

Sooner Nation

BARBARA J. KING IS WEARING BISON EARRINGS. AND SOCKS. AND, IT TURNS OUT, SHE'S BEEN TO YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK FOUR TIMES.

Bison are just the latest in a long line of animals that has captivated King. What started as a fascination with monkeys and apes in an undergraduate anthropology class turned into a 14-month field study on baboons in Kenya as a graduate student at the University of Oklahoma. A former anthropology professor and now a freelance science writer, King's work has become more than just gathering data. By using science to tell stories about the creatures we spend our lives with, King has gone from working *on* animals to working *for* animals. Her passion for that new mission transcends deeply into her personal life — right down to her socks.

Had she been any good at calculus or organic chemistry, King's life might have taken a different path. Growing up, there was no doubt in her mind that she was going to be a doctor. But when she took those two classes at New Jersey's Douglass College, she didn't enjoy them and received her worst grades ever.

The turning point came when King enrolled in a physical anthropology class. While learning about nonhuman primates and evolution, she felt electrified. "It just took over me. I wanted to study monkeys and apes more than anything, not only because they're fascinating animals, but because they're part of our evolutionary lineage. I became interested in what they could tell us about who we are and how we are unique."

After completing a degree in anthropology, King found herself on a plane to Norman.

"Every hour of the day, I just loved what I was doing," King says of her time at OU, where she earned her master's in 1980 and Ph.D. in 1989. "The seminars and the classes were very immersive, and we were pushed to develop our own ideas and be creative. It was intense, but in the best way. Professors treated us like we were part of something, and it's a community that I really haven't replicated anywhere else."

Professor Jane Lancaster was the heart of the anthropology faculty for King. Deep inside the shy student who blushed during oral presentations and was unhappy to be in the public eye during her teaching assistantship, Lancaster saw a future professor. Under Lancaster's guidance, King became more confident leading classes at OU, and she soon accepted a year-long anthropology position at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va. "It seemed to me that a one-year position was a one-year position," King says. "Well, that became a 28-year gig."

Studying the cognition and emotion of nonhuman pri-

mates was what started King's life's work. "But what really changed for me over the years was that my interests broadened into so many different types of animals," she says. "I became interested in how these animals express their very various intelligences in keeping with their own evolution and their own emotional makeup."

Writing was a natural way for King to showcase her findings. Even as a child, she loved to write. "I'm surprised my friends would put up with me because they'd come over to play and I'd be like, 'Let's read and then write chapter summaries.'"

King's work has been featured in *The Atlantic*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and on the NPR blog "13.7: Cosmos & Culture." She has written six books, including *How Animals Grieve*, which gives examples of how pets, farm animals and wildlife express love and deal with loss.

From elephants who stand and sway over the body of a fallen matriarch to a baboon who withdraws socially when her daughter is killed by a lion, King says there's a great deal of emotion shown in relationships between animals. And while animals may express emotions differently than humans, the depth is not necessarily that dissimilar. "This is part of being a sentient, smart being, and we share that with a lot of animals," King says. "To me, that's a really powerful message."

Released in 2013, *How Animals Grieve* positioned King as the go-to person for research on animal grief and emotion. "It's easy to say Barbara is at the top of her field because of her intellect, but it's also because of her passion," says Danielle Moretti-Langholtz, director of the American Indian Resource Center at William & Mary and a fellow OU graduate. "And while the passion energizes her, she's not blinded by it. She's still very anthropological in her thinking."

The past few years, King began to consider how she could combine the science of animal cognition and emotion and the ethical decisions people make that affect the animals around them. The result was *Personalities on the Plate: The Lives and Minds of Animals We Eat*.

"My goal is not to say everyone needs to become a vegan," King says. "But rather, when you eat a chicken, to think about the fact that this is an animal who did want to live, an animal that has memory, has compassion. These are things to consider when we make our food choices. And I think the more that we consider them, it's possible to make a shift both in the types of treatment we accept of these animals and in the types of food that we eat."

King is the first to admit that talking about food issues can make people uncomfortable. But her work, whether on the animals we eat or animal grief, is not meant to polarize, but to invite people to participate in a deeper discussion "Throughout everything I do, from my teaching, to my books, to my conver-

King of Creatures

BY KELLEY FREUND

sations with other people, I want to have that open dialogue,” says King. “When issues are entangled and challenging, we need to keep on talking to each other, even when it becomes uncomfortable. Keep on listening, and keep on working towards positive change for others.”

Barbara King will be teaching a seminar sponsored by the Oklahoma Scholar-Leadership Enrichment Program on OU’s

Norman campus Oct. 11 through 15, with a public lunchtime lecture, “Monkey Love and Duck Grief: An Anthropologist’s Perspective on Animal Emotions,” at noon Oct. 12 in the ninth-floor lounge of Dale Hall Tower. For more information, contact Karl Rambo, OSLEP director and associate professor of anthropology, at krambo@ou.edu.

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PRIMATES, BARBARA
J. KING EXPANDS
OUR KNOWLEDGE OF
ANIMAL EMOTIONS.

