

By Gareth Patterson

From the book cover:

It was while working as a game ranger in the Tuli bushveld of Botswana that Gareth Patterson's fascination and love for lions developed. Later, collaborating closely with the legendary George Adamson and the Born Free lions, he continued to rehabilitate lions back into the wild after Adamson's death in 1989.

Gareth Patterson's extraordinary experience of life with the lions has shown him how, unlike us, lions are the embodiment of Ubuntu--the African sense of belonging. To Walk With Lions takes us on a mystical journey towards rediscovering our spiritual wholeness through reverence for Nature. In our inward looking, Western society, separated from Nature and God, many of us lack purpose and meaning whereas lions, wholly connected to the earth's energy, have an intrinsic sense of community and direction. To Walk With Lions is about releasing ourselves from the prison of spiritual loneliness and purposefulness. It is about feeling part of everything around us, about realizing our place in the natural kingdom and discovering true spiritual fulfillment.

Excerpt

Lion Power! Precept One

Darky, A Story of Self-Reliance

It was a profound experience to know Darky, the Lion King of the Tuli bushlands. I first encountered this magnificent lion in 1983 and knew him for almost a decade. He was a great, stately grey lion with a full dark mane. I view Darky as my "lion father," for he taught me much about his kind. He also taught me about self-reliance. His life and his great capability to overcome adversity embodied great self-reliance. Darky was almost a mystical lion. At times I thought that immortals did exist, and that Darky was one of them. His state, his being, remained so constant in the bushlands that at times it seemed he could have lived there for ever. Darky was the bushlands.

When I think of Darky, I see in my mind a male lion resting alone upon a rise on the plains. I see Darky looking out upon all that he was a part of. Alone, yet a part of. The scene is one. The plains would not be the plains without him, and he would not be he without the plains.

In 1983, Darky was one of the two "Lords" of the Lower Majale, an ancestral lion territory in the Southern Tuli Bushlands. Kgosi was the elder of the two pride males, a stately and proud lion who exuded unleashed power and might. Kgosi's mane was spectacular and flowed like a murky river across his tawny back, down beneath his chest and tapering toward his belly.

Kgosi and Darky resting together on the plains was an inspiring sight, and at night their great territorial calls would float across the land like a cosmic wave. Upon hearing them I would always be filled with a sense of well-being: at times I would raise my hand in the direction of their leonine song and feel a part of their energy.

At its height, the Lower Majale pride consisted of nineteen lions; the two pride males, six beautiful lionesses and eleven tumbling cubs. Darky was a particularly tolerant father. The cubs loved to play on his reclining body and to swat at his twitching tail. He would groan softly as the cubs jumped upon his shaggy head and back. Eventually, when the cubs' games became over-boisterous, he would raise his upper lip and give a short snarl. At this, they would scatter away back to their mothers. This, though, was all part of the game as they would inevitably return, stalk him, then jump on him. Then, equally inevitably, he would eventually snarl again, the cubs would scatter...and the pantomime would continue until, with the setting sun, the entire pride (after much stretching and yawning) moved away into the night.

Tragically, within two years of my knowing the lions, Darky's pride was severely fractured by the actions of hunters and poachers. One day Kgosi and two lionesses found themselves on the game farms beyond the boundaries of the Tuli. It was very likely that trophy hunters with baits had lured them out. I never saw Kgosi or the two lionesses again. They were shot dead by white hunters, men who think it is manly and heroic to kill the King of Beasts. The sound of gunfire beyond the Tuli boundaries signified the destruction of the brotherhood of Kgosi and Darky.

Darky was now the lone pride protector, and single pride males are normally vulnerable to the incursions of younger nomadic males, eager to oust the old and to take over a pride. Amazingly, though, Darky, the self-reliant, went on to rule alone over the Lower Majale for another eight long years. Over those years, his foes were not only young challenging males, but also the white hunters beyond the reserve's boundary. In fact they posed the greatest danger; they knew well of his existence and some sorely sought the opportunity to kill him as the ultimate lion trophy. They referred to Darky as the "Big Black Mane" or the "Swart Een," the "Black One." In bushveld bars and around campfires they would speak of the legendary Botswana lion of great size, fierceness and cunning. They spoke of him in such terms because they always failed to kill him. Darky outwitted them instead and belittled them. Some thought him to be somehow protected. The truth is, he was protected; he lived as long as he did for a purpose, a portion of which, I believe, was to teach and inspire me. Darky defied the white hunters and their guns, the poachers and their traps and the challenges of pride takeovers by the wandering nomadic male lions.

Once, two adult male lions left their territory in the north and headed into the fringe areas of Darky's range. A confrontation was inevitable and when it took place the sounds of the great battle echoed off the hills and through the valleys. And Darky emerged victorious.

At the site of the battle, upon the scarred and defaced ground, a large tuft of thick black mane was found. Embedded within the fur was the sheath of a hooked claw.

After the battle, I set out in search of Darcy. I feared that he might have sustained terrible injuries. Late in the afternoon, I found the great old warrior upon the rise on the Pitsani plains. At my approach, although clearly weary and torn, he only exuded calmness to me. As evening closed in, I left my friend and that night raised my hand as I heard his haunting calls flowing through the air from across the plains.