

Book Review

SENSUOUS SEAS: TALES OF A MARINE BIOLOGIST. Eugene H. Kaplan. Princeton University Press, 2006. ISBN 0-691-12560-0, 288 pp.

Sensuous Seas is an unusual mixture of irreverent anecdotes and intriguing marine science. Kaplan, who is Professor of Conservation and Ecology at Hofstra University in Long Island, begins his book with the assertion “that there is no such thing as a marine biologist.” And yet, this is the profession that so many of his aspiring students claim they wish to pursue. As he points out, you may study marine zoology, or marine ichthyology, but the catchall term of “marine biologist” is very much a common name term for a range of subjects rather than an actual discipline.

Like many academics, Kaplan has been forced to tackle the difficult problem of keeping his students interested in topics which may at first seem boring. He has discovered that undergraduate minds “seething with hormone-infused thoughts” will often pay closer attention if he peppers his lectures with “a generous helping of sex.”

Kaplan has the knack of simplifying large amounts of marine biology so that it makes sense to both students and laymen alike. Discussing shark behaviour, for example, he clearly explains that the shark’s brain is similar to our own: it possess a hind-brain (the medulla), a mid-brain (the cerebellum), and a fore-brain (the cerebrum). Does this mean that sharks are intelligent rather than instinctual? Not necessarily. While the human medulla is of modest size and controls autonomic functions like breathing, the shark medulla is proportionately much larger because it is assaulted with sensory information from the shark’s lateral line and the electro-receptors in its snout. Meanwhile, the frontal lobe—where we do most of our “thinking”—is virtually absent in the shark. As Kaplan puts it, “sharks are not heavy thinkers.”

Kaplan is happy to stray from the larger charismatic sea creatures to attract an audience. He reveals that shellfish (Arthropods) are severely inhibited by their rigid exoskeleton. I knew that they moult, but I did not know that they burst free from their shells because they secrete an anti-diuretic hormone that prevents them from peeing. When the time is right, their bodies swell with

retained fluid and literally crack open their suits of armour.

There is a steadily prurient strain running through this book—students are nubile, ancient Mayans use stingray barbs to puncture their penises in religious rituals, and there is a chapter entitled “A Peek into the Anus of a Sea Cucumber,” etc, etc. Far more appealing are the 150 line drawings by Sandy Rivkin and Susan Kaplan, which beautifully depict everything from horseshoe crabs to holothurians, and nudibranchs to nurse sharks. A comprehensive index is provided as well as a good glossary that will allow the reader to tell their claspers from their cloaca.

Professor Kaplan sometimes tries too hard and might be more amusing if he didn’t try to always make his anecdotes into jokes. I found this a trifle wearing. Even so, the reader who perseveres will discover that *Sensuous Seas* contains a wealth of stimulating and digestible information. This book is also beautifully produced and will be an attractive asset to any marine library.

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