pumps, a plastic handbag, lots of rhinestones, and glittery appliqué were all needed for Fischer to meet local expectations of what a lady looked like and obtain a vehicle permit. The book ends on a serious note, though. The only way we will really understand our own origins is to explore the minds of other primate species along with the bewildering differences in the societies they live in, their ecology, neurobiology, and genetics. But primate populations are being destroyed so fast that our close relatives may vanish from the wild before we can find out what made us human.” (New Scientist) “[One of our] book recommendations for January.” (Scientific American) “Fascinated by the complex social lives of monkeys, primatologist Fischer has been studying Barbary macaques and baboons for decades in order to understand the connections among their social behavior, intelligence, and capacity for communication. This book is a survey of experimental work carried out by Fischer and other researchers and includes studies of how monkeys perceive space and time, their awareness of others, and their use of gestures and alarm calls. . . . Amusing anecdotes about Fischer’s trials and tribulations as a field primatologist in Senegal and Botswana serve as counterpoint to the detailed technical content. Recommended for nonspecialists intrigued by animal intelligence and fans of Frans de Waal’s Are We Smart Enough To Know How Smart Animals Are? (Library Journal) “Fischer’s recollections of field research (where strong nerves, grit and oftentimes a morbid sense of humor are essential) and descriptions of monkey behavior are highly engaging. The account of babysitting among Barbary macaques is especially vivid and memorable. . . . Only on the final page does Fischer make the reader fully aware of two very dark clouds hanging over the progress of knowledge concerning our fellow primates. One is that long-term research while necessary, since most species have long life spans is difficult given the scarcity of long-term funding. The other is that a majority of species are now endangered, and many are on the verge of extinction. Monkeytalk certainly leaves you with a feeling

of the depths that loss will mean. (Inside Higher Ed) “Monkeytalk invites readers into the complex social world of monkeys. . . . Our primate relatives specialize in tracking comrades’ behaviors, Fischer holds, rather than trying to infer others’ plans and desires. And unlike human groups, monkey communities don’t steadily accumulate knowledge and innovations or communicate in language-like ways. . . . So what if monkeys don’t write books or gossip about each other? Their social lives are complex enough to remain largely a mystery to humans, Fischer concludes. The gritty work of conducting long-term studies, especially in the wild, can illuminate the worlds inhabited by monkeys. (Science News) “In Monkeytalk, Fischer offers a lively, personal, and nuanced perspective on primate behavior. She neither embellishes nor diminishes primate intelligence, but evaluates it objectively. And she does so in the most appropriate way—in the natural environment in which it evolved. (Dorothy L. Cheney and Robert M. Seyfarth, coauthors of "How Monkeys See the World" and "Baboon Metaphysics") “An excellent and entertaining book about how we may begin to uncover the capacities of our closest relatives. (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, on the German edition) “This eminently readable book explains from a position of erudite affinity with the animal world just why an anthropomorphic view of it is equally misleading as a purely naturalist depiction of human culture. Refreshing, both for us humans and for the monkeys. (Süddeutsche Zeitung, on the German edition) “How Monkeys See the World is . . . the title of a classic work in primate research that was written in 1990 by Dorothy Cheney and Robert Seyfarth. Later on, Fischer herself worked for this team of researchers, and in Botswana she worked on, among other things, detailed playback experiments in which . . . the alarm call of a relative was played to monkeys using a (hidden) speaker so that their reactions could be observed. In her book Monkeytalk, Fischer now offers a beautiful overview of the state of such research projects. (Die Zeit, on the German edition) “Fischer is profoundly knowledgeable about communication among monkeys. . . . She has the best information on what observational and experimental work her worthy colleagues are performing, and she is also well versed in the history of behavioral research. . . . The media are constantly reporting similar things: Amazing, monkeys can speak! Or: We’re like them after all, and they’re just like us—only not as clever! . . . The wonderful thing about Fischer’s book is that she does not follow this path. She writes that comparing a human child to a grown monkey is problematic. She focuses not on the comparison “What can monkeys do, and what can humans do? but rather the respect that we should show the fellow creatures in our world. . . . It is made clear that monkeys are intelligent, but in their own way and in a manner suited for their

own purposes. (Laborjournal, on the German edition) "Along with her results, Fischer's book offers numerous anecdotes taken from the everyday life of a researcher and is thus both informative and enjoyable reading. (Das Leibniz-Journal, on the German edition) "One discovers again and again in this book the close affinity between monkeys and humans. This book needed to be written! (Cuxhavener Allgemeine, on the German edition) "Accessible and . . . entertaining. . . . Fischer's book . . . is very much to be treasured. (Die Tageszeitung, on the German edition)

Julia Fischer is professor in the German Primate Center and head of the Department of Cognitive Ethology at Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Germany, as well as president of the European Federation of Primatology. Frederick B. Henry Jr. holds an MA in anthropology from the University of Chicago and is an independent scholar and translator of German who has worked with several university presses.

Probably everybody that has heard about or seen documentaries of primates or other animals imitating human behaviors has questioned if they are aware of the meaning behind these actions or if they are simply repeating what they see. Julia Fischer's answer is an emphatic "no!" She argues that they are fully aware and reasoning. Human babies mimic the actions of the people around them before they are able to explain the motivations for why any one action is performed verbally, so it isn't a stretch to see monkey behavior as similarly a blend of mimicry and understanding. She examines relationships between different primates from macaques to baboons in the wilds of Barbary to Africa and Guinea towards male rivals, towards children, and in other social interactions. She concludes that humans rather than other primates are the "evolutionary mimics" while the others use language in much more innovative and creative ways. The first three sections are organized by locations and primate type. Then there is a part on cognition (thinking, social and otherwise, special intelligence, intention, belief), followed by a part on communication (information, signals, sounds, training). Diagrams and photos help to explain some of the theories Fischer uses to strengthen her argument. The photos of monkey communications are highly expressive and look very human-like (107). Spectrogram diagrams help to explain patterns in primates' alarm calls and other vocalizations. This book is hardly designed for general readers, who will probably be lost the complex rhetoric employed. While this is not an entertaining read, it does offer some new perspectives that should help to further this barely understood field of study. --Pennsylvania Literary

This is an excellent book about the cognitive lives of monkeys (and some other animals). Highly recommended for a broad audience and classes in cognitive ethology and primate behavior. It covers a lot of ground in an accessible way, and is very clearly written. I learned a lot about nonhumans with whom I'm not all that familiar.

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