



Nim Chimpsky: The Chimp Who Would Be Human

Elizabeth Hess

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Now Elizabeth Hess's unforgettable biography is the inspiration for *Project Nim*, a riveting new documentary directed by James Marsh and produced by Simon Chinn, the Oscar-winning team known for *Man on Wire*. Hess, a consultant on the film, says, "Getting a call from James Marsh and Simon Chinn is an author's dream. *Project Nim* is nothing short of amazing."

Could an adorable chimpanzee raised from infancy by a human family bridge the gap between species—and change the way we think about the boundaries between the animal and human worlds? Here is the strange and moving account of an experiment intended to answer just those questions, and the astonishing biography of the chimp who was chosen to see it through.

Dubbed Project Nim, the experiment was the brainchild of Herbert S. Terrace, a psychologist at Columbia University. His goal was to teach a chimpanzee American Sign Language in order to refute Noam Chomsky's assertion that language is an exclusively human trait. Nim Chimpsky, the baby chimp at the center of this ambitious, potentially groundbreaking study, was "adopted" by one of Dr. Terrace's graduate students and brought home to live with her and her large family in their elegant brownstone on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

At first Nim's progress in learning ASL and adapting to his new environment exceeded all expectations. His charm, mischievous sense of humor, and keen, sometimes shrewdly manipulative understanding of human nature endeared him to everyone he met, and even led to guest appearances on *Sesame Street*, where he was meant to model good behavior for toddlers. But no one had thought through the long-term consequences of raising a chimp in the human world, and when funding for the study ran out, Nim's problems began.

Over the next two decades, exiled from the people he loved, Nim was rotated in and out of various facilities. It would be a long time before this chimp who had been brought up to identify with his human caretakers had another opportunity to blow out the candles on a cake celebrating his birthday. No matter where he was sent, however, Nim's hard-earned ability to converse with humans would prove to be his salvation, protecting him from the fate of many of his peers.

Drawing on interviews with the people who lived with Nim, diapered him, dressed him, taught him, and loved him, Elizabeth Hess weaves an unforgettable tale of an extraordinary and charismatic creature. His story will move and entertain at the same time that it challenges us to ask what it means to be human, and what we owe to the animals who so enrich our lives.

From the Hardcover edition.

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