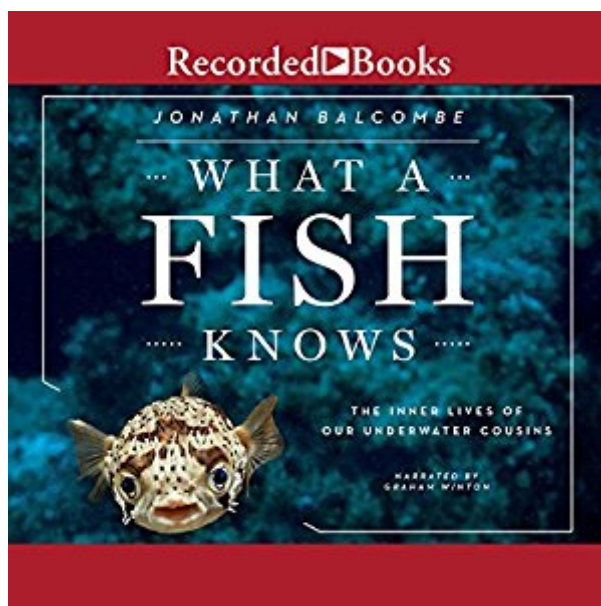


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# What A Fish Knows: The Inner Lives Of Our Underwater Cousins



## Synopsis

An underwater exploration that overturns myths about fishes and reveals their complex lives, from tool use to social behavior. There are more than 30,000 species of fish - more than all mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians combined. But for all their breathtaking diversity and beauty, we rarely consider how fish think, feel, and behave. In *What a Fish Knows*, ethologist Jonathan Balcombe takes us under the sea and to the other side of the aquarium glass to reveal what fishes can do, how they do it, and why. Introducing the latest revelations in animal behavior and biology, Balcombe upends our assumptions about fish, exposing them not as unfeeling, dead-eyed creatures but as sentient, aware, social - even Machiavellian. They conduct elaborate courtship rituals and develop lifelong bonds with shoalmates. They also plan, hunt cooperatively, use tools, punish wrongdoers, curry favor, and deceive one another. Fish possess sophisticated senses that rival our own. The reef-dwelling damselfish identifies its brethren by face patterns visible only in ultraviolet light, and some species communicate among themselves in murky waters using electric signals. Highlighting these breakthrough discoveries and others from his own encounters with fish, Balcombe inspires a more enlightened appraisal of marine life. An illuminating journey into the world of underwater science, *What a Fish Knows* will forever change your view of our aquatic cousins - your pet goldfish included.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Who would have thought that reading about fishes could be so entertaining and educational? After all, I was taught to believe that a fish is a fish is a fish is a fish, *fish* just automatons

peddling water waiting for food and sex, sex and food, food and sex, until they become food to other fishes. Other than different colors and shapes, their lives were unremarkable and just plain boring. I was so wrong. In opening Jonathan Balcombe's book, I fell into "Alice in Wonderland" waters where the characters come to life, - but real life, in an underwater civilization that I didn't know existed. I set aside all I thought I knew about fishes after reading Chapter 1 The Misunderstood Fish - which challenged the teachings on which I had based my bias about them. Balcombe first leads through the basics, the understanding of fishes' senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch and expanded to added senses of magnetic fields, electricity, and pressure. Then his really challenging work begins: pain, consciousness, awareness, stress, and joy followed by intelligence, tools, planning, and winning competitions with primates. Not one to hold back, Balcombe next leads us to the cultural pages of Fishdom with social contracts and societal cooperation, democracy, and peacekeeping. Who knew? I could relax my poor brain a bit when he finally ventured into the sex lives and parenting styles of fishes. (Gone was my long held belief that all female fishes let go of their eggs to wherever the waters took them.) Before reading the last chapter, I braced myself for a round of proselytizing paragraphs on what is wrong about harming fish leading to a condemnation. But no, as a consummate scientist and brilliant writer, Balcombe simply lays out the facts clearly and calmly of how fishes and fish populations are suffering and how current human actions are irreparably damaging Earth's underwater world. He has finished walking us through the science. Now he leaves it up to us to decide what to do.

If you like fish, if you like watching them in a fishbowl or in an aquarium or when snorkeling or scuba diving; if you like how beautiful some of them are, how weird others are, how strange their behaviors can get; you'll like this book. You'll like the breadth of his research, the lightness of his humor, his deep appreciation for fish (or "fishes" as he calls them, to help us understand their plurality and variety). You'll like how he makes you think about them in new ways: their emotions, their senses, their consciousness, their life in community. I like reading about play and games and imagination and playfulness and all things related. And when I'm not reading about those things, I like reading science fiction. I especially like those "first contact" stories when the heroes are trying to figure out how to communicate with an alien mind. It's a wonderful exercise of the imagination, just to imagine someone who thinks differently than you. It's also a wonderful exercise in compassion, and understanding children and your significant others and your boss.

Reading Dr. Balcombe's book is like that. Like reading science fiction. Only it's science non-fiction. You'll be amazed at how much mind is present in the two-thirds of the world we've never considered in any other light than that of food and perhaps beauty. I'd advise, however, that you skip the last chapter. If, on the other hand, you like fish because they taste good, or because catching them is good sport, and you don't want to think about the lives, the uniqueness of the beings that you are taking away from their communities and habitats, you should still read this book. It will give you a different perspective on things. It will help you appreciate the cost of the gift of their lives that you are accepting. But you still shouldn't read the last chapter. You might flip the book open to, for example, page 84 of the chapter that begins with the question "do fish feel pain?" where Dr. Balcombe writes: "Fishes show the hallmarks of pain both physiologically and behaviorally. They possess the specialized nerve fibers that mammals and birds use to detect noxious stimuli. They can learn to avoid electric shocks and anglers' hooks. They are cognitively impaired when subjected to nasty insults to their bodies, and this impairment can be reversed if they are provided with pain relief." "Yes, but do they have fun? And so, we turn to page 97." "This one (fish) seemed to have a destination. She would swim in one direction along the bottom (of the aquarium), then, on reaching the end of the tank, she swerved upward and swam to the surface. Arriving there, she was met by the current of the water pump, pushing the little traveler like a rocket back to the other side. There, she descended back to the bottom and started her circuit all over." "Finally, yes, if you're the kind of person who wants to save lives, conscious lives, who wants to help create a better balance between our ever-growing, all-consuming appetite and the dwindling abundance of ways to satisfy those appetites; if you want to get angry, yes, by all means, read the whole book, every last word.

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