

## Book Review: *The Soul of an Octopus*

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Sy Montgomery's *The Soul of an Octopus* is an in-depth exploration of the something the average person may never think about – what is it like to be friends with an octopus? Octopuses are a life form that seem so foreign, so alien, that often they have been depicted as monsters in horror movies. They are so different from us that we can't even begin to understand where we might find enough common ground to be friends. However, naturalist Montgomery immerses herself completely in their world, meeting with experts, spending hours and hours behind the scenes at New England aquarium, and even learning how to scuba dive to observe these complex creatures in their natural habitat.

Through Montgomery's experiences, we learn that these creatures are incredibly complex, intelligent, and unique. Each octopus with which she interacts has its own personality and showcases its intelligence in unique ways. One is playful, another is shy, and yet another is extremely curious. Those who interact with them regularly form a close bond that seems to be reciprocated by the octopus as well. When Montgomery visits, the octopuses come to her and will usually spend time playing. However, just like humans, octopuses have different moods, and sometimes they just don't want to interact. Reading about the way in which Montgomery and each of her octopus friends get to know each other is fascinating, as it really demonstrates the abilities of the octopus.

Another interesting aspect of the experiences that Montgomery writes about is the difficulty of keeping octopuses in captivity. Due to their high level of intelligence, they get bored if left without stimulation or entertainment. Thus, aquarium employees have had to come up with

new and interesting ways to keep these intelligent aquarium inhabitants busy such as different toys and puzzles. Additionally, octopuses are able to fit through incredibly small holes and therefore are master escape artists, presenting the challenge of constructing tanks that are escape-proof. The curiosity of these animals makes them difficult pets.

The book's overarching narrative follows the way that exploring these creatures affected Montgomery's worldview and personal relationships, and this is interspersed with more scientific explanations of the octopus's consciousness. She describes the way in which her journey to befriend an octopus opens her eyes to the way science often discounts the possibility of emotions, consciousness, and intelligence in animals. We also get to hear the stories of the various friends she makes during her time immersing herself in this world. She meets a high schooler with Asperger's, a senior aquarist at the New England aquarium, and others who share her newfound love for octopuses. For many of these people, it seems that the octopus tank at the aquarium, a place so full of mystery for most of the world, is a place where they can really be themselves and feel at home.

Montgomery's prose is simple, yet it conveys the intense personal effects and reflections of her journey to understand the consciousness of an octopus. It is a great way for someone who knows little about neuroscience to get their feet wet (no pun intended) and learn the basics about this fascinating animal while also getting to read a more feel-good personal story. The author's detailed descriptions of her interactions with various octopuses are definitely rich enough to get anyone interested, and this is why *The Soul of an Octopus* would be a great read for students in middle or high school. For this reason, I have created an infographic with relevant and interesting information from the book.