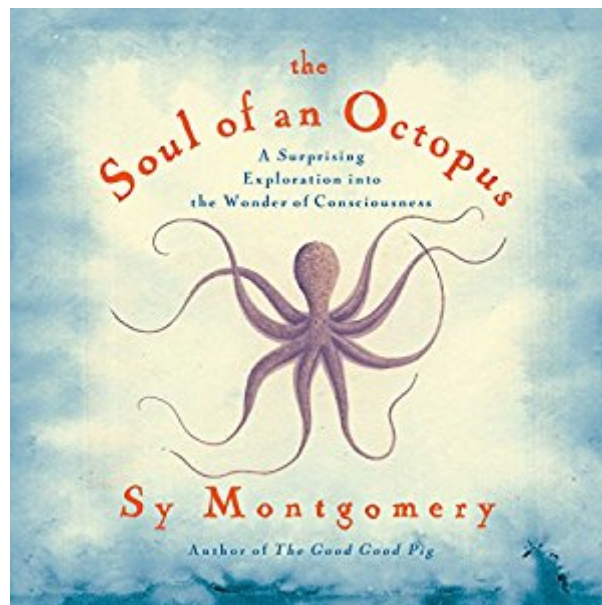


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Soul Of An Octopus: A Surprising Exploration Into The Wonder Of Consciousness



Synopsis

Sy Montgomery's popular 2011 Orion magazine piece, "Deep Intellect", about her friendship with a sensitive, sweet-natured octopus named Athena and the grief she felt at her death, went viral, indicating the widespread fascination with these mysterious, almost alien-like creatures. Since then Sy has practiced true immersion journalism, from New England aquarium tanks to the reefs of French Polynesia and the Gulf of Mexico, pursuing these wild, solitary shape-shifters. Octopuses have varied personalities and intelligence they show in myriad ways: endless trickery to escape enclosures and get food; jetting water playfully to bounce objects like balls; and evading caretakers by using a scoop net as a trampoline and running around the floor on eight arms. But with a beak like a parrot, venom like a snake, and a tongue covered with teeth, how can such a being know anything? And what sort of thoughts could it think? The intelligence of dogs, birds, and chimpanzees was only recently accepted by scientists, who now are establishing the intelligence of the octopus, watching them solve problems and deciphering the meaning of their color-changing camouflage techniques. Montgomery chronicles this growing appreciation of the octopus, but also tells a love story. By turns funny, entertaining, touching, and profound, *The Soul of an Octopus* reveals what octopuses can teach us about consciousness and the meeting of two very different minds.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I was certain I would love this book having encountered many octopuses while diving, and firmly being in the camp that they, like other living creatures, are sentient souls. We cannot know

specifically what they are thinking but lets give them credit for having thoughts and capacity for something more than simple reaction to physical stimuli. I was eager to learn more about this. The book gets two stars because I did read it in its entirety - an easy enough read - and enjoyed the occasional information tidbits; furthermore if this treatment of the topic persuades anyone out there to think anew about such creatures, then despite shortcomings, there is some value to it. However, I give it no more than two stars for two reasons:1. This was pretty thin gruel, as others have said, with respect to any new or particularly insightful information about octopus behaviors or relationships or what we might deduce about octopus intellect or emotional life from closely and rigorously observing these things. This more is a story about the author's many visits 'behind the scenes' to a series of captured aquarium octopuses, and about the aquarium staff associated with that activity. The main gist about 'soulfulness' is drawn from how these confined creatures responded to the author, and others, in ways that she interpreted to be friendship. Perhaps so, perhaps not - she offers little to support this beyond the sensation of suckers winding up her arms, and what may have just as likely been the animals' desperate attempts to find relief from such close boring confines.2. That leads to the second reason for only two stars. If as seems the case that the author and aquarium staff care so deeply for these creatures, how can they then reconcile confining - alone - in a small dark boring pickle barrel for months at a time, animals captured in young and mid-life from their wild free oceanic homes. It might just be that these octopuses rise up in their barrel prison and taste those protruding arms with their suckers because there is NOTHING ELSE TO DO other than dying of depression. This confinement seems cruel beyond imagining...indeed one of the captured octopuses does die trying to escape, and others chomp at the restraints in similar attempts. It seems we've come to some consensus that this is not the way to treat primates, why then should it be ok for marine creatures which are being highlighted in this very same book as smart, soulful, and sentient. Does not add up. One can reasonably argue the value, plusses and minuses of zoos and aquarium in general, but capturing and tightly confining smart, free, wild animals for eventual display - and losing some in this process as the price of doing business - does have implications that are an inherent yet all but unacknowledged under-theme of this book. This created a wrinkle that this reader at least just could not overcome. For a more cogent treatment of this topic, I recommend Carl Safina's 'Beyond Words, What Animals Think and Feel' or watch his excellent recent TED talk on the same topic.

I once kept an octopus in a sea water aquarium. For the week that I kept her, she spent all her time watching every move that I made. Every night even though I piled the aquarium with plywood

heaped with books and anything heavy, she would crawl out and I would find her on the rug the next morning. Thinking she was dead, I would scrape her into a dustpan and put her back in the aquarium where she would come to life -- unhappily. She had so much impact on me that by the end of the week I knew I had to put her back in the ocean. Her huge consciousness had made me feel small and stupid for trying to keep a creature that could make itself felt that way in a small aquarium. This happened in the '60's but I never forgot her and I have ever since been crazy about octopus (and cuttle fish). We have so consistently underrated the creatures we share the world with that this was a wake up call for me. For awhile, I wanted to be a marine biologist but I knew I wouldn't want to spend my time killing and cutting up living creatures to "scientifically" study them. If rats don't take over, than surely the octopus will once we are gone. Oh, yes, and I LOVED THIS BOOK and the woman who wrote it.

I would probably not have given this book a second glance except that just days before it was offered to me for review I had read *Turtle Reef*, an Australian contemporary romance novel, in which the heroine, working at a marine park, befriended an octopus. I was intrigued by the relationship and was delighted by the opportunity to learn more. *The Soul of an Octopus: A Surprising Exploration into the Wonder of Consciousness*, is written by Sy Montgomery, an author, naturalist, documentary scriptwriter, and radio commentator. It offers a very readable and rather unique blend of personal experience, scientific knowledge and philosophical opinion about what is understood, and unknown, about the nature of octopuses. I knew little about octopuses -- not even that the scientifically correct plural is not octopi, as I had always believed (it turns out you can't put a Latin ending on a word derived from Greek, such as octopus). But what I did know intrigued me. Here is an animal with venom like a snake, a beak like a parrot, and ink like an old-fashioned pen. It can weigh as much as a man and stretch as long as a car, yet it can pour its baggy, boneless body through an opening the size of an orange. It can change color and shape. It can taste with its skin. Most fascinating of all, I had read that octopuses are smart. "What Montgomery is able to show in *The Soul of an Octopus* is that octopuses are complex creatures who exhibit personality, intelligence and emotion, despite having neural systems completely alien to our own. During her time spent at the New England Aquarium she befriended several individual octopuses including Athena, who was the subject of a popular 2011 *Orion* magazine piece, "Deep Intellect" which went viral and was the inspiration for this book, Octavia, Kali and Karma. Through her study of, and interaction with, these extraordinary creatures she shares what she learns from both science and her experiences, while musing on the mystery of

the 'inner lives' of the octopus, who grow from the size of a grain of rice and live for, on average, just four short years. The Soul of an Octopus is as smart, playful, curious and surprising as the creature it features. A fascinating read I'd highly recommend.

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