

Reading Group Guide

Introduction

In *THE SOUL OF AN OCTOPUS*, Sy Montgomery recounts her friendships with several octopuses, complex, spirited creatures who make remarkable connections with humans. She explores their almost alien intelligence, one that is of the Earth but so different from our mammalian and human consciousness that it might not be out of place on another world. Practicing true immersion journalism, Montgomery journeys from the New England Aquarium to the reefs of French Polynesia and the Gulf of Mexico in pursuit of these wild, solitary, predatory mollusks. It's an underwater adventure story but also the story of relationships that are forged within the community of people that arises from their mutual care for the octopuses. Each octopus turns out to have a distinct personality, and each becomes the central character in her own drama, like a character in a Jane Austen novel. By turns, the story is funny, entertaining, touching, and profound, as it reveals what octopuses can teach us about the meeting of two very different minds.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Sy Montgomery writes about her scientific and emotional attraction to octopuses. Did anything surprise you in her poetic, sensuous language about the octopuses? Does she make clear what science cannot explain about octopuses?
2. How does Montgomery describe the different personalities that the octopuses have? Do you agree with her assessments of their attributes? Can you relate to the emotions that she interprets them to have?
3. Otherness is a central issue in the book – the otherness of the octopus and its dramatically different nature from other mollusks as well as the differences between cephalopods and people. How does Montgomery use the otherness of the octopus to show the ways the human characters in the story can feel that they don't fit in or belong? How do the human characters with their varied backgrounds find ways of coming together and belonging?
4. The similarities between octopuses and humans are another theme. What are the similarities that Montgomery sees? Would you share her point of view or do you see the differences more than the similarities?
4. What does Montgomery reveal about what constitutes consciousness, in humans and animals? Does she show that octopuses have consciousness?
5. Does Montgomery address and answer the question of whether an octopus can have a soul? If so, how does she show the animal has a soul? If not, does she explain that the animal does not have a soul?
6. What is anthropomorphism? Given what science knows now about the consciousness of animals, is anthropomorphism a problem? If so, why?
7. What are the issues involved in collecting wild octopuses from the oceans and studying them in an aquarium?

8. Many cultures consume octopuses as food. Do you see any issues regarding eating octopuses?

9. For a book that imparts a wealth of scientific information about octopuses, Montgomery uses humor and also a deep sense of feeling and respect for the octopus and all of nature. How does Montgomery convey the major conservation issues, such as global warming and the health of the oceans, in the stories she tells in this book about people and animals?

10. Has your view of human consciousness changed after reading this account? Has your view of animal consciousness changed? What information specifically influenced you?

11. Has your perspective on nature and on octopuses been influenced by this book? What views has the book reinforced and what views has it changed your mind about?

Enhance your understanding of THE SOUL OF AN OCTOPUS:

1. Watch videos of octopuses. [There are several listed in the book's Bibliography.]
2. Describe times when you've undergone the life passages that the octopus goes through in only two years. What life challenges did you have to face that the octopuses in the aquariums also face? What life challenges have you had to face that the human community that grew up around the octopuses also had to face: your own illness or that of a loved one, difference and desire to fit in, loss and loneliness, the birth and growth of friendships, ways to connect with others through play? What did you learn about your experience and how did it affect your relationships with others?
3. If you had to write a short essay about one of the most difficult parts of your life, what part would you choose to write about? What would be the obstacles to writing about this?