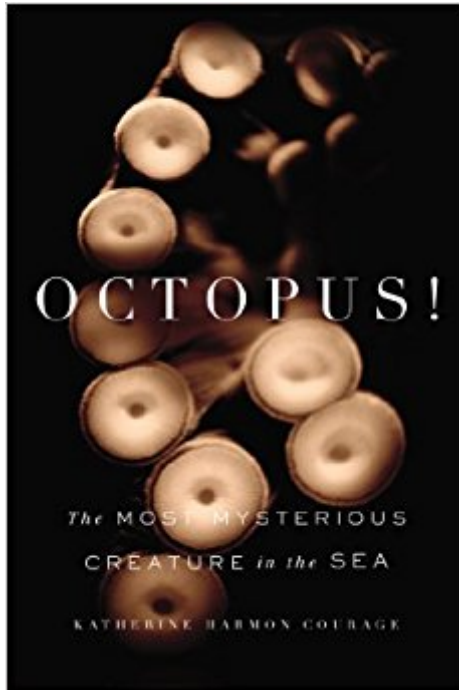


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Octopus!: The Most Mysterious Creature In The Sea



Synopsis

No one understands the octopus. With eight arms, three hearts, camouflaging skin, and a disarmingly sentient look behind its highly evolved eyes, how could it appear anything but utterly alien? Octopuses have been captivating humans for as long as we have been catching them. Many cultures have octopus-centric creation myths, art, and, of course, cuisine. For all of our ancient fascination and millions of dollars' worth of modern research, however, we still have not been able to get a firm grasp on these enigmatic creatures. Now, Katherine Harmon Courage, a veteran journalist and contributing editor for *Scientific American*, dives into the mystifying underwater world of the octopus. She reports from around the globe of her adventures in Spain, Greece, and even Brooklyn, inviting us to experience the scientific discoveries and deep cultural ties that connect us to the octopus. You'll discover: The oldest known fossilized octopus is estimated to have lived 296 million years ago—even before the first dinosaurs emerged. Government agencies are funding research labs around the world to re-create the octopus's naturally occurring camouflage techniques. About two thirds of an octopus's brain capacity is spread throughout its eight arms, meaning each one literally has a mind of its own. Octopuses have aced numerous intelligence tests, including opening childproof bottles, solving mazes, and even recognizing individual people. The octopus can change colors and textures within milliseconds to vanish against its background yet we have no evidence that it can see in color. Courage deftly interweaves personal narrative with interviews with leading octopus experts. The result is an entertaining yet scientifically grounded exploration of the octopus and its infinitely complex world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book has so many problems it isn't even funny, well it kind of is, unless you paid for this or your tax dollars paid to put it in a library. Let's get started:1. Chatty magazine-ish prose. Like a People magazine article on octopuses (yes, that is correct, there is no "i" in octopi). Words like "gazillion," "cool," and "bejesus" just don't belong in a natural science book. I cringe.2. The first two chapters and half of the Introduction deals with, I kid you not, eating octopus. 60 pages including recipes. The first chapters! We are treated to both the details of the author's peregrinations to the various restaurants and then the gourmandizing itself. Complete with the live suckers sticking to her gums! Yeah! Good book so far.3. Who is this book written for? Page 66: "The mouth is hidden away at the center of the eight arms. But be careful up there - it has a sharp beak and a scary toothed radula for drilling into hard shells. This chitin structure awkwardly positioned on the octopus's underside, at the center of all its appendages, almost evokes the strange myth of the vagina dentata. (But don't worry; because the female octopus accepts sperm from a male directly into her mantle, she keeps the chance for love bites to a minimum.)" Woo-who4. Bad Science. Page 159. "A sucker's strength depends in part on how much volume it holds." Hmmm, volume of what? Presumably water. The murk becomes inkier. "Under water, that force is limited by the weakness of the water molecule itself." What? The suction force driven by a sucker is dependent on the "weakness" of the water molecules themselves.

A caveat here...you have to have some sort of curiosity about these creatures to finish this book; while the author doesn't get too scientific, she does delve into the ever-increasing abilities of these intelligent roamers, from their changing adaptations to their delicious taste (some recipes are included, primarily traditional Greek and Italian fishing port dishes). And remember, this is an author who attended Vassar and has written for Scientific American so get ready for a Discovery-like read...but an interesting one. So to begin, yes, the octopus can change color and texture (to mimic rocks and even wavy algae) and do so in about 3/10 of a second. Keep an octopus in the dark for hours then turn on a light and the octopus will blend into the environment. Each of its arms are basically independent of its walnut-sized brain, functioning much like a series of command centers occasionally reporting to headquarters; but beyond that, each of the suckers on the arms are also independent, able to "taste" as well as grab or fold into a slit (and unlike our man made rubber suction cups, the octopus' suckers can hold or release at will and without the "pop" we so expect...robotics engineers are fascinated by this ability and are frustratingly working to figure out how this works). Their eyes have evolved much like ours...only better. They can see polarized light,

have no blind spot, can possibly see more color wave lengths (we see three, some shrimp can see twelve), and possess a horizontal slit which has camera engineers rethinking if that is indeed a better system than our current circular-fan type lens...so far, the answer might be yes.

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