

TRIBUTES TO THE PASSING OF A MEERKAT MATRIARCH

Animal Planet

Fans of Animal Planet's "Meerkat Manor" will shed new tears this season.

Grief over the death of 'Meerkat Manor's' Flower has been building as word was carefully leaked. The episode's airing spurs tears anew.

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In the promo for Friday night's episode of "Meerkat Manor," a goshawk left its perch to the lonely ping of a single piano note. "What if you lost forever the one you loved most?" asked a soft, sympathetic voice worthy of an advertisement for Forest Lawn. "Soon a tragedy will touch us all as never before. And nothing will ever be the same."

The executives at Animal Planet didn't have to spell it out for fans of the show. The promo—not to mention hints in magazine ads and even a network-placed Internet spoiler last March—left little doubt that the queen of the Kalahari, the leader of the brave little band of scrappy scorpion eaters, the tiny, beady-eyed grandmother with a radio collar, would probably get whacked in some horrible way.

Still, meerkat lovers, who had swamped the network with grief-stricken notes after the death of Shakespeare in Season 1, were aghast again to hear the news that in the episode scheduled for Friday night, Flower would die of a cobra bite.

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“My children have been totally traumatized by Flower’s death,” wrote a mother on one of the fan sites dedicated to the reality soap that has expanded viewers’ emotional attachment to animal documentaries into another dimension. “They cried themselves to sleep after two hours of histrionics... My daughter said she felt like I had died.”

Older animal lovers also said they were devastated. “I have tears streaming down my face,” one woman wrote. “What a shock. Poor, poor Flower. My heart goes out to all who knew her and her Meerkat Family.

“P.S. I have to tell my husband now. He also will be so upset.”

In real life, Flower died in February during the filming of Season 3. But having learned a few lessons from the uproar over Shakespeare’s injury and disappearance at the end of Season 1, executives at Animal Planet realized they needed to apprise devoted fans immediately. (Bitten by a puff adder, Shakespeare was presumed to have died.)

In March, “Meerkat Manor” executive producer Mick Kaczorowski released a statement on the network’s meerkat Web forum saying Flower had not survived the snake bite, that she would be missed and that life would go on in the Kalahari.

The network also made sure the death was shown before the season’s end. “Once the audience gets invested in the characters, they need to have the full experience,” he said. “When Shakespeare disappeared over the season, we weren’t filming—there was no evidence, no body. When we came back in Season 2, everybody was completely frustrated. Conspiracy theories came up.

“The most important thing is to track down the remains or stay with the body so we could put an end to the story.”

Flower was the most successful meerkat in the Kalahari Research Project, and “everyone was touched by her,” he said. Filmmakers were as upset as the audience, he said.

“She was buried in the Kalahari by the researchers,” he said. “I heard it’s marked.”

Animal Planet has planned to air a commemorative spot, a tribute for Flower online and a press event in New York.

The upcoming feature film “Queen of the Kalahari,” starring Flower, continues in production, he said. The film was always intended as a prequel to “Meerkat Manor” and will trace her rise to dominance, he said. He would not say whether her end would be shown.

Flower’s was the most significant, but not the only, death among the meerkat clan this season, which began in August. Among the dead have been Carlos, the roaming lover from

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a neighboring tribe, and two babies, Len and Squiggy, who were eaten by a goshawk. (Kaczorowski said a rule of natural world filmmaking is not to intercede.)

But as the body count piled up, some fans vowed to stop watching altogether.

Kaczorowski called “Meerkat Manor” an experiment in natural history documentary that goes beyond dramatic movies like “Flipper” or “Gentle Ben.” Naming animals always raises the emotional stakes, but adding the special camera work, increasing the characterization in the soap operatic overlay and not flinching from the nature of the animals’ short and brutal life cycle apparently pushed many viewers over the top.

“It’s a growing process, and the audience is going to have to learn with us,” he said.

Fans began memorializing the meerkat in poems and craft items since news seeped out in March. One stained-glass item features a portrait of Flower with her radio collar for \$35.

One fan’s obituary reads:

*“Flower Whiskers (2000-2007)
Beloved mate of Zaphod and Yossarian.
Mother of: Big Will, Tosca, Mozart, Shakespeare, Mitch, Columbus and many, many more.
Grandmother of: Jogu, McMurphy, Sophie and Spud.”*

And this week, a fan on YouTube posted a tear-jerking video tribute. As the meerkat nuzzled babies, groomed her mate and dug holes in the dirt, a twangy country balladeer sang:

*“Remember when
We lived and learned, life threw curves
Old ones died and new were born
And life was changed, disassembled, rearranged.”*

One viewer replied, “Get a life.”

Marjorie Kaplan, general manager of Animal Planet, said it might help the more sensitive viewers to remember that Flower wasn’t always very nice, banishing daughters who got pregnant or cavorting with Houdini, a meerkat from another tribe.

A few weeks before Friday night’s episode, the network hadn’t had any official complaints, she said. To the contrary, ratings increased after the death of Carlos.

In fact, the reality show format has been so successful for Animal Planet that the network is planning more of the same but with different animals. Next up this fall: “Orangutan Island.”

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