

My Journey to Meet Jane Goodall

Gregg Chavaria

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A young man happens upon Jane Goodall in this thoughtful, descriptive, and adventurous work of creative nonfiction.

Gregg Chavaria's descriptive and thoughtful adventure book, *My Journey to Meet Jane Goodall*, is a brisk and scenic tour through Africa with glimpses into the human condition. Along the way, fellow travelers will enjoy the book's insights, both the gritty and the compassionate, along with the main character's growing wisdom and journey toward love.

Setting the story in motion is the conundrum of what to do if a typical life-plan doesn't work out. In this case, the plan was Harvard Law School, and it was all or nothing. Chavaria's story is delivered through a fictionalized stand-in, Vince, who finds himself adrift, with no back-up schools and no plans, nor an answer to the question being constantly asked by his family: "What are you going to do?"

With time to kill and a curious nature, Vince—who'd been writing a youth column for a local paper—volunteers with a nonprofit to travel to Zagreb, Croatia, to document refugees' stories. It is here he meets the woman who spins his life toward the African adventure to follow. Skylar, debating passionately at a bar, is on her way to meet Jane Goodall and to help establish a youth conservation program. Vince is intrigued, attracted, and not going to miss his moment. Appreciating his direct approach and humor, Skylar spontaneously invites Vince to join her on her upcoming African adventure. Why not?

Vibrant with detail and touching with insight, Chavaria's tale is a whirlwind. Vince reflects honestly on his observations, encounters, and his growing feelings for Skylar. The two are at ease together and rely on each other as they traverse from sketchy, bug-ridden hotel rooms, to day-long train trips, and finally, to the lush and expansive beauty of the Gombe Stream National Park. The supporting players in the story are briskly yet effectively described, with Chavaria capturing their essences well. Almost stealing the story is, of course, the devoted Dr. Jane Goodall. Vince details her motivation, dedication, and trials, providing keen insight into the woman who devotes her life to conservation, education, and chimpanzees.

Yet it is Chavaria who steers this story. With glimpses into African city life and an enlightening examination of the state of "humanitarian aid," there is much to take away from this adventure story. His writing is succinct, effective, and transportive.

My Journey to Meet Jane Goodall ends on an intriguing note. This is an enjoyable read for armchair travelers, adventure buffs, and anyone seeking a glimpse out into our big, wide world.

FELICIA TOPP (March 22, 2016)

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