

Alex & Me: how a scientist and a parrot discovered a hidden world of animal intelligence – and formed a deep bond in the process
by Irene M. Pepperberg.
Scribe Publications Pty Ltd, 2013.

The ability to mimic shared by many parrots is well known, the ability of African Grey parrots to supersede their avian cousins in this field are similarly well attested.

So for anyone who is interested in the natural world in general and parrots in particular, Alex & Me looks like an interesting read. Those interested in the cognitive powers of animals other than our own species, will be drawn to a book written by an outstanding scientist working in the field of animal cognition. And finally anyone whose emotion surges when they read a touching story about human-animal relationships will find in Alex & Me a tale that truly melts the heart.

Irene Pepperberg had worked on animal cognition using parrots for a number of years before Alex entered her life. She acquired him when he was a year old as part of her scientific plans to study birds and their behaviour. When Alex died, far earlier than he should have done, at the age of 31 in 2007, he had become a public figure in the USA, had appeared on television, and had many clips on You Tube.

Working with Irene, and other Greys, Alex acquired an extraordinary number of words, but more than that he showed every sign of independent cognition, of using words that he knew in the right context, suggesting a degree of original thought that was hitherto deemed impossible in any animal other than *homo sapiens*.

Alex & Me tells the story of that relationship, the professional as well as the personal, and starts with Alex's death and its impact on America, as well as on Irene. The following chapters serve to demonstrate what an exceptional bird Alex was, and how he inter-acted with Irene, other birds, and other scientists.

The night before he died Alex said to Irene 'You be good. I love you'. The chapter describing how she discovered that he had died is poignant and powerful, and makes it clear that building an emotional relationship to animal subjects does not in any way mitigate against the discoveries that the animal and scientist make in their collaboration.

Alex & Me is a moving but ultimately joyful and uplifting book, and reminds us all that we should not exclusively ascribe to ourselves abilities that may be, and sometimes demonstrably are, replicated in the animal kingdom.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh