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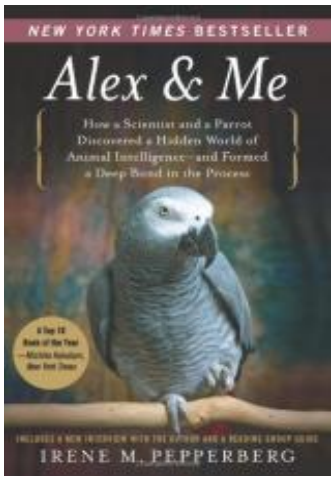
Alex & Me

by Irene Pepperberg



About the Book

On September 6, 2007, an African Grey parrot named Alex died prematurely at age thirty-one. His last words to his owner, Irene Pepperberg, were "You be good. I love you."

What would normally be a quiet, very private event was, in Alex's case, headline news. Over the thirty years they had worked together, Alex and Irene had become famous?two pioneers who opened an unprecedented window into the hidden yet vast world of animal minds. Alex's brain was the size of a shelled walnut, and when Irene and Alex first met, birds were not believed to possess any potential for language, consciousness, or anything remotely comparable to human intelligence. Yet, over the years, Alex proved many things. He could add. He could sound out words. He understood concepts like bigger, smaller, more, fewer, and none. He was capable of thought and intention. Together, Alex and Irene uncovered a startling reality: We live in a world populated by thinking, conscious creatures.

The fame that resulted was extraordinary. Yet there was a side to their relationship that never made the papers. They were emotionally connected to one another. They shared a deep bond far beyond science. Alex missed Irene when she was away. He was jealous when she paid attention to other parrots, or even people. He liked to show her who was boss. He loved to dance. He sometimes became bored by the repetition of his tests, and played jokes on her. Sometimes they sniped at each other. Yet nearly every day, they each said, "I love you."

Alex and Irene stayed together through thick and thin?despite sneers from experts, extraordinary financial sacrifices, and a nomadic existence from one university to another. The story of their thirty-year adventure is equally a landmark of scientific achievement and of an unforgettable human-animal bond

Discussion Guide

1. Irene talks in the book about having birds as pets since she was 4 years old. Though her Ph.D. is in Theoretical

Chemistry, she describes how her love of birds moved her to make animal psychology her career. Has your love of animals or a pet in particular affected your life in such a way?

2. Because Alex was her research subject, Irene discusses how she had to keep her objectivity with him when he was alive. Based on what you read about their relationship, discuss whether you think she really was able to maintain her objectivity or if, in many ways, he was like a real pet to her.

3. Irene acquired Alex from a pet store where she let the owner chose one from among eight parrots. Discuss stories of how you came to have the pets in your lives. Did you find your pets or did they find you?

4. African Grays are known for their ability to mimic speech. But all animals have their ways of communicating with us. Discuss stories of your own special brand of communication with your pets.

Author Bio

Irene M. Pepperberg is an associate research professor at Brandeis University in Massachusetts and teaches animal cognition at Harvard University. She is head of the Alex Foundation and author of **The Alex Studies: Cognitive and Communicative Abilities of Grey Parrots**.

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