



## **Ghosts of Tsavo: Stalking the Mystery Lions of East Africa**

*Philip Caputo*

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1898, Tsavo River Kenya, the British Empire employs native workers to build a railroad. Construction comes to a violent halt when two maneless lions devour 140 workers in an extended feeding frenzy that would make headlines and history all over the world. Caputo's *Ghosts of Tsavo* is a new quest for truth about the origins of these near-mythical animals and how they became predators of human flesh.

## **Ghosts of Tsavo: Stalking the Mystery Lions of East Africa Details**

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## From Reader Review **Ghosts of Tsavo: Stalking the Mystery Lions of East Africa** for online ebook

### **Gavin says**

This is a shame. What starts as a fascinating account of the lions of Tsavo and their predilection for man eating quickly becomes the wandering, directionless travelogue of a tourist.

The first few chapters are full of compelling stories about the man eaters, most notably the famed pair that plagued the railroad construction and were finally killed by Patterson and later stuffed and displayed in the Field Museum. These early chapters are packed full of anecdotal evidence that these maneless man eaters are quite possibly a different, older species than the well known, golden maned lions of nature shows. They have bigger teeth, some say. They live in caves, some say. They don't grow manes...like saber tooth tigers. This is all a tremendous start for what is sure to be a book that explores its own early promises...right?

Think again. After a great introduction, Caputo joins the hunt himself- by going on a safari in Tsavo. Here we're treated to his random musings on Africa, very little information on lions, and an odd lambasting of tourists, which he most certainly is one himself. Perhaps he thinks that an interview or two precludes him from the distinction, but lets face it; he took his wife on vacation and thought it was worth a few chapters. Nice try, but you're a tourist so get off your horse, friendo.

On a return trip, he actually meets up with some scientists and participates in a few hilariously stupid 'experiments' involving dummy lions in an attempt to unravel the purpose of manes. Sadly, but maybe not surprisingly, the scientists involved didn't give much credence to the theory that Tsavo lions are genetically different. Naturally, they put little or no effort into studying the thought further. Remember kids, any evidence can be used to backup your hypothesis if you write your thesis creatively. Unfortunately they were there to find what they were looking for and no more. Pity. Oddly enough, by the end the author himself admits that he doesn't want to know more about the elusive title creatures. Not to pry, but why the hell did you write a book on the topic then, guy?

After a few hundred pages of this soft, semi-vacuous heartwood, he wraps up with a chapter containing the book's only real hard data on man eaters. Obviously it's an attempt to deliver on the introduction, but it comes as too little too late. It's odd, the intro and conclusion belong to a completely different book than the body of the text. Lit 101 is sharpening its red pencil...

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### **Sam says**

I'm in two minds about this book, much like Caputo seems to be in his writing as he jumps between the science of the animals, their ecology, behaviour etc. and the philosophical musings he scatters amongst the scientific endeavours he is following. I enjoyed the science side of this book as Caputo details each of the various theories about the Tsavo lions and the experiments being undertaken to determine whether they are in fact a separate species or subspecies of *Panthera leo*. Although he never addresses why genetic testing isn't done which surely would resolve much of these questions? However my enjoyment was tempered by the amount of philosophical musing that he includes, which are interesting to start with (and on a personal note rather insightful given that I have no qualms accepting that humans are prey...how could we not be?). But the same point is made repeatedly and while I'm sure he had this recurring feeling when he was in Africa, it

wasn't necessary to keep repeating it. Or if you must at least change it a little, or expand on it or something. Of course many readers may not find this quite so irksome and may enjoy the philosophy surrounding the idea of humankind being on the menu. Overall not a bad book but a little muddled between being a work of science, philosophy and travel journal.

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### **Mark Luongo says**

If you've seen the movie, "The Ghost and the Darkness" (Val Kilmer & Michael Douglas), you are going to want to read this book and get a notion about what makes a "man-eater." You are going to want to know about how a large predator like a lion goes about killing and eating you.

Caputo eloquently waxes poetic about the African "bush" and laments the effect progress has had on the environment, the culture and the wildlife. The author, a Vietnam veteran of note, has his moments on "safari" including an unlikely NDE ( "near death experience") that will surprise you. At the time the author also notes the sorrow that he is experiencing as his mother suffers from dementia. That touched me in many ways. A highly recommended read and I'm going to get a copy of John Patterson's "The Man-Eaters of Tsavo" as a follow-up. Patterson is the engineer/hunter featured in the movie. Also Peter Capstick's "Death in the Long Grass" is recommended by the author.

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### **Kayla Motto says**

Very interesting read! Gives a whole new prospective on lion behavior.

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### **Nancy says**

This is a book about man-eating lions. You may as well stop reading this review now, because can you really go wrong? I mean, even though the author went to Africa to work with researchers in the hopes of gaining scientific knowledge of the animals, is it wrong that my favorite parts were accounts of the man-eating itself?

Different researchers have different theories about the lions of Tsavo and they carry out careful experiments in an attempt to uncover answers. Are the mane-less lions of this region a separate species? Are they products of their environment, harsher than that of the Serengeti lions? Are they truly man-eaters by nature or is this just a backup plan for sick and injured individuals? These are the questions the author attempts to answer in his journeys.

Interesting stuff. Where the book falters, in my opinion, is when the author - an otherwise engaging writer - waxes on about the humility he feels in being out in the field and finding he's not the top predator in the food chain. It's a fair enough observation the first time, but after one too many wide-eyed discussions of it and references to god, it comes across as naive from someone who's a professional writer in his 50's. Has this man never gone outside before? Has it never occurred to him that other animals don't see us as their lords and masters, but as chucks of meat? I don't think you have to face man-eating lions to experience this - I have felt like prey in California cougar country or encountering bears in the Shenandoah Valley. I will give him credit though in that towards the end of the book, he lets it be known that one of the researchers seems to be sick of hearing him talk about this. I hear ya.

Again, the best parts were the accounts of the lions actions. Their behaviors appear to be so...primate-like, so well thought-out and cunning. Makes you want to get into the lions heads.

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### **Will Byrnes says**

The book opens with gripping tales of lion hunting in Africa. There was the famous tale of two man-eaters in Tsavo, Ghost and Darkness, which had killed and devoured hundreds of humans at the end of the 19th century. There have been other outbreaks. Why? What makes these man-eaters different from the wooly-maned lords of the Serengeti? The opening, the first couple of chapters, is wonderful, but it is downhill from there, mostly following Caputo as he accompanies others in their research or hunting.

Caputo raises the possibility that the short-maned 19th century killers were members of a subspecies of lion, a throwback to an earlier, cave-dwelling ancestor. These lions (preserved in the Field Museum in Chicago) have physical differences from the usual lion. They are taller, heavier, but with smaller skulls. In reading, I was hoping that DNA analysis would resolve the dispute, but it appears not to have entered the debate. We are left with musings about the alternative possibilities. Differences in lions, and in their interest in feeding on humans, might be understood in different ways. Availability of food was one determining factor. In areas with ample game there was little need to add humans to the menu. But when prey is scarce, people become more likely targets. Also, the Tsavo lions, lived a hard-scrabble existence, one in which their primary prey was Cape Buffalo, one of the most dangerous creatures on the continent. Although these lions adapted by becoming larger, taller, with more powerful forelegs and shoulders than their Serengeti cousins in order to survive on such a difficult diet, people were an easy choice when available.

What is the significance of lion manes? It appears that there is a tradeoff between status, advertising advantage, and body heat management cost. The darker the mane the healthier, the stronger the male lion is likely to appear. But only to a point. As one moves lower in elevation, the hotter it gets, and the more that mane costs. That may be why all not all adult males have manes.

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### **Meaghan says**

This is a sort of combination science and travel book. Unfortunately the "science" side was much weaker than the "travel" side.

The author writes of his trips to east-central Africa on photographic safari, tracking the lions of Tsavo, and his adventures. Apparently safari vacations, at least in the Tsavo, are not for the faint of heart -- it's close to 100 degrees all the time, you're very far from civilization, there's a real chance of getting mauled and/or eaten by some wild animal, and there are long periods of being bored to death punctuated by short periods of being frightened to death. Caputo had a ball, but I'm not sure I'd be willing to sign up for that trip.

The Tsavo lions are different from the lions further north in that they are larger, their skulls are shaped differently, they are more aggressive and much more likely to attack humans, and their manes are often sparse to non-existent (maybe that's why they're so aggressive: inferiority complex). Caputo wrote about the debate between biologists about this; some of them believe the Tsavo lions could be a different subspecies or species altogether, while others believe the differences aren't significant and can be accounted for by

environmental factors. I think it's a very interesting question and would like to know the answer. However, not reaching any conclusions about this, Caputo is finally like, "Who cares, I'd rather it remain a mystery, they're awesome anyway." The affect, to me, was like slamming the door in my face.

I would still recommend this book, but for intrepid armchair travelers rather than armchair zoologists.

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### **Michael says**

I will start by saying I read this book by accident about 18 years ago. I just never remembered to put it on here. As I recall, it wasn't a bad read. BUT..... when I purchased it, I had mistaken it for MAN EATERS OF TSAVO. The book I was actually looking for but didn't write down the name and when I went to the book store I grabbed this book by accident. As I recall it wasn't bad, I was just disappointed because I figured out rather quickly that I had the wroooooong book. Despite that, I did read it till the end and remember it having some very interesting info. Technically, it's the first book I ever read as a hobby. it was the next book, MAN EATERS OF TSAVO, that made me fall in love with books.

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### **P.S. Winn says**

I have read several books of this subject and have found all of them astounding and intriguing. To know this is a true story of two lions doing what had never been something lions did in pairs is amazing. If you haven't read the books, this one or others, pick them up. I also loved the movie "The ghost and the darkness" linked to the books.

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### **Jennifer Rothe says**

Caputo starts strong, delivering a fascinating and chilling account of Ghost and Darkness, the legendary man-eaters. Unfortunately the book goes downhill from there. He mostly tags along with researchers and guides, and while this premise held potential, in my opinion he drops the ball. Caputo also makes it clear on several occasions that he pits science and wonder at opposite ends of the spectrum, and quite frankly comes off as smug, humble-bragging that \*he\* is satisfied without knowing the intricacies of lion biology and ecology, and even disparaging of the researchers who graciously allowed his presence.

It's worth noting that this review is written a month or two after I finished the book. The details have faded, but I still find myself thoroughly annoyed with and put off by the writer. As far as I'm concerned he hasn't earned the right to act as a mouthpiece for anything science-related.

Honestly I can't remember what possessed me to assign two stars rather than one. Perhaps for some inexplicable reason I was feeling generous the day I finished the book?

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### **Patricia says**

I first heard of Phil Caputo when I watched an interview with him on authorsroad.com (2 Pacifica people,

traveling around in their RV, interviewing authors along the way). I liked him and what he had to say so much that I started looking for his books, and this one is the first I've read. It is, I must say, a very good follow-up to *The Tiger: A True Story of Vengeance and Survival*, even though it is very different. In this one, the author tells of his travels to Tsavo Nat'l Park in Kenya, and the efforts he makes to learn more about the lions that live there that both look and act slightly different than the lions we think of when we think "lion," which are from the Serengeti. So this book is part travelogue, part animal-behavior-science, part history, and part simple philosophical musing on the part of the author, who I almost feel I can call Phil, as I know and like him so much after reading it. I'll look for more by him. Hard to believe that there are so many authors out there--good authors!--that I know nothing about.....

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### **Dean Hamilton says**

They were called The Ghost and The Darkness, two adult male African lions, that haunted the scrub brush of the Tsavo River at the turn of the century.

In 1898, they killed more than 135 Indian and African railway workers, laboring to throw a bridge across the Tsavo River, before Lt. Col. John Patterson, in an epic and harrowing nine-month struggle, hunted the lions down and killed them.

Today the lion's are stuffed and displayed in the Field Museum in Chicago, but the question of what spawned their behavior, what drove them to become that most feared of all animals ( to us anyway) - a maneater, remains unanswered and mainly unexamined by science.

In the *Ghosts of Tsavo*, Phil Caputo, author of *A Rumor of War*, *Horn of Africa*, and numerous other books, examines the Tsavo lions, looking at two separate lines of scientific research that are now attempting to explain supposed behavioral and physical differences (Tsavo lions are maneless - sometimes, very aggressive, and may be a subspecies of lion that was thought to have died out 8,000 years ago) between Tsavo lions and other African lions. Journeying into the field with the scientists, Caputo offers a welcome insight into the scientific methodology in studying these animals, and brings a raw, visceral sense of the dread, fear, strength and admiration that the lions can generate.

Tsavo, in case you are interested, means "place of slaughter".

At times Caputo's writing is, by turns, chillingly effective at making the reader aware of the power of the lion and why so many of us fear the dark beyond the fire, mixed with the more clinical approach of scientific study. There is an undercurrent of Caputo's awareness of his own mortality ribboning through the story that makes the lions appear less of an animal, and more of a archetype of death, staring at you with yellowed, predatory eyes.

The book is generally engrossing but at times the abrupt shift in tone is disconcerting and uneven. As with most scientific studies, there is no real conclusive point to the lion study, or for that matter to the book. It is a good tale of a journey, but a final arrival at a destination would have also been nice.

For more about the Tsavo lions, read Col. Patterson's *Maneater's of Tsavo* for the definitive account (and a rippin' great adventure story to boot (if a trifle Victorian in tone)). You can also download it (and many other public domain texts) free from Project Gutenberg.

There are also two Hollywood interpretations of the story, one of which, *The Ghost and The Darkness*, starring Val Kilmer and Michael Douglas, is now on DVD. Interestingly enough, they had to import the lions used in the filming from Canada, and, with the filmmakers usual lack of attention to detail, they used two fully-maned males, rather then the sparsely maned Tsavo cats....

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### **Kate says**

Caputo travels through Kenya stalking lions alongside scientists with opposing views on why these particular animals in Tsavo sometimes track, kill, and eat humans.

Tsavo means place of slaughter in KiKamba. Generally, when referred to geographically, Tsavo refers to Tsavo East National Park in Kenya. This area is noted for lions. More specifically-man-eating lions. In 1898, two man-eating lions nicknamed Ghost and Darkness, killed an estimated 135 people. Another noted period of man-eating lion terror occurred in the early 1990s. Man-eaters have taken people before, in-between, and since these two studied periods in Kenyan and wildlife research history. Caputo tracks lions with two groups of scientists who hold opposing views on why the lions in this particular part of Africa 1)don't have manes and 2)sometimes use people as a food source. Is it evolution? Is it food source issues? Is it the geography? Are the lions passing the want for human flesh to their young? Or is it all nonsense? Several of the scientists prove to be interesting characters. Some of them take a disproved hypothesis personally.

Caputo describes Africa in both picturesque and horrifying terms. Forget the idea of a safari for rich white people. It is hot. There are insects carrying diseases that will easily kill you. A rhino, hippo, lion, or water buffalo could charge and you and remove chunks of your body before you'd even think to run. He tempers this harsh living with sunsets of unspeakable beauty and quiet moments of amazement at how wild Africa is. It's not the "wild" of a naive tourist. It is a primeval wild.

Never mind all the theories. Yes, the research is fascinating. However, my favorite thing about this book was the details of how the lions would choose particular people to eat. I loved the descriptions of their day-to-day behavior, even the lazy parts (of which there are many, lions are very lazy).

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### **John says**

Exploration of what makes a lion become a man-eater. A bit of a Kenya travelogue and serious investigation of the behavior of maned and in-maned lions. Fascinating.

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### **Ainslee says**

Enjoyed the chapters about the Man Eater of Mfuwe and the Tsavo Man-Eaters, but I got so bored with the rest of the book and just kinda stopped reading it.

