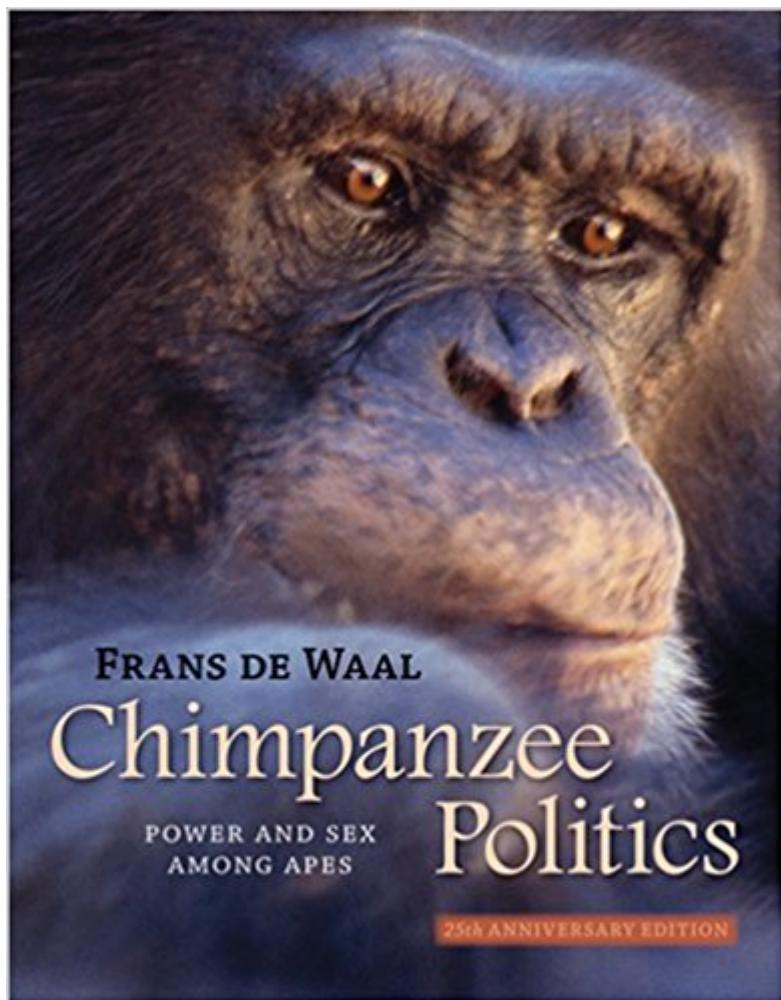


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Chimpanzee Politics: Power And Sex Among Apes



Synopsis

The first edition of Frans de Waal's *Chimpanzee Politics* was acclaimed not only by primatologists for its scientific achievement but also by politicians, business leaders, and social psychologists for its remarkable insights into the most basic human needs and behaviors. Twenty-five years later, this book is considered a classic. Featuring a new preface that includes recent insights from the author, this anniversary edition is a detailed and thoroughly engrossing account of rivalries and coalitions—actions governed by intelligence rather than instinct. As we watch the chimpanzees of Arnhem behave in ways we recognize from Machiavelli (and from the nightly news), de Waal reminds us again that the roots of politics are older than humanity.

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Customer Reviews

Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex among Apes was a very disturbing book to read. Perhaps this is because of the way Franz de Waal chose to end the book. The story about how Luit finished his reign as "alpha male" was extremely upsetting. One of the key themes in the book is that so called political behavior is rooted at a level of development that is below cognitive and is as much instinctive as it is learned. Learning about the male chimpanzee's quest for dominance, it makes one wonder how much our behavior is motivated by inherent drives that are not only irrelevant in modern cultures, but are unknowable by those who experience the motivation. This book has changed the way I look at and understand the world around me. I strongly recommend this book, but it is not for the faint-hearted.

excellent book. de waal's thesis, as i understand it, is finding and exposing analogies to human behavior among other animals in order to better understand human behavior (a thesis he extends in good natured to show that our "animal" behaviors are also behaviors of kindness and compassion) chimpanzee politics reads like a novel as it follows chronicles the group dynamics of a chimpanzee colony over several years; and in those group dynamics we see enough sex, scheming, and politics to fuel a soap opera or election campaign. the mirror that de waal holds up to us through this book is at once funny, fascinating, and humbling. if one reason you read novels is to appreciate the universality of the human condition (that is, that you like to live vicariously in other times or places to experience conditions as other humans do), then get this book and prepare yourself to appreciate just how universal much of our condition really is. you might be surprised at just how easily you vicariously experience life as chimpanzees do.

In the year I was born the Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal delivered a highly popular and influential book about the chimpanzees of Arnhem Zoo, the Netherland facility housing the largest captive population of the apes in the world. At first such a book might not have seemed so exciting, the well-known studies of Jane Goodall or Diane Fossey among apes in Africa making a group of chimpanzees in a zoo seem bland by comparison, but de Waal took advantage of the opportunities for detailed observation the captive setting provided and painted a vivid picture of the complex social life of chimpanzees in Chimpanzee Politics. Twenty-five years after its first publication, the book has recently been updated with new information about the chimpanzees of Arnhem and a selection of color photographs, the supplemental materials adding to what was already an excellent book. The true strength of Chimpanzee Politics lies in de Waal's ability to guide the reader step-by-step through the complex social interactions of the chimpanzees, the story of the various dominance shifts and reconciliations being fairly easy to follow. Even when some of the interactions become a little confusing, the book includes a smattering of diagrams that help to show how the groups feelings toward a certain member oscillated back and forth over time, for example. These are especially helpful as de Waal shows that while physical strength or the ability to beat another chimpanzee in a one-to-one confrontation is important, coalitions and support from other members of the group can make or break dominance hierarchies in ways that we might not expect. Indeed, the males Luit, Nikki, and Yeroen are the main "characters" of this tale, each having their time at the top (but only through cooperation and coalitions). Ultimately, as reported by de Waal in the paper "The Brutal Elimination of a Rival Among Captive Male Chimpanzees" published in 1986, Luit was

fataally injured by Nikki and Yeroen, a fact that is included in the epilogue as de Waal admits he did not want to initially end his book on a dark note. The power shifts between the three males don't make sense without an understanding of the females in the group, however, and de Waal does spend some time describing the behaviors and social habits of the females. A little more explanation and detail in this area would have strengthened the book, especially since female chimpanzees in the wild disperse from their home populations and are not constantly in close contact with each other, but de Waal does spend some time talking about the rough time the male chimpanzees received when introduced to the group when it was dominated by a female named Mama. Eventually the males achieved dominance, but even so they still relied on the support of females during the periods when one male was on his way to displacing the dominant male as the alpha, so females are not merely relegated to the objects of the males sexual desires and nothing else. In fact, the younger sexually-mature females were sometimes so amorous that they "wore out" the adult males, the interactions between the sexes being just as compelling as the chapters featuring power struggles. Given the close resemblances, both physical and social, between chimpanzees and our own species it is easy to draw comparisons between the two, but de Waal remains careful not to extend his observations of chimpanzees too far. Even when his writings might land on the anthropomorphic side of the fence, de Waal usually admits that he is doing so up front. Indeed, de Waal's unapologetic attitude for attributing names and personalities to each animal and up-front honesty in making the occasional comparison to human behavior makes *Chimpanzee Politics* a refreshing read, de Waal overcoming preconceptions that captive chimpanzees are not worth the time spent studying them. While it was right on-time to signal a changing view of primatology when it was first published, *Chimpanzee Politics* is just as fresh and thought-provoking in 2008 as it was in 1983.

This a a book that has gotten more attention for what people have said about it than for what is actually inside. Though there are some graphs and tables, don't let them scare you away: the text reads like a novel and certainly isn't overly technical or formally scientific. The story is a fascinating recollection principally about the sex and power struggles among a group of chimpanzees that lived in a zoo in the Netherlands in the mid 1970's. Some have claimed that the author has advocated using the complexities of chimpanzee social structure to shed light on human politics, but, if anything, the exact opposite is true: de Waal says very little abut non-chimpanzee societies until the last chapter and, throughout the book, freely and unapologetically employs human intentions, actions, and emotions to shed light on chimp culture. If you're prepared to cast aside any

preconceived notions you may have, this book makes an enjoyable introduction to pop-sci primatology.

Chimps, it is said, are not able to perform cognitive tasks that a three-year-old human could master with ease. THis book shows how tricky it is to compare human and chimpanzee intelligence: the machiavellian chimpanzee princes in this gripping saga may not read or write, but appear to grasp the long-term consequences of their day-to-day activities, and plot deviously to gain power in the quicksand of shifting alliances. No three year old child has this kind of concentration and determination, to my knowledge! It makes for gripping reading, and raises fascinating questions about the evolution of our own intelligence, social hierarchies and power-seeking instincts. You'll want to read it again as soon as you've finished...

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