

## HighBeam Research

**Title:** I'm wild about this soap.

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Big Cat Week (BBC1);

The Big Question with Stephen Hawking (Five)

JUST when you thought you knew everything there was to know about African wildlife, the BBC natural history unit comes up with yet another series to knock your socks off.

Last night, big cat experts Simon King, Jonathan Scott and Saba Douglas-Hamilton had the Matthew family on the edge of its collective seat with the most intimate portrait yet of the life of lions, leopards and cheetahs.

The experiences of Kike the cheetah, Bibi the lioness and Bella the leopard - and their young - as they battle for survival on the Masai Mara reserve in Kenya are being shown every evening this week on BBC1.

The result is a wildlife soap opera, and if yesterday evening's opener is anything to go by, we are in for more thrills, spills, plot twists and cliff-hangers than we get in a year's worth of EastEnders episodes rolled into one.

The tone was established in the opening scene when Kike pounced on a baby topi (a type of antelope).

She was padding confidently off in the direction of her cubs with their supper clamped in her jaws when Mrs Topi decided enough was enough and gave chase. The cheetah dropped the baby, made straight for Jonathan Scott's vehicle, leapt on the bonnet and sat, panting heavily, on the roof.

So that we could appreciate the full effect on Kike's state of mind, Jonathan swiftly poked his head out of the sunroof and pointed a large microphone in the cheetah's direction.

For a moment I thought he was going to ask her how she was feeling, but he settled for a few words on her behalf: 'She's really agitated, really worried, really distressed.' One has become used to wildlife presenters anthropomorphising their subjects, but Jonathan, Simon and Saba have got to know their big cats so well over the years that they speak about them as if they were personal friends, if not close relatives.

When Kike and her cubs were about to tuck into a baby Thompson's gazelle that was lying there in the grass, waiting to be eaten, and chased after a hare instead, Jonathan

commented: 'That hare was only a snack - they're going to have to do better than that!' But then it turns out that for all who live under the African sun, life is one long round of danger, whatever their age.

Bibi the lioness's big-eyed babies have the odds stacked against them from the word go.

'It'll be a miracle if they survive Big Cat Week,' said Simon, gravely.

Even for Simba, king of the pride, there could be no guarantee of a secure future - not with a couple of ambitious young males waiting in the grassy wings to topple him from his throne.

'They look mean,' murmured Simon as they sloped towards the old lion, looking like a pair of muggers. 'They have that tightlipped look they get when hunting.' When they finally attacked, he couldn't resist shouting out: 'Watch your back, Simba. Run, boy, run!' At that moment the credits rolled, and millions held their breath, wondering how they were going to survive for another 24 hours.

\* CHANNEL 5 has also launched into a new weeklong series called *The Big Question*, in which distinguished scientists such as Professor Richard Dawkins and Professor Baroness Susan Greenfield attempt in half an hour to tackle such fundamental questions as why we are here and how the world will end.

Professor Stephen Hawking got the ball rolling yesterday evening by explaining how the universe began.

SINCE I have never managed to get beyond page three of *A Brief History Of Time* - despite the fact that it is written for the benefit of scientific ignoramuses - I tuned in certain that I would come away none the wiser.

The self- consciously histrionic surroundings in which Professor Hawking delivered his lecture (after being delivered on to the large stage in a theatre lift) also had me worried.

Would I be so dazzled by the computer-generated effects on the huge screen at the back that I wouldn't be able to concentrate on what the great man was saying?

But the Prof must have had people like me in mind, since his explanation of how modern science abandoned the time-honoured theory that space was static, infinitely big and had no beginning, and began to think in terms of a big bang, could not have been simpler or more graspable.

Having said that, I am still not clear about what happened before this strange matter of zero size and infinite heat exploded, and in a fraction of a second expanded to a trillion, trillion, trillion times its size.

Professor Hawking assured us that it is possible for something to be spontaneously created out of absolutely nothing, like bubbles of steam in boiling water, but I still don't understand how.

But then, as you could tell from the enigmatic smiles he kept darting at the camera, he is a man who knows things that will remain a mystery to most of us.

Our universe, he concluded, may well not be anything special or significant - except that it has led to intelligent creatures who can ask why the universe is the way it is.

'If the universe were slightly different,' he said, 'no one would be around to ask the question.' Just so, professor.

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