



# **Bonobo Handshake: A Memoir of Love and Adventure in the Congo**

*Vanessa Woods*

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## **Bonobo Handshake: A Memoir of Love and Adventure in the Congo** Vanessa Woods

In 2005, Vanessa Woods accepted a marriage proposal from a man she barely knew and agreed to join him on a research trip to the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country reeling from a brutal decade-long war that had claimed the lives of millions. Settling in at a bonobo sanctuary in Congo's capital, Vanessa and her fiancé entered the world of a rare ape with whom we share 98.7 percent of our DNA. She soon discovered that many of the inhabitants of the sanctuary—ape and human alike—are refugees from unspeakable violence, yet bonobos live in a peaceful society in which females are in charge, war is nonexistent, and sex is as common and friendly as a handshake. A fascinating memoir of hope and adventure, *Bonobo Handshake* traces Woods's self-discovery as she finds herself falling deeply in love with her husband, the apes, and her new surroundings while probing life's greatest question: What ultimately makes us human? Courageous and extraordinary, this true story of revelation and transformation in a fragile corner of Africa is about looking past the differences between animals and ourselves, and finding in them the same extraordinary courage and will to survive. For Vanessa, it is about finding her own path as a writer and scientist, falling in love, and finding a home.

## **Bonobo Handshake: A Memoir of Love and Adventure in the Congo Details**

Date : Published (first published January 1st 2010)

ISBN :

Author : Vanessa Woods

Format : Kindle Edition

Genre : Nonfiction, Animals, Autobiography, Memoir, Cultural, Africa, Science, Biography

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Vanessa Woods

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# From Reader Review Bonobo Handshake: A Memoir of Love and Adventure in the Congo for online ebook

**Saleh MoonWalker says**

Onvan : Bonobo Handshake: A Memoir of Love and Adventure in the Congo - Nevisande : Vanessa Woods  
- ISBN : 1592405460 - ISBN13 : 9781592405466 - Dar 278 Safhe - Saal e Chap : 2010

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**Kristina says**

I won this book through the First Reads Giveaway.

A few years ago when I was taking my first anthropology class I read a book about bonobos from the library and I was fascinated.

There are a number of things I enjoyed about this book. Besides learning about the bonobos, I learned a great deal about Africa and Congo. I have to admit that my familiarity with Africa's current events doesn't extend much more than a brief lecture I got in high school, so I really appreciated the mini history lesson that Woods provided. I knew all kinds of horrible things have taken place, but I never really understood just how bad it was. Woods explained the situation in a way that it was both interesting and informative without getting boring. It was like reading a history lesson that my father would give me - and it has encouraged me to continue reading more about what has been going on in Africa.

But what I liked most of all was her narrative. It was funny and sad and real and insightful. Overall, I would recommend this book to anyone.

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**Ruth Seeley says**

Vanessa Woods is quite a good writer - there's no awkwardness of phrasing here, no need to turn back pages to try to figure out what she's talking about. As a long-time fan of the primatologist women like Jane Goodall and Diane Fossey, and having learned a lot about chimp behaviour from reading William Boyd's *Brazzaville Beach*, I was interested in learning more about bonobos.

Sadly, you won't learn an awful lot about bonobos by reading this book (you'll learn a bit - just not as much as you might hope to). What you will learn a lot about is Vanessa Woods, her insecurities, her lack of self-esteem, and her relationship with her husband. This really strikes me as creative non-fiction run amok. Her resentment at having to do the experiments for her husband because bonobos in general prefer female humans and are mistrustful of males just seems so very odd - she's being fed and housed as a result of her husband's work, he's the one who's succeeded in getting the grants to carry out his research, she doesn't cook or clean, and yet being asked to work is out of line? Perhaps there's something I don't quite get about the Aussie sense of humour.

However, it is rather heartwarming when Vanessa finally designs an experiment of her own and becomes engaged in studying bonobo behaviour. Honestly, I'd suggest people read Sara Gruen's *Ape House* rather

than *Bonobo Handshake* (Woods, in blurbing the novel, generously states that Gruen's done more for bonobos than she ever will, and I suspect she's right). Either that, or use *Bonobo Handshake* for its bibliography.

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## Betty says

I first learned about bonobos in Sara Gruen's *Ape House*, which was a great book because of how she portrayed the bonobos-- selfless, almost human creatures. I heard about this book when I saw that the author was coming to the college to speak.

*Bonobo Handshake* is a wonderful story about love, war and hope. Vanessa Woods writing was easy, funny and informative. The information she provided about Congo will haunt me forever. I can't pick up my cell phone without thinking of the lives that were lost to provide the technology for it. The violence against women is especially shocking to me. Some of the stories are just too much to even write about. But that is why this book works. Woods tells you the horrors of the war in Congo. She talks to people that lived through the wars and yet, despite the horror, they are hopeful for a future with peace.

Which leads to the bonobos. These peaceful, unknown apes that are living through the wars in the Congo as well. These apes share 98.7% of our DNA. I could go on and on about her accounts with these loveable creatures. If you go to the website, you can see how adorable some of the "characters" from her book really are.

And since I have babbled, you'll just have to read the book to find out what the bonobo handshake is!

Note: I don't usually do reviews. I did this really fast between breaks at work, so if it doesn't make sense, sorry! :P

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## Claudio says

Touching! Having spent myself 4 months in Berlin observing Bonobos, Vanessa manages to make me cry several times.

If you want to know more about yourself and us human as a species, this book will open your eyes.

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## Eve says

**"If I have learned one thing from Congo, it is this: If there are those you love, whoever or wherever they are, hold them. Find them and hold them as tightly as you can. Resist their squirming and impatience and uncomfortable laughter and just feel their hearts throbbing against yours and give thanks that for this moment, for this one precious moment, they are here. They are with you. And they know they are utterly, completely, entirely ... Loved." – Vanessa Woods**

I go bananas for apes, so it's no surprise that I fell in love with this book! Woods stumbles into the world of Bonobos accidentally when she meets her husband, Brian. Bonobos live in the the shadow of their close cousins, the chimpanzees, and can only be found in the jungles of Congo. Their peaceful and accepting way of life is worthy of emmulation, especially in a country where violence, war and death are a way of life.

**"LOLA YA BONOBO is the only bonobo sanctuary in the world. More than sixty orphans live in a seventy-five-acre forest just outside of Kinshasa...All ape sanctuaries, including Lola, exist because of the bushmeat trade. In many African countries, where livestock is scarce and expensive, the easiest way to get protein is to shoot it."**

While Woods assists her husband with his psychology study and tests of the Bonobos at LOLA, she finds herself immersed in the stories of the sanctuary staff, the adult Bonobos, and the orphans that keep streaming in after being rescued from wildlife traders. It's a heartbreaking read at times, but I loved how Woods made the story as light-hearted as she could. She invites the reader into her marriage and heart, and I am so grateful for the awareness that this book raises about the plight of this loving primate. I feel motivated to get my ape on once again. I'll have to scour my shelves for another book about apes because their world is one I love to lose myself in!

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## Mark says

This is a very important book. For too many people, bonobos (my spellchecker doesn't even consider their name to be a word!) are the least known member of the great primate family, often considered to be no more than "pygmy chimps." They aren't- they're a separate species, but like chimps, share some 97.6 of their genes with humans. The trick is, as Wood's and her husband's research attempts to discover- is What Is the Difference- because there are many.

Bonobos are considered the most erotic of the great primates, if only because their matrilineal culture uses sex not as a reward, nor something to be withheld as punishment, but as greeting, as affirmation, as a general "feel-good" pacifier. Woods and her husband Brian Hare work on discovering why bonobos will work together in cooperation, while humans and chimps (predominately) compete with each other, make war, and can show disgusting tendencies toward bullying and outright savagery. Yet bonobos exist as a differential doppelganger, making love, not war, and living in such a way as that the emotions they live with are enough to bring them to die of loneliness, if separated from their kin.

Woods takes us to a bonobo sanctuary- one of only a few on the planet, because they live only in one country on earth- Congo- where orphaned bonobos out of the bushmeat trade are allowed to psychologically recover and live amongst their fellows in a protected manner.

The book also functions as an educational tool for those of us in the West who never paid much attention to the years of violence and obscene warfare that has rent Congo for the past fifty years or so, most especially, the Hutu/Tutsi wars nearly ever-present since the late 1980s. It's quite a revelatory document, and yet, despite the narrative of the difficulties of the early struggles of their marriage, and the historical narrative, Woods shows us- like Goodall and Fossey- that the great primates (beside ourselves) have still got much, much to teach us regarding who we are as a species, and who we are in relation to all our inter-species others as planetary beings. Read it. You might look at life, and our society, a bit differently before you get through.

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## **Drobnies says**

At first, I thought this book was an *Eat, Pray, Love* with apes and genocide, but as I got more into it, I found it was much more interesting than that in its depiction of the bonobo orphanage, the study of bonobo behaviour, and the description of the tragic events in the DRC, including the impact of those events on individuals Woods came to know there.

Some of the most moving parts of the book are about the bonobo-bonobo and bonobo-people interactions, though it can veer at times into the sentimental. Bonobos and humans are so alike in many ways, but I felt the temptation to directly and uncritically project our own experience onto theirs was sometimes too great for Woods to resist.

The way she dealt with her own experience sometimes seemed facile and lacking much insight in the gender dynamics of her own relationship.

There is a good bibliography, and Woods had done a good job of giving credit to other researchers and journalists/authors.

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## **Sera says**

In this book, Vanessa Woods skillfully interweaves three stories: her personal life, consisting of her temper tantrums directed at her husband Brian and her longing for understanding how the Vietnam war affected her estranged father; the history of the Congo with a focus on war; and her and her husband's research and relationships with chimps and bonobos at the sanctuaries.

The connection between these three stories is violence. Most of the bonobos who end up in the sanctuary in the Congo have been orphaned when their parents were hunted for bushmeat, and the orphans are in a state of trauma much like the human victims of the war-torn Congo.

But Bonobos are interesting because they “make love not war” –and so offer an alternative to the violence that pervades human and chimpanzee societies. I wish the book focused in more detail on the experiments and the scientific understanding of what makes bonobos so different, but one of the rules of reading is that you can't blame a book for not doing something that it's not trying to do. For working so much in the scientific world, Woods seems surprisingly uninterested in science, and that affects what she focuses on in her memoir. Instead, we learn more about what the bonobos like to eat and which one has pretty eyelashes.

The writing style oscillates between the chatty verbiage of a blog post, the tone and topic of a term paper, and a preachy speech on how we're all to blame for the carnage in the Congo because our cell phones and laptops use coltan. But I'm not as critical of the writing style of non-fiction books because the main point of them is the content, not the style. As such, this book was quite readable and informative, especially for those of us unwilling to slog through the extensive reading Woods has done (or implies she has done in the bibliography at the back of the book).

I think Vanessa and Brian's next research project should mimick the experiments they did comparing Chimps and Bonobos, but this time compare republicans and democrats. My thesis is this: Democrats evolved from bonobos (less fearfull of strangers, not inclined to fight, matriarchal) and that God created

Republicans in the image of Chimps (male-dominated, fearful of strangers, aggressive and prone to war).

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### **Tuppermalone says**

To my way of thinking, this is a message book. Not particularly well written but alerting the world to the plight of the bonobos. The observations are interesting about the bonobos social behavior and the difference between humans, chimps and the bonobos and I actually felt, after hearing Woods' arguments, that the bonobos were superior to chimps and unfortunately, humans are closer to chimps in their behavior. As great literature, this is not it. I'm not even sure I would classify it as good literature. But the message was worth reading about and the plea to support the Lola Ya Bonobo. After reading the book, I did check out the site supporting the sanctuary and also another website with soukous music which comes from the Congo. I also studied several maps of the DN Congo, Congo, and the adjoining countries of Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, Angola and and Zambia. I tried to chart the distance between Kinshasa, Nagaba Island in Uganda and the Oleta Sanctuary in Congo.

Before reading this book I didn't realize the differences between Congo, DN Congo. I had heard of the Tutzis and the Hutus but really didn't quite get what the problems were. I still don't think I really understand the tribal warfare within countries and that some countries are more sympathetic to one tribe or another depending on which tribe is in power in the particular country. To hear about the evisceration of women and children, the brutal rapes, cannibalism, and gross depravity of the soldiers and rebels alike was very unsettling. The amazing numbers of deaths and rapes was overwhelming. It seems that over population would not be an issue after hearing of the enormous numbers of innocents killed by these power-hungry war mongers. It makes one question how critical the bonobos are when one realizes how expendable human life has become in these war zones or, indeed, all of Africa.

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### **Ashley V says**

I liked this book for the most part. Before having read it I didn't really even know that bonobos exist, which is unfortunate because they are such fascinating creatures. I really enjoyed how the author described the bonobos at Lola ya Bonobo as having very distinct personalities (gay fashionista, tomboy, princess, goddess, etc.) Animals of a particular species often get lumped together as being pretty much the same as far as demeanor goes, but this really showed that they differ just as much as people do. A few times I actually got confused as to whether the author was talking about a bonobo or a person, that's how similar we are!

I did enjoy learning a little bit about the political history and wars of the Congo. I was generally aware of the conflict but I had no idea to what extent to brutality reached. There are some very disturbing descriptions as to some of the violence occurring in the area, such as female genital mutilation. It's really not for the squeamish, but I'm glad it was included. It's part of the history of the Congo and I'd rather have the whole picture than just gloss over the less enjoyable bits.

One thing I absolutely HATED (and this is a little bit silly) is that her husband calls her "Skippy." I would smack my significant other if they called me something like that. To me it just sounds a bit patronizing, like something you'd call a little, naive kid. That's just a preference thing though. It doesn't really have anything to do with the book. I just rolled my eyes every time I saw it.

My only criticism is that on occasion, the book seems fairly repetitive and I found myself skimming a little bit over parts that I thought had already been adequately discussed.

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### **Mike says**

This is a very moving book. It is part memoir and part history lesson. But mostly it is an account of the bonobos, the world's most endangered ape. Humans and bonobos share 98.7% of their DNA. Common chimpanzees, while very intelligent, can be quite aggressive and have been observed to wage war against other groups of chimps. Bonobos on the other hand live in a peaceful society in which females are in charge, war is nonexistent, and sex is as common and friendly as a handshake.

The author recounts her time studying bonobos at a sanctuary in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She makes it very easy to identify with these apes, most of whom have been orphaned and suffered very traumatic lives. Yet their tolerant, playful, loving nature shines through.

Ms. Woods also does a good job of depicting the violent and chaotic political climate of the Congo as it has struggled to move towards democracy over the last decade. She also seems quite candid in dealing with her own emotions as she searches for meaning in her life and tries to balance work and leisure with her fiancé who dragged her to this war-torn country.

As I said, this is a very moving and informative book. It touches on questions of what it means to be human and how we compare to our closest ancestors. Highly recommended!

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### **Calzean says**

I was surprised by this book. There are many parts of it that make a whole.

There is the story of Vanessa and her husband undertaking research on Bonobos and Chimps.

There is their quest on why humans developed the way to do.

There are the animals themselves with their different behaviours, personalities and preferences.

There is the story of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the various and recent wars and genocide which have gone mainly forgotten.

There are the people of the Congo who live in hope and come together to celebrate a soccer game.

There are the hunters and poachers who hunt animals for profit.

There are Presidents, potential Presidents and their cohorts.

There are the dedicated people who have established and maintain sanctuaries to provide homes for orphaned Bonobos and Chimps and where possible return to the wild.

There is the conclusion of the research that one of the main reasons why humans developed was their tolerance which leads to cooperation.

There is also Woods writing which at times is humorous, sad, deep and meaningful, very personal and reflective. She has a clear and lucid style which makes the book very readable.

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### **else fine says**

When I picked this book up out of a pile of Advance Reading Copies, I had only a vague idea of what a Bonobo was, and an even vaguer grasp of what was happening in Congo. I'd heard plenty of news reports about atrocities, but, I'm sorry to admit, the who and the why confused me. Vanessa Woods not only



introduces us to the social lives of the Bonobos in a way that will melt the heart of the crankiest reader, but also provides an effortless synopsis of modern Congolese history for those of us who needed to be brought up to speed. She's also got a sense of humor that veers between saltiness and pure slapstick, so lest you think you're in for some tofu-munching, holier-than-thou, delicate forest creature: think again. Woods is a delightfully earthy guide to this corner of the world. Highly recommended.

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## **Maggie Campbell says**

"It's hard to live with someone you haven't forgiven. It's like a cavity in my tooth that I can't see but I keep pushing at with my tongue. I'm afraid it will crack but I can't leave it alone."

"...Because resentment and anger are what you old on to when you have all the time in the world."

"The only way love endures is because of one simple gift. Forgiveness."

"We all carry our own tales of violence. The distant war going on over there is not so different from the war we fight here. I don't know why some people, like the Mamas and Suzy, can survive a war and still find enough joy to laugh as if their whole life has been blessed."

"If you have a strong sense of who you are and what's important, you can live through it. People like me, we never knew who we were, so we became the war. And because I was the war, I could never let it go."

"If there are those you love, whoever or wherever they are, hold them. Find them and hold them as tightly as you can. Resist their squirming and impatience and uncomfortable laughter and just feel their hearts throbbing against yours and give thanks that for this moment, for this one precious moment, they are here. they are with you. And they know they are utterly, completely, entirely...Loved."

"All these precious traits we cling to as uniquely ours- empathy, altruism, morality- they have to come from somewhere. They didn't just appear as soon as the first human plopped out of his or her mother's womb. Evolution is a journey."

"In the end, if fate is just a roll of the dice and you could be born anywhere, to any family in the world, if you look at the odds, who would you rather ne? Most of the time, bonobos have no hunger, no violence, no poverty. And for all our intelligence, all our things, bonobos have the most important of all possessions- peace."

"In return, the bonobos will share their secrets. Schoolchildren learn that when bonobos are get angry, the hug. Women hear that together, bonobo females are strong. Men understand that it is possible to live a life without war."

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