steve and terri: a love story

The whole nation – indeed, the whole world – mourned when we heard of the death of wildlife warrior Steve Irwin. Now his grieving widow TERRI IRWIN has written an uplifting book, My Steve, about their life together and about Steve’s undying vision. ALISON PRESSLEY talked to her about the book and the future.

When we remember that endearing, iconic figure dressed in khakis, wrestling a croc and exclaiming ‘Crikey!’, it’s easy to concentrate on the showman and forget the serious research and commitment that lay behind all the filmed scenes. The fact that Professor Craig E Franklin of the University of Queensland has written the foreword to Terri Irwin’s tribute to her late husband serves to remind us of that scholarship and dedication. Terri tells us, among other things, how shamefully little we know about these magnificent creatures in the wild, and how much Steve was contributing to accumulating scientific data.

That’s the serious side of this irrepressibly passionate, fun-loving man. One of Terri’s motives in writing the book was to show Steve Irwin the man rather than just the world-famous Crocodile Hunter. Above everything, My Steve is a love story: one woman’s account of life with the love of her life, and of his untimely death. It’s a heart-wrenching but also upbeat tale, full of wild adventure, deep family ties and total commitment to wildlife conservation.

Terri Raines, from Oregon, USA, stumbled into Steve Irwin’s life by accident – except you can’t help thinking that fate had a lot to do with it. Terri was already involved in wildlife conservation in the States, and in 1991 was in Australia to find homes for rescued American cougars. She saw what was then called the Queensland Reptile and Fauna Park from the passenger window of a friend’s car and decided to pay a visit, although pessimistic about the chances of the park being interested in taking cougars. While there, she met Steve and watched incredulous as he fed the crocs and listened even more incredulous as he recounted tales of wrangling and capturing ‘troublesome’ crocs so that they didn’t get shot.

Terri writes: ‘I had never, ever believed in love at first sight. But I had the strangest, most overwhelming feeling that it was destiny that took me into that little wildlife park that day.’ She tells a lovely story of finding out if Steve had a girlfriend or not. Just as she was wondering, he volunteered, ‘Would you
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I asked Terri if writing the book had been a cathartic experience. I think perhaps in the future I will gain that healing from going over everything, she responded, but to be perfectly honest it was incredibly difficult. I think because I started the process in February when things were pretty raw, and the good memories were difficult because I miss him; I remembered hard times. But I’m certainly proud of doing it, I’m glad I did it, and I’m very happy with the result.

We all know the bare bones of the story of their success and the birth of their two children, Bindi and Bob, but in My Steve Terri fleshes out the reality of their lives, including their initial poverty and making the first videos of Steve in action with filmmaker John Stainton (on their honeymoon!), the beginning of the Crocodile Hunter legend – hunting animals to save them, not kill them.

Terri describes Steve as the consummate bushman, never ever fazed by anything he encountered in the wild. Watching Steve around the camp was witnessing a man at one with his environment. Their trips together into the bush are described with a vivid immediacy – Terri was as unified by the Australian landscape, flora and fauna as she was by her Australian action hero. She also writes of her strong initial feeling that together, nothing bad would ever happen to them. Apart, they were each vulnerable. That gut feeling never left her during all their years together – happy years, mostly.

The book is filled with exciting wildlife stories, including a heartbreaking whale stranding in Tasmania; relocating the ‘black ghost’, the giant croc Acco; bonding with a mother orang utan; getting poisoned by a euphorbia plant in the Kalahari Desert;
their wonderful conservation work with Tasmanian devils; buying up land around Australia to help save the environment; building the Crocoseum with the proceeds of the film *Crocodile Hunter: Collision Course*.

Steve worked incredibly hard to achieve his vision for Australia Zoo, founded as the Beerwah Reptile Park by Steve’s parents Lyn and Bob in 1970, toiling day and night to build enclosures, plant trees, landscape the grounds. Life was simpler then, writes Terri, but of course things began to change with the success of their documentaries on Australian television.

So it was all the more galling when the dreadful media response to ‘the Baby Bob Incident’ happened in 2004. This was when, as part of a ceremony celebrated by the Irwin family many times, Steve held his infant son in his arms while he fed the zoo’s crocodiles. The world media erupted in condemnation – ignoring the fact that Steve had done exactly the same thing with Bindi years earlier, and no one batted an eyelid.

I asked Terri if she thought the Tall Poppy Syndrome, that dreaded Aussie reaction to fame, anything to do with this. ‘That’s an interesting story,’ she replied. ‘If an animal became sick at the zoo, Steve would always say to me, “What’s changed? Is it their food, is it the weather, is it Steve was much better known, and the O.J. Jackson incident had just happened. Jackson dangled his infant son over a hotel pool, so I think it was an instant, “Look, here’s another spin”. I try to grasp how anyone could possibly think that Steve would put his kids in danger – I think it was circumstance. But my goodness, it just levelled him, because he loved his kids dearly. I watched him grieve. Everybody kept saying, “Apologise!” And he’d say, “For what? I don’t think I’ve done anything wrong!” It was tumultuous times. But at least we stood together as a family – it solidified us as a family.’

There are many moments of sadness in this book. But Terri and Steve had fourteen wonderful years together, fourteen years of love and adventure and family, and that can never be taken away from Terri. ‘One crowded hour of glorious life is worth more than an age without a name. I had no regrets for Steve’s glorious life,’ she writes.

Steve’s life was dedicated to the cause of wildlife. ‘One day, we’ll look back on wildlife harvesting projects and things like croc farming the same way we look back on slavery and cannibalism,’ he’d said to Terri. As Terri points out, we aren’t there yet. She is hopeful that Bindi will carry the torch her father left her. ‘If we can learn to love wildlife, just develop that empathy – and you know, Bindi is such a hero with that,’ Terri told me proudly. ‘She’s reaching the next generation, as did Steve – she has that real connection with children. I think that will be the next wave – people starting to say, we need to consider the needs of other living creatures.’

The very first ‘Steve Irwin Day’ will be celebrated this month, on 15 November, which is Harriet the giant Galapagos tortoise’s birthday. Harriet, who died in June 2006, would have been 177 years old. You can help, said Terri, by ‘doing something with your kids: have a neighbourhood camp-out in your back yard with your kids – don’t just send them out, go out with them! Have people sponsor you. Visit our website, australiazoo.com.au, for ideas and help – if you buy your supplies for the event from us, the money we make goes back into conservation. Here at Australia Zoo it’s going to be a big day. I’ll be here to sign copies of *My Steve*, Bindi’s launching two new songs, we’re unveiling a beautiful, masterpiece work in bronze that’s going to be a centrepiece of the zoo, we’re going to have entertainment and activities all day – it’s going to be huge! We’re really proud, and people around the world are getting on board to celebrate Steve Irwin Day. Hopefully, it will give us all an excuse for spending time with those we love.’

In the meantime we can all do our bit, perhaps by joining Wildlife Warriors and ensuring that the marvellous work of Steve Irwin lives on.

My *Steve* by *Terri Irwin* is published this month by *Simon & Schuster*, rrp $39.95. You can also find out more about Wildlife Warriors by visiting their website, www.wildlifewarriors.org or writing to them at PO Box 29, Beerwah, Qld 4519.
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