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A Dark Place in the Jungle

Linda Spalding
Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill (May 1999)
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In 1995 Spalding set out to explore the life of Dr. Birute Galdikas and the effects of her work with orangutans in Borneo. Galdikas commonly sends volunteers and workers on what she describes as a “follow”: an observational trek following a particular orangutan and collecting data on it. In A Dark Place in the Jungle, Spalding chronicles her own follow of Galdikas herself.

In a story full of fluctuating emotion Spalding discovers and then explores the controversy surrounding this mysterious woman who eludes her attempts at an interview. She hopes to find a woman to admire and promote, and instead finds one who seems to have lost sight of the good she set out to do in the reach for power and glory.

After months of attempts to communicate one-on-one with Galdikas and a second trip to the jungles of Borneo to prove her seriousness in her study, Spalding receives her final snub in the presence of some fellow travelers. It is then that she realizes her preconceptions of the scientist fall far short of reality. “I had wanted her to live up to my idea of greatness, nothing short of that. My embarrassment was for her.”

In a work that could have easily become one-sided, Spalding makes a point of including interviews with everyone from a local man who works at Galdikas’ home in Borneo to Matthew Block, a man sentenced to a jail term for involvement in an orangutan smuggling operation. In fact, Spalding interviews nearly everyone she comes in contact with during her follow that spans three countries and three trips to Borneo, making this a well-rounded and well-researched account of the war for orangutan survival.

Spalding’s previous work as a novelist (Daughters of Captain Cook and The Paper Wife) carries over into this, her first non-fiction book, lending it a flowing, story-like quality. This style works well in blending the travel journal, scientific research paper and biography components that make this book appealing to a wide audience. While at first glance, a reader might mistake this as simply the story of one scientist and her failings, it is even more the record of a woman who journeys to the realization that her heroine is not what she appears to be.
CHRISTINE CANFIELD (April 15, 1999)

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