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Alex & Me



How a Scientist and a Parrot Discovered a Hidden World of Animal Intelligence--and Formed a Deep Bond in the Process

I love parrots and my two—Roger the Ringneck and Jackson the Eclectus—are both intelligent, loving, smart, kinda kooky at times and provide me with endless love and entertainment. Though I'd love to have an African Grey, it's a two bird household and a third would be too much for me to handle, though I've inquired a couple of times and come close to fulfilling a dream.

Some nights though, I have a terrible dream that one or both of my birds have died, been badly injured or birdnapped and I wake up in a night fright. I know that it's likely my birds will outlive me and I've made arrangements with a NSW Parrot Rescue organisation with my avian vet to rehome them including setting up a bank account for their care in case of my death or incapacitation. Yet I still dread the thought that one morning I might awaken and one of my flock might not.

The average lifespan for an African Grey is 40 to 60 years

So it was with some apprehension that I read this book on two counts. The previous book on Alex, arguably the smartest bird in the world, was more of an academic and scientific tome that I laboured through half way before giving up. This one, I couldn't put down but I do admit it made me cry in the end. But at least I knew what was coming. Here's a description of the book by the publishers, which says it all, far better than I could. Besides, you'll find most reviewers simply copy the promo anyway.

"On September 6, 2007, an African Grey parrot named Alex died prematurely at age thirty-one. His last words to his owner, Irene Pepperberg, were 'You be good. I love you.'"

"What would normally be a quiet, very private event was, in Alex's case, headline news. Over the thirty years they had worked together, Alex and Irene had become famous—two pioneers who opened an unprecedented window into the hidden yet vast world of animal minds. Alex's brain was the size of a shelled walnut, and



when Irene and Alex first met, birds were not believed to possess any potential for language, consciousness, or anything remotely comparable to human intelligence. Yet, over the years, Alex proved many things. He could add. He could sound out words. He understood concepts like bigger, smaller, more, fewer, and none. He was capable of thought and intention. Together, Alex and Irene uncovered a startling reality: We live in a world populated by thinking, conscious creatures."

The fame that resulted was extraordinary. Yet there was a side to their relationship that never made the papers. They were emotionally connected to one another. They shared a deep bond far beyond science. Alex missed Irene when she was away. He was jealous when she paid attention to other parrots, or even people. He liked to show her who was boss. He loved to dance. He sometimes became bored by the repetition of his tests, and played jokes on her. Sometimes they sniped at each other. Yet nearly every day, they each said, 'I love you.'"

"Alex and Irene stayed together through thick and thin—despite sneers from experts, extraordinary financial sacrifices, and a nomadic existence from one university to another. The story of their thirty-year adventure is equally a landmark of scientific achievement and of an unforgettable human-animal bond."

The African Grey Parrot has been called "the perfect mix of brains and beauty"

I couldn't have said it better if I was reviewing this book, but I'm more like sharing it. If you're not a 'bird person' you would probably not know how very intelligent they can be. I have tons of stories I couldn't relay here due to space, but I can assure you that meeting the many avian critters I have, I never cease to be amazed at the depth of their ability to reason and communicate.

Just like showing the film 'The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill', it takes courage to release a product that may have a very limited audience, but 2008 Small Publisher of the Year, Scribe Publications, did more than merely import a few copies, they printed it onshore and are selling it for almost half the price it would be if imported from the US, even if you tried to buy it through Amazon (not the parrot!). It proves the adage, "One person with a belief is worth a thousand with merely an interest."

The book itself shows how much one bird has affected the world. It's intimate, funny, has a history aspect of how both Alex and Irene evolved through their tight but sometimes frustrating relationship that is touching as well as having just enough science to not overwhelm. For animal lovers, it's the perfect gift and for anyone with a featherlust or twitcher fans, it opens up a whole new world on avian intelligence.

It's now available at bookstores for \$27.95 and you can also purchase it online at www.scribepublications.com.au or by calling 03 9349 5955



