

(Download pdf) Ghosts of Tsavo: Tracking the Mythic Lions of East Africa

## Ghosts of Tsavo: Tracking the Mythic Lions of East Africa

*Philip Caputo*

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**Philip Caputo : Ghosts of Tsavo: Tracking the Mythic Lions of East Africa** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Ghosts of Tsavo: Tracking the Mythic Lions of East Africa:

27 of 27 people found the following review helpful. Engaging look at unusual lionsBy Customer"Ghosts of Tsavo" is part travelogue, part natural history, part murder mystery, and part mid-life crisis for its author Philip Caputo. What it is as a whole is a fascinating, engaging look at the lions of Tsavo Park in Kenya. Caputo first became interested in these unusual lions as a result of a visit to the Field Museum in Chicago as a young boy. Therein were "Ghost" and "Darkness" two enormous males lions that terrorized constructions workers building a rail line through Tsavo. In fact

terrorized may be too weak a word as they are credited with killing at least 120 people and literally halting construction until they were eventually hunted down and killed by British Lt. Col. Patterson who was heading up the project. He recounted this effort in his famous memoir "The Man Eaters of Tsavo" and kindled a fascination with Kenya's lions that lingered with Caputo for half a century. What sets the lions of Tsavo apart from the more familiar ones we know from nature documentaries, is that they are much bigger, and the males are either maneless or have very short manes, in either case nothing like the regal mountains of fur on their cousins from the Serengeti. In the first half of the book, Caputo explores reasons as to why this might be the case. It is possible that since Tsavo is much warmer than the Serengeti, manes are too expensive in terms of internal resources to grow. Another possibility is that the thick scrub brush and thorns of the region wear down manes before they ever become truly impressive. However, it is a more controversial theory that makes for the most entertaining reading. Caputo encounters several scientists who argue that the lions of Tsavo are genetically distinct from the lions on the Serengeti. Moreover, they argue that the lions of Tsavo are in fact a throw back to prehistoric lions, quite literally walking fossils. The point to the lack of manes, the much larger height and girth and the fact that Tsavo lions hunt the enormous Cape Buffalo as justifications for this thesis. Ultimately, Caputo, in three journeys to Kenya over the course of eighteen months (once as a tourist and twice with scientific expeditions) is never able to definitively state which hypothesis is correct. However, that in no way detracts from his rambling, conversational narrative. Caputo is not a scientist, and he in no way pretends to be one, although he does (and justifiably so) consider himself a well-informed observer. As such, he is not constrained by the rigors of academia, and can therefore transfer his passion for these lions and the mystery surrounding them onto the page. In fact, towards the end he grows weary of the scientific studies as they somehow detract from the powerful aura that surrounds the lions. If you are interested in lions in general, or if the prospect of some spine-tingling tales of man-eating lions sounds appealing, "Ghost of Tsavo" is well worth reading. However, beyond the surface elements, Caputo has written a book that captures the raw spirituality of nature, and that bemoans modern man's detachment from the primitive. So it is entirely likely that even if you have no interest in lions at all, you may be drawn to Caputo's lament for something we don't even realize we have lost. Either way, "Ghost's of Tsavo" is well worth reading.

Jake Mohlman  
0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great nonfiction from a great writer, and a thrilling must-read for the ailurophile. By Joe LeDux  
I'm an admitted and probably obsessed ailurophile, and this book from one of my favorite authors (both fiction and nonfiction) was precisely what the doctor ordered. Ever seen the movie "The Ghost and the Darkness"? Well, yes, a true story and yes a hunting pair of brother lions killed and ate a hundred or so railway workers before they were finally themselves killed. They got their nicknames because they appeared like spectres and disappeared like smoke, usually with human flesh in their mouths. At least two of their victims were experienced professional lion hunters brought in to finish them, but ended up as just so much lion scat instead. These brothers made a science of hunting human and were experts at it. Where the movie got it wrong was the two male lions had no manes. Which brings us to the point of this book. The Tsavo lion is--to scientists at least--a much different beast from the typical highland Serengeti lion, which is smaller and heavily maned. There's enough of a difference between the two that it provoked scientific study and a National Geographic expedition and article (also written by Caputo). The Tsavo lion is a bigger, burlier lion than its highland relative and that its purportedly due to its primary prey--the cape buffalo, called by such legendary hunters as John "Pondoro" Taylor "the meanest animal in Africa". And very large and as dangerous as any other animal on that continent. Not something that a maned highland lion on the Serengeti would willingly take on when there are plenty of wildebeeste around, and much less risky to engage. Anyhow, in a nutshell, what you have here is a mystery--why are the Tsavo lions so different from their Serengeti cousins? Why did a pair of them take to man-hunting with such a skilled and effective zeal? When it comes to hunting and killing primates (including humans), leopards are actually much more efficient and effective at it than any lion or tiger, which are built and evolved to destroy much larger prey. Yet the hunting brothers of Tsavo share a rare limelight with other legendary maneaters such as the Panay leopard of India. Why? That's the mystery. This mystery is documented by one of the best writers of our time. I mean, really...Caputo is so good he could have written a book about the Ducks of Tsavo and made it as interesting and thrilling as anything a lesser writer could manage. He is one of the rare Hemingways of the modern generation, and everything--everything--he writes is worth reading. And if you're an obsessed ailurophile like me, this book will absolutely blow you away. You will not be able to put it down. When finished, you will read it again. And still it won't be enough. This is a spellbinding book that I have read many times, no doubt with many more times to come. You have no idea how dangerous the African wilderness can be. Read this, and you might understand. A little, at least. Spoiler alert: This shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone who knows the story or has seen the movie, but the hunting brothers were eventually killed and their hunting spree came to an end. But grieve not, fellow cat lovers. They took many, many humans with them. As Caputo notes in his book, it's a disturbing idea to learn that you are just so much protein to an animal with a brain the size of your fist. But in his element, the lion is the Einstein and you are the bumbling fool, brain size notwithstanding. And the story doesn't end there because the Tsavo lion is still bigger, burlier, and different from his highland cousin, and finding out just why is really the intriguing root of this story. I would have to recommend this book based on the author alone. But a book about lions, written by Philip Caputo--oh brother, just give me the damn book, would you? And yes, to answer your

last question--the animal on the cover is indeed one of the Ghost and Darkness pair, now stuffed and preserved in a museum. But, according to Caputo, no less impressive for all that. Get the book. Read it. You will get your money's worth, and then some. Edit: The reviewers who criticize the science in the book are barking up the wrong tree. That's no fair critique of the book. Caputo is not a scientist, he is a journalist. All he can do is report what he saw and what the scientists told him. Perhaps the scientific questions about the two cats have since been answered. Who knows? Do your own research, and use it if it concerns you that much. Also, it's not exactly fair to characterize the Tsavo lions as being more aggressive than their Serengeti cousins. There is nothing more aggressive than a male Serengeti lion, and as Caputo himself notes in a fight between the bigger Tsavo male and a Serengeti (maned) male the Tsavo male would almost certainly lose. The reason is probably because the Tsavo lion has evolved for hunting huge and hugely dangerous game, while the Serengeti male has evolved primarily to do one thing: combat, against the most dangerous adversary on the continent--other male lions like him. Cats do have a culture, in the sense that some learned behaviors are passed on to offspring, and it is entirely possible that the maneating culture alleged to be such a part of the Tsavo lion group originated with the disposed sick and dead victims of the slave trade, but that doesn't constitute aggressiveness. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A thrilling story, well told. By SDSCaputo is an excellent writer, and no stranger to danger. This book is an excellent companion to the works of Peter Hathaway Capstick and Jim Corbett. With its focus on lions (and some very interesting history), it is also a very nice companion to a book called "Of Tigers and Men" (likely of the best ever written on the glory and tragedy of tigers).

1898, Tsavo River Kenya, the British Empire has employed 140 workers to build a railroad bridge. The bridge's construction comes to a violent halt when two maneless lions devour all 140 workers in a savage 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.

From Library Journal In 1898, two maneless male lions killed and devoured 135 Indian and African workers constructing a railroad bridge over the Tsavo River in Kenya. It took Lt. Col. John Henry Patterson, the engineer in charge of the project, nine months to hunt and kill the beasts, an ordeal recounted in his 1907 book, *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo*, and later the subject of two films, 1952's *Bwana Devil* and 1996's *The Ghost and the Darkness*. A century later, the story of Ghost and Darkness still fascinates and terrifies. Were they just rogue lions, or were they the "missing genetic link" between the prehistoric cave cats who hunted early humans and the modern African lion? Novelist Caputo (*The Voyage*) seeks answers to this intriguing question as he accompanies two separate expeditions to study the maneless lions of Tsavo. Unfortunately, the resulting book is a frustrating mix of personal travel narrative and scientific speculation, with no definite conclusions. Admitting his ambivalence, Caputo writes: "I feel divided, half of me hungry for scientific truth, the other half seeking to embrace the mythic. It occurs to me that I haven't come close to solving the mystery of Tsavo's lions, probably because my heart hasn't been in it." Still, Caputo's muscular prose vividly captures the beauty and dangers of Africa, and there will be demand because of his name. For larger adventure and natural history collections. Wilda Williams, "Library Journal" Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. From Booklist Caputo is a superb yarn-spinner with a love of adventure and a penchant for philosophizing. A best-selling, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, memoirist, and journalist, he's really been around--"at last count, I've lived, worked, traveled, and fought and covered wars in 48 countries on 4 continents"--so it's no surprise to find that Caputo's latest compelling work of nonfiction chronicles a quest on foreign ground. The inspiration for Caputo's African sojourn is found in the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, the final resting place for the two infamous, maneless, man-eating male lions of Tsavo, an inhospitable and scrubby coastal region in East Africa. These beasts "attained mythic status" by killing and eating 135 railway laborers in 1898, and their cunning descendants continue to take humans as prey and to intrigue scientists who want to know why some lions hunt human beings, why most male lions have manes, and why many male Tsavo lions do not. Caputo relishes hair-raising tales of man-eaters and explicates various theories about them, while entertainingly chronicling his experiences as part of a photography and research safari in Kenya's wildlife reserve. Not only does he excel at evoking the beauty of his surroundings and describing his own sometimes harrowing encounters with wildlife, he also reflects cogently on the consequences of our precipitous decimation of the wild. It turns out that there's nothing all that mysterious about the Tsavo lions: they simply hunt to live. It's our unnecessarily violent species that remains obdurately enigmatic. Donna Seaman Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved "Ghosts of Tsavo makes for great summer reading."