

ZOOLOGY

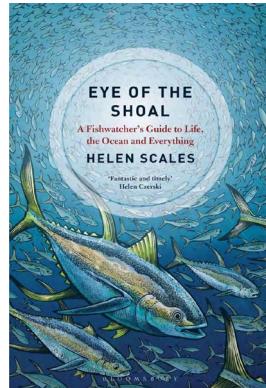
Eye of the Shoal

By Helen Scales. 2018. Bloomsbury Sigma. 320 pages, 36.00 CAD, Cloth.

This book is an excellent example of a highly qualified professional researcher distilling the most interesting parts of her subject to create a coherent, enthralling work. Like her previous book, *Spirals in Time: The Secret Life and Curious Afterlife of Seashells* (Scales 2015), *Eye of the Shoal* is a ‘deep dive’ into the history, ecology, and complexity of life in the watery realm. Of the two, *Eye of the Shoal* is by far my favourite.

The 10 chapters cover the past and present representatives and ecologies of “fish”, that nebulous group of (usually) water dwellers who (often) have scales and display an impressive diversity of colour, behaviours, diet, habitat, and talents. Although at least a passing interest in fish or aquatic ecosystems will probably help, this book is written for a broad audience and requires no specialized knowledge to enjoy. Latin names are only given if their translations are relevant or interesting, and the history of fish research is treated with humour and based in the quirky personalities of those who were involved in it.

The author is trained as a marine biologist and her field experience in marine ecosystems combines with a presenter’s sense of organization to create an eminently readable book. Unlike some works in the genre, Scales lets the subject speak for itself. Yes, you may come away caring more about the health and preservation of earth’s fishy residents, but it will be because the author showed you the wonders of that world, not simply because she told you to care.



The text is organized in sections, many one or two pages long, covering a specific topic. This structure makes for an excellent sporadic read (short reading over a cup of hot caffeinated liquid of your choice, or before bed), but there is a well-crafted, logical flow to each section and the text does not feel fragmented, disorganized, or repetitive.

Helen Scales writes with many excellent habits that are the hallmark of great general science writing, including humanizing science. Where appropriate and without the impression of haphazard name dropping, discoveries and studies are contextualized with the location and name of the researchers leading them. This allows interested readers to look up these projects and adds a face and context to facts and discoveries.

This book feels like a passion project in the best possible way and includes several delightful touches that put it a step above other entries in the genre. Each chapter begins with a full-page drawing by scientific illustrator Aaron John Gregory capturing the themes and main species of the chapter, each of which is annotated in the back material with a species list. Continuing the attention to detail, sections within a chapter are separated by a small fish, with each chapter having its own dedicated icon. A final touch: each chapter ends with a short traditional fish myth, its origin, and its own thematic illustration.

The author’s easy to follow, narrative prose combined with her contagious enthusiasm make *Eye of the Shoal* one of the most enjoyable popular science books that I have read.

Literature Cited

Scales, H. 2015. *Spirals in Time: The Secret Life and Curious Afterlife of Seashells*. Bloomsbury Sigma, New York, New York, USA.

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