

Revisiting a Lion Called Christian

CatChannel managing editor Nikki Batalis blogs about an emotional YouTube reunion that prompted a book reissue, which is now a best-seller.

By Nikki Batalis

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The emotional reunion of Anthony Bourke and John Rendall with Christian became an Internet sensation. About a year ago, a remarkable video was posted on YouTube and became an instant sensation, getting more than 40 million hits. We have the clip posted here on CatChannel as well.

It shows the reunion of two men, Anthony "Ace" Bourke and John Rendall, with their pet lion, Christian, who had been introduced to the wilds of Africa after being saved by the men from a life of captivity.

It's quite a remarkable story, which Bourke and Rendall wrote about in "A Lion Called Christian," originally published in 1971. The YouTube clip had such an extraordinary impact that the book was reissued, and now sits at No. 5 on The New York Times bestseller list.

In addition, Animal Planet will be airing a documentary, "A Lion Called Christian," at 10 p.m. EDT on May 8. There is even talk about a feature film.

Here's the story: Bourke and Rendall had come upon Christian in 1969, when they found him for sale at Harrod's department store in London. The two men, both Australians who were visitors to London, couldn't stand to see the beautiful lion cub locked up in a cramped cage. Against all reason, they bought him and took him to live with them in their flat above the Sophisticat furniture store in London, with the intention of giving him a better life.

Christian became something of a feline rock star in those "mod" London days, cruising around town in the back of a Bentley, posing for photographers and making TV and radio appearances.

But it became evident to the men that the growing lion needed to live in a more suitable environment than they could provide, and they dismissed any thought of sending Christian to a zoo.

A chance meeting with Bill Travers, who had starred in the film "Born Free," set things in motion. Travers hooked them up with George Adamson, the man he played in the film, who ran a wildlife sanctuary in Kenya. Adamson agreed to take Christian and integrate him into life among lions in the wild.

Bourke and Rendall were invited by Adamson to return to Kenya for a visit a year later. Amazingly, Christian, now a much bigger young lion with his own pride, was ecstatic to see his old friends and rushed to give them one of the most emotional embraces in screen history.

The story is so moving because it involves the close bond that humans and animals have for one another. We humans know that we love our pets with all of our hearts, and it is wonderful to see the evidence that our animals love us back, even a wild animal like Christian.

One of the most inspiring things the men write is in the last chapter of the book, where they discuss the powerful positive effect that Christian had on the world around him: "Forty years later, George's work is still continuing, and Christian's magic is inspiring us to think about the interrelationship of all living creatures, about love and caring for one another, and the urgency of action for wildlife conservation. If all of us touched by Christian's story came together ... what could we achieve in the spirit of Christian's love of life?"