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Elephant Don: The Politics of a Pachyderm Posse

Caitlin O'Connell

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Meet Greg. He’s a stocky guy with an outsized swagger. He’s been the intimidating yet sociable don of his posse of friends—including Abe, Keith, Mike, Kevin, Torn Trunk, and Willie. But one arid summer the tide begins to shift and the third-ranking Kevin starts to get ambitious, seeking a higher position within this social club. But this is no ordinary tale of gangland betrayal—Greg and his entourage are bull elephants in Etosha National Park, Namibia, where, for the last twenty-three years, Caitlin O’Connell has been a keen observer of their complicated friendships.

In *Elephant Don*, O’Connell, one of the leading experts on elephant communication and social behavior, offers a rare inside look at the social world of African male elephants. *Elephant Don* tracks Greg and his group of bulls as O’Connell tries to understand the vicissitudes of male friendship, power struggles, and play. A frequently heart-wrenching portrayal of commitment, loyalty, and affection between individuals yearning for companionship, it vividly captures an incredible repertoire of elephant behavior and communication. Greg, O’Connell shows, is sometimes a tyrant and other times a benevolent dictator as he attempts to hold onto his position at the top. Though *Elephant Don* is Greg’s story, it is also the story of O’Connell and the challenges and triumphs of field research in environs more hospitable to lions and snakes than scientists.

Readers will be drawn into dramatic tales of an elephant society at once exotic and surprisingly familiar, as O’Connell’s decades of close research reveal extraordinary discoveries about a male society not wholly unlike our own. Surely we’ve all known a Greg or two, and through this book we may come to know them in a whole new light.

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