

The Soul of an Octopus

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JoAnn Hackos

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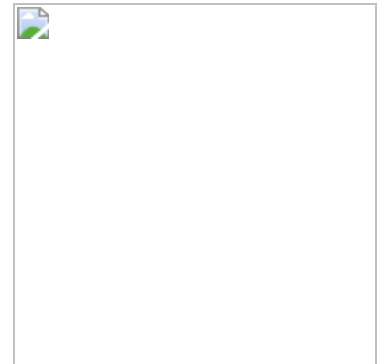
The Soul of an Octopus: A Surprising Exploration into the Wonder of Consciousness

Sy Montgomery

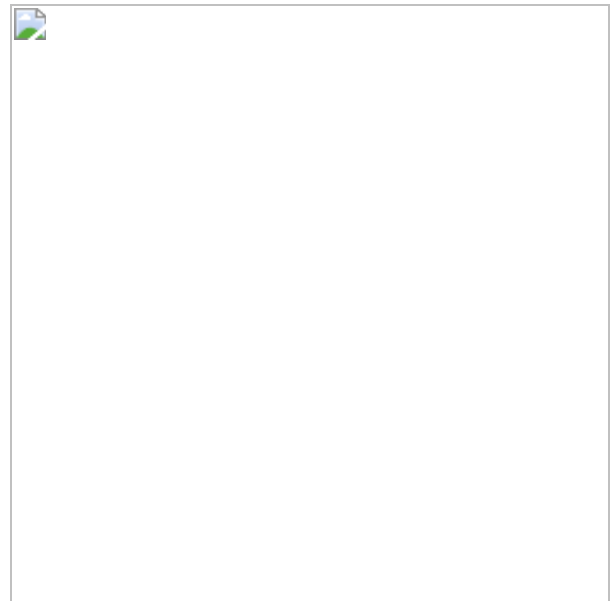
Atria Paperback, New York, 2015

Giant Pacific Octopuses live at the New England Aquarium in Boston, and author, Sy Montgomery, befriends them and learns about their extraordinary nature. Note that the plural of “octopus” is “octopuses,” not “octopi,” as we are told on the first page. The name is Greek, not Latin. We also learn that an octopus has “venom like a snake, a beak like a parrot, and ink like an old-fashioned pen.” But, more amazingly, an octopus is incredibly smart and aware of what is around it, including people.

The Soul of an Octopus is a fascinating account of Montgomery’s interactions with four giant octopuses at the aquarium. They are invertebrates, entirely unlike our human lineage. They have no bones. They breathe water. They change color instantaneously. Their eight appendages have grasping suckers and are covered with neurons, separate from their central brains. They are as “alien” as a creature might be, but they recognize individual people, enjoy games, have tempers and moods, respond to touch, and are interested in everything.



If you still need to be convinced that many creatures, not just mammals and birds, are sentient, you must read this book. You will also be convinced that octopuses are amazing, sentient creatures with vivid personalities. In fact, it might keep you from ever eating octopus again. Montgomery is so enamored that she devotes years to learning about the octopuses in the aquarium and those living free in the ocean.



You may have heard that octopuses are escape artists. They don’t much like living in tanks in an aquarium and easily become bored. Since they have no bones, octopuses like the Giant

Pacific are able to extend their bodies into the smallest crevices. One escaped from a private aquarium, pushing the lid off its tank, it slid to the floor, crossed the veranda, and headed home to the sea.

Octopuses need to be kept amused in order to thrive in captivity (and deter escape!) so aquarium staff need to create games for them to play. Sammy, an octopus in Seattle, liked to play with a baseball-size plastic ball that could be screwed together. Sammy could unscrew the ball to get at food placed inside, and then screw the two halves back together when done eating.

Octopuses in aquaria are great to study and enjoy, but Montgomery finally develops the nerve to look for them in the wild. She has great difficulty learning to scuba dive but eventually succeeds with a dive in Cozumel. She sees an octopus watching her, flashing red, turning white, then immediately becoming turquoise. She says, "I feel elation cresting into ecstasy and experience bizarre sensations."

Nearly all of the individual octopuses that Montgomery learns to love and admire at the New England Aquarium eventually die. We learn that these giant octopuses actually don't live very long, only a few years. The females die after they have laid and tended their eggs, hundreds of thousands of them. One of the females in the aquarium lays and carefully tends eggs that have unfortunately never been fertilized. Both she and the eggs eventually die.

One scene, at the Seattle Aquarium, is unforgettable—the elaborate mating dance of a male and female octopus with the goal of fertilizing her eggs. Typically, an octopus is a loner, more likely to kill another octopus than befriend one. But when Rain and Squirt are finally united, they are mesmerizing. They turn a pure white, a sign of contentment.

I strongly recommend reading *The Soul of an Octopus*, if only to gain insight into an animal that is so entirely different from us, and yet so amazing. You will learn that consciousness and intelligence exist in such creatures. They recognize and remember people, so different from them. They can even become our friends.