

My Watery Self: Memoirs of a Marine Scientist

By Stephen Spotte. 2015. Three Rooms Press, New York Publishers Group West / Perseus, 1700 Fourth Street, Berkeley, CA, USA, 94710. 164 pages, 15.95 USD, Paper.

Stephen Spotte's book, *My Watery Self*, traces a fascinating and, at times, hilarious trail through a life that began in West Virginia coal camps, drifted through reckless bohemian times of counter-cultural indulgence in Beach Haven, New Jersey, among other places, and led to a career as a highly-respected marine biologist. As the book jacket indicates "Spotte's singular voice offers a wet and occasionally very weird perspective on the world. The stories he shares – such as his stint as curator of the New York Aquarium at Coney Island at the tail end of the hippie era – are compelling and thoroughly enjoyable as he elevates the people and situations he encounters to mythical levels, blending empirical observation with literary prose."

Amazon.com had a slightly longer review of Spotte's newest book, and I find it worthwhile to include the non-redundant information here: "Together, these stories form a view not just of one man's life, but that of a generation that often refused to take a direct path to the workplace, insisting instead on a winding unveiling of true self-realization, to achieve previously-unimagined outcomes. For Spotte, the key was water: His years of beach living led to a self-initiated study of literature and the sea. He eventually returned to college and received his training as a marine biologist, and discovered, through his singular voice, a wet and occasionally very weird perspective on the world."

This book might be the most random and non sequitur book I have read, as some of the stories are so outlandish that they are hard to believe, and "any chronology is unavoidably artifactual in this sense...since memories are drifted across my consciousness as fragments often displaced out of time" (p. 137). As indicated above, the book starts in West Virginia during Spotte's adolescence with characters such as Earl and Mr. Howard and his boys, and includes fist fights over possession of a fish (a Redhorse to be exact). The next chapter then includes a nameless drunk circus roustabout (i.e., an unskilled, casual laborer) with scrawny chicken hands who watched his girlfriend die after falling from the tightrope. Spotte (p. 24) includes a great passage on how strange it is that certain stories can become a part of you that you don't forget even if you weren't there to witness the event. After that, we move to Spotte's young adulthood and his experiences with lots of alcohol and drugs, and his ability to make

homemade LSD – an interest in chemistry that would later help him with his chosen profession as a marine scientist. Many of the anecdotes recalled in this book from Chapter 3 on include alcohol, drugs, sex (including prostitutes), and lots of foul language.

While these stories might sound bizarre for a well known marine biologist with 18 books to his credit (three of them fiction) and over 80 scientific papers on marine biology, ocean chemistry and engineering, and aquaculture, they are all true according to him (see p. 136), which he confirmed in an email exchange with myself as I wrote this review! It might be a stretch to suggest given the long time-frame of these stories (from 50+ years ago), but a few pictures interspersed in the book would've been great, such as the 1962 picture that he recalled of him and two friends (p. 35), presumably when they weren't drunk or on drugs (ha-ha). The interesting thing about the book, however, was that each section, no matter how peculiar, tied into the author's love of water, whether it be ocean or freshwater, and that this random path led him to where he is today.

A few chapters center on his jobs at various aquariums including Aquarium of Niagara Falls, New York Aquarium, and Mystic Aquarium. For those jobs, he traveled to many places, such as the coasts of Rhode Island and New Jersey to try and capture sharks to bring back and exhibit at the aquariums. The methods, including killing sharks that they didn't want for the aquariums, would irk many conservationists today, but we are talking about the 1960s for many of these stories. At one point in his adventures, he falls overboard (p. 53-55) during a violent storm and has to use his pants as a makeshift life jacket to avoid drowning. Spotte was rescued after spending multiple hours in the water (luckily he didn't appear to be drinking at the time!). Another incident, in a coral reef off Key Largo, Florida, involved an underwater acid (LSD) trip in the middle of the night to make a major life decision regarding selecting a new job (you have to read p. 67 to find out what that was).

The latter half of the book focuses on his experiences capturing whales for the various aquariums he worked

at. One instance involves three local thieves helping him tube feed a baby pygmy sperm whale at night in Brooklyn, New York. I laughed out loud envisioning Spotte (p. 79) yelling to one of them “Hey you. (*Expletive*). Hand me the bucket... What the (*expletive*) is wrong with you, you deaf?” After a very non sequitur chapter on Freddy the con man and supposed automobile magazine reviewer, we jump to tales of Spotte visiting the Arctic to capture belugas, which he calls belukhas to distinguish them from a fish with the same name inhabiting Russian waters. Spotte took three trips to the mouth of the Churchill River entering into Hudson Bay to try and bring some whales back to the aquarium he was working for at the time. Some of his travels were before and others after the passage of the *Marine Mammal Protection Act* (1972), which created much more bureaucratic paperwork. Spotte notes that these excursions for capturing whales would never occur in today’s world. But the side events, with lots of drinking and interactions with the local Inuits were, as usual, very Spotte-like. His scary trip to Newfoundland (with the purpose of capturing dolphins for exhibit), in which the plane he was on “lifted off with the grace of a crippled goose” (p. 121) nearly ended his life when bad weather forced an emergency landing with first responders literally on the runway expecting the plane to crash upon impact. Spotte and the crews’ survival, of course, meant celebrating which involved additional quantities of beer.

I thought the book was very funny and an overall page turner. Others might be turned off by the swearing, drugs, alcohol, discussions of sex, and the seemingly randomness of this book, but I found myself continually going to a new chapter without pause. I do wish the book had a bit more discussion on how these events

helped shape who Spotte is today. It also could have fleshed out how all of these events helped him secure the jobs that he eventually received. Most chapters were about stories when he was here or there, but not really about the process of how Steve got there. I say that because I am always interested, as a biologist myself, on the paths people take and how they end up where they are. However, a nice Introduction by Dr. Robin Overstreet helps provide some perspective to Stephen Spotte both as a biologist and as a person, which gives the reader a better understanding of the author. Also, the last chapter does justify the randomness, i.e., the format, of the book where he discusses time and reality noting (p. 136) “how reliable is memory when reality itself is a construct?” In that last section, he also explains his background from West Virginia where the majority of people view nature as utilitarian and animals needed a purpose to justify their existence (p. 137-140), and how events should be interpreted in the context of history and culture (p. 140) such as his past participation in live-capturing whales and shooting seals.

However, the very end of the book is nicely summarized when Spotte tries to make some sense of his past, saying (p. 141) “To me the emergent world is a noisy, unpleasant place overflowing with deceit. I mistrusted it as a child and still do. Underwater, the silence lets me speak inside myself, and I can hear secret things.” For those that want to read an eccentric, funny, and ridiculous account of a marine biologist, try *My Watery Self!* It is relatively short and easy to read but includes enough details and narrative to make it well worth the investment.

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