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Alex & Me. Irene M. Pepperberg. Scribe, 2009.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for The Adelaide Review, May 2009.

Everyone who spends time with dogs or cats or horses knows that humans can communicate with other animals, using body language and other non-verbal signs. But talking is different. Irene Pepperberg, who was entranced by Dr Doolittle in her childhood, has proved that birds can learn to use language genuinely, not just ‘parrot-fashion’, despite having, as she often points out, ‘a brain the size of a shelled walnut’. The results can be seen on YouTube – feisty African grey Alex conversing with the proficiency of an intelligent toddler. He could not only produce words but demonstrate recognition of numbers, materials and shapes, and the relationships between words, concepts and written signs.

Pepperberg started her research with Alex in 1977, but it was many years before she could get her work recognised by the scientific community. Her problem was partly that her initial qualifications were in chemistry rather than biology or psychology, but she was also up against a wall of prejudicial assumptions about what it means to be human and what sets us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. Her research was underfunded and marginalised for many years – her CV shows a string of visiting and adjunct positions at a dozen institutions, and she writes feelingly of years living on a diet of tofu in Spartan conditions.

Alex died young, for a parrot, in 2007 and Pepperberg and her team were devastated. Alex wasn’t her only subject, and since his death Pepperburg has continued her research with his ‘colleagues’ Arthur and Griffin. Was Alex exceptional? Maybe, but Pepperberg shows what’s possible and confounds deep-seated beliefs about what makes humans different. This book reports a rigorous scientific experiment, but it’s also a moving tribute to a friend.