

= Meerkat Manor : The Story Begins =

Meerkat Manor : The Story Begins is a 2008 television film created by Discovery Films and Oxford Scientific Films as a prequel to the Animal Planet series Meerkat Manor . A scripted documentary narrated by Whoopi Goldberg , the film details the life of a meerkat named Flower from birth to her becoming the leader of a meerkat group called the Whiskers . The film is based on the research notes of the Kalahari Meerkat Project and primarily uses wild meerkat " actors " to represent those in the story . Shot over two years at the Kuruman River Reserve in Northern Cape , South Africa , the film employed a much larger crew than the series . Some scenes were shot at a wildlife park in the United Kingdom , while others were created using camera tricks and trained film animals .

The 75 @-@ minute film premiered at the 2008 Tribeca Film Festival before its television premiere on Animal Planet on May 25 , 2008 . While it was praised for its cinematography , for maintaining the depth of coverage of the television series , and for its accessibility to newcomers to the series , it was criticized for not offering anything new to fans . The Kalahari Meerkat Project noted that the film was not completely accurate but praised it overall and recommended against analyzing it . Several reviewers praised Goldberg 's narration , but the script was criticized as being too simplistic for adult viewers .

= = Synopsis = =

The meerkat Flower is born in the Kalahari Desert on March 15 , 2000 , to Holly , the leader of a meerkat group called the Whiskers . After an attack by a rival group , the Lazuli , the Whiskers are forced to surrender their territory and move to a new home . A hawk kills Holly when Flower is a year old , and her father abandons the group to find a new mate . Flower 's sister Viale becomes the group 's matriarch and chooses Yousarian , a roving male from the Lazuli , as her mate . Flower mates with Yousarian 's brother , Zaphod , but Viale kills the resulting pups and banishes Flower from the group , allowing her to return later . During a time of starvation and drought , Viale attempts to lead the group across a road to forage . As she crosses , she is struck and killed by a passing truck . As the Whiskers attempt to adjust to the loss of their leader , a snake approaches the group . Flower steps in to lead an attack to drive it off . In doing so , she becomes the new leader of the group . Zaphod returns to the group to be her mate , while Yousarian steps aside and leaves the group . Flower leads the Whiskers back to their original home , and after a brief battle , the Whiskers reclaim it from the Lazuli . At end of the film , an on @-@ screen note describes Flower 's death during the third season of Meerkat Manor and the children she left behind .

= = Production = =

Created by Oxford Scientific Films for Discovery Films , Meerkat Manor : The Story Begins is a prequel biography of Flower , the central meerkat of the highly rated documentary series Meerkat Manor . Caroline Hawkins , creator of the series , wrote the script using notes taken by Kalahari Meerkat Project researchers , including head researcher Tim Clutton @-@ Brock . Hawkins notes that Oxford Scientific Films believes the film is the first natural history prequel to be created . The film was directed by Chris Barker and Mike Slee , while Whoopi Goldberg , a known Meerkat Manor fan , provided the narration .

Meerkat Manor normally films episodes using a crew of only two or three people to avoid disturbing the meerkats ; the film was shot over two years at the Kuruman River Reserve , where the Kalahari Meerkat Project that the meerkats are a part of is based , and employed a much larger crew . Breaking from the series ' pure documentary format , the film does not include footage of the project meerkats depicted in the story . Instead , wild meerkat " actors " represented Flower and her family ; Flower was depicted by approximately eight female meerkats . The camera crew sought out appropriately aged meerkats for each scene , then filmed them until they behaved in ways the script required .

While the majority of the meerkats filmed were partially habituated , the cinematographers had to

move carefully to avoid scaring the animals . The crew used radios to keep in contact with one another as they followed the meerkat groups around . Although the park normally prohibits low @-@ flying aircraft , the production crew was given permission to film for three days using a low @-@ flying helicopter . Mounted to its front underside was a new type of camera that was not affected by the shaking of the helicopter . Full @-@ color scenes depicting the birth of meerkat pups were obtained by filming captive meerkats at the Cotswold Wildlife Park in the United Kingdom .

Because of the viewer backlash Animal Planet received for allowing meerkats from the Meerkat Manor series to die , the producers of the film debated including the filmed death of a young meerkat who was bitten by a snake . They questioned whether viewers would understand that the meerkats were wild animals and that human interference would disrupt the animals ' natural life cycles . In addition , to avoid disrupting the research , crews are only allowed to film within the research area under a strictly enforced agreement not to interfere with the meerkats ' lives . The producers ultimately included the scene , but the meerkat 's cries for help as it lay dying were edited out . Other meerkat deaths depicted were reenactments . For Viale 's death scene , the crew rigged a camera mounted on a platform on the side of a truck . Robin Smith , the film and series main cinematographer , hung partially out of the truck to hold the camera steady , giving the visual impression of a truck bearing down on a meerkat . To provide bird and snake footage , professional handlers were employed , ensuring the meerkats were not deliberately put in danger .

In 2007 , the real Flower was killed by a snake bite ? before the film and the third series of Meerkat Manor had finished shooting . According to Executive producer Mick Kaczorowski , Flower 's death imposed the need for a " bigger " ending to the film than the producers originally planned ; Flower 's death was addressed and the coda added .

= = Distribution = =

The film premiered at the 2008 Tribeca Film Festival on April 30 in the Spotlight section , before airing in the United States on Animal Planet on May 25 . Its television premiere was followed by the 30 @-@ minute Making of Meerkat Manor : The Story Begins special . The film was screened at the 2008 Festival du film britannique de Dinard in France , as The Meerkats , and at the Wildscreen Festival in Bristol on October 18 and October 24 , 2008 .

It was released to Region 1 DVD in North America on June 3 , 2008 , with the Making of ... special included as an extra . The DVD also includes another special , The Science of Meerkat Manor , giving viewers a look at how the Kalahari Meerkat Project researchers work with the meerkats . It is scheduled for Region 2 DVD release in the United Kingdom on November 2 , 2009 .

= = Reception = =

In 2009 , the film was nominated by the Cinema Audio Society for an award in the " Outstanding Achievement in Sound Mixing for DVD Original Programming " category , losing out to the music documentary If All Goes Wrong . Variety 's Ronnie Scheib did not think that Meerkat Manor : The Story Begins offered anything new for viewers of the television series , feeling that it was a " re @-@ edited , re @-@ scored , re @-@ narrated " version of the existing series . While he found Goldberg 's narration to be higher quality than in most documentaries of this type , he also felt that it " pales after a while . " Scheib praised the film for its cinematography and the depth and quality of coverage of the meerkats , and said their activities " constantly amaze " , while noting that the film was a condensed and embellished version of actual events that did not distort the meerkats ' story . The Friends of the Kalahari Meerkat Project , a sponsorship for the research group studying the meerkats , thought the film was a " heart @-@ touching tribute to Flower , with amazing meerkat , landscape and wildlife footage " . Though the group noted that the film changes some details from the life history reports it was based on , they felt the film should be enjoyed rather than analyzed . Common Sense Media reviewer Emily Ashby felt the film was accessible to fans and newcomers to the series ; she praised the story 's scope and emotional impact , calling it a " captivating journey " that did not avoid depicting the " harsh facts of life in the wild " . David Lowe from The Sun found the

film to be " charming " and a " fantastic documentary [that] manages to be both educational and incredibly entertaining . "