



To Touch a Wild Dolphin: A Journey of Discovery with the Sea's Most Intelligent Creatures

Rachel Smolker

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In 1982, Rachel Smolker traveled to Monkey Mia, a remote spot in western Australia where she'd heard wild dolphins regularly interact with people. She had no intention of staying long; she simply wanted to see if the rumors were true. That initial trip changed Smolker's life; it commenced a fifteen-year scientific obsession that has culminated in this fascinating scientific adventure story—the first-ever intimate account of dolphin life in the wild.

To Touch A Wild Dolphin is a seminal work that radically alters our fundamental understanding of these enigmatic creatures. Learning to identify scores of dolphins by their dorsal fin, Smolker and her team of scientists were able to conduct close and consistent studies that revealed the dolphin to be even more intelligent than we'd previously suspected. And while they were every bit as playful as we've known them to be, they also proved to have a dark and alarmingly violent side. But more than just a document on dolphins, this book is a touchingly personal look at the life of a scientist, at the rigors and sacrifices but also the wonders and joys of unending days in the field. Written with prose poetic and pristine, this book is nothing short of a landmark.

To Touch a Wild Dolphin: A Journey of Discovery with the Sea's Most Intelligent Creatures Details

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Danae says

I enjoyed this book. I found it very interesting. I was only slightly bored a couple of times when her writing was more science-y. I'll admit i teared up at one point when she painted an adorable picture of an elderly man leading his eager, blind wife to touch a dolphin. It has its happy moments, its sad moments, its frustrating moments... It's quite good.

I got it from my library for, like, 10 cents and i'd say it was definitely worth the dime. Haha.

Meredith says

This was such an amazing read! Smolker presented the results of years of research in an informative and surprisingly refreshing way. Her story was so creative and interesting that even those who were not previously interested in dolphins can enjoy it. To be honest, before reading this book I myself liked dolphins but didn't know much about them. Now, I feel I can appreciate them for everything good and not-so-good about them. Anyone who is interested in dolphins, marine life, animals, or biology will love this interesting story. It really opened my eyes to the lives of our animal counterparts. There are some things about a life in the field, researching these magnificent animals, that are not all that rewarding. But then there are moments like those expressed in this read that simply take your breath away. This book reminded me what it feels like to work with animals in a way that was eye-opening, informing, and creative.

Annabelle Peterson says

A really good book following the lives of many dolphins in Monkey Mia, on the coast of Australia. This is an amazing book if you are in love with dolphins! It is a really good book and I highly recommend it.

Jackie says

Bought this at an airport gift shop on a whim. Could not put it down. Fascinating, and as a person who works with animals daily, rings very true.

T.H. Waters says

I really loved this book and was sad when it ended - Definitely like saying goodbye to a friend. "To Touch a Wild Dolphin" chronicles the first-ever intimate account of dolphin life in the wild. The author, Rachel Smolker, spent 15 years studying wild dolphins in western Australia, and this gem of a book distills her many experiences into an easy read that straps you into her boat and whisks you alongside the swimming

herds of dolphins. This book is so well-written, especially considering that it's rendered from a scientific perspective. Its beauty lies not in numbers and measurements, but in the keen insight Ms. Smolker provides from being up close and personal with one of the sea's most magnificent creatures, and highlights how similar they are to human beings... how their strong & complicated social bonds are formed, how they forage for food, compete for sexual dominance, raise their young and navigate dangerous waters just to stay alive for another day.

One of my favorite quotes from this book: "So what is it that we see when we look into the eye of a dolphin and are struck immediately and powerfully with a sense that theirs is an intelligence of extraordinary measure? We see an eye that appraises, reserves judgment, watches intently, weighs and considers, infers and understands".

This book made me want to quit my day job and camp on the shores of Shark Bay just for the chance to interact with the dolphins there and observe them with my own eyes. But, the reality of the work Ms. Smolker has done must surely have been fraught with many struggles... camping your life away, never having roots, sitting in the hot sun for hours on end with not much to show for it, never knowing where your next source of funding will come from, having to live in close quarters with other researchers who you may or may not enjoy, and essentially living the life of a vagabond. Ms. Smolker has paid a high price for being one of the first researchers to document the extraordinary lives of dolphins. Her reward has been immense, yet I have to believe that, so too has been her sacrifice. In this book, she concentrates on the former, sharing the shining rewards of her quest, and we are all the better for it. Thank you, Ms. Smolker, for such a richly written book.

Tippy Jackson says

Kind of everywhere. There are a few random completely awesome tidbits, like the dolphins using lionfish as weapons (I'm stealing this for my blog.) Not scientific AT ALL. (What do you expect with a title like this though?) When she discusses conservation, she doesn't mention anything one can do to help (like purchasing only sustainable seafood), but I'm glad she brought it up. For 15 years worth of research, I definitely expected more. Mildly entertaining for animal-loving folk and an easy read for anyone interested. Dolphins are definitely waiting for climate change to raise the sea level so they can take over the world. I did not realize how few dolphins survive to adulthood.

BTW, for some shameless self-promotion, if you like reading about animals, check out my blog on wildlife at <http://backyardzoologist.wordpress.com/>

M.L. Sparrow says

For more reviews, or to check out my favourite quotes from this book, go to my blog at <http://mlsparrow.wix.com/mlsparrow>

3.5

This is the second time I've tried to read this book. The first time I didn't get more than a few chapters in. This time I finished it but I have to say there were times when I was forcing myself to read it. It seems to plod along. There are bits that are really interesting and I liked that this is a scientist who worked with wild dolphins rather than captive ones.

I enjoyed learning about the dolphins at Monkey Mia and their different personalities and, as I said, I also liked learning about wild dolphins rather than captive ones, since you can't say that the behaviour of captive dolphins is normal. Also, the pictures in the book are gorgeous!

I did have to keep reminding myself though that this book is relatively old. It was published in 2001 but most of the research is from the late 1900's, mostly before I was born. I love the idea of Monkey Mia, but was saddened to hear it was turned into a tourist resort and god knows what it's like now.

However, the thing for me was the pacing. Beginning and end it was so slow, though it was faster paced in the middle. Also, the layout confused me a little since in one chapter it would mention that a certain dolphin died, then in the next it would be talking as if it were alive. I understand that it's laid out that way for a reason and it does make sense, but at times it confused me.

Although relatively old, all in all this is a good book to learn about wild dolphins if you can persevere through the first few chapters.

Amanda C. Blackburn says

It's not very often that a nonfiction reads as smoothly as a fiction, but Smolker accomplishes this beautifully. I could read this over and over and never get tired of it. A great read for biologists and non-geeks alike.

Rose says

An interesting read, and one of the better of several books I've read recently on cetaceans (dolphins, porpoises, and whales). Rachel Smolker writes about studying dolphins as a graduate student, and what sets her apart is that she maintains enthusiasm while taking a much more scientific approach than the other popular authors in this area. Many of the "studies" out there have a definite romantic, not-so-scientific bent regarding dolphins. Smolker is cautious of assumptions about dolphin behavior, and discusses her research in a matter-of-fact way. The writing is decent, the research method is decent, and the subject is fascinating.

Chris says

Cons:

The book was a little slow in most parts and not in the style I was expecting. It's more a personal narrative that almost reads like a journal. Maybe I should have been expecting that? It's been said previously by other reviewers that the book is supposed to be for those without scientific background, which is fine. But for me it was almost too basic.

Pros:

That being said, I like the fact that the author highlights how much uncertainty there is in their observations, as any science is imperfect (especially animal behavior).

Also, I was pleasantly surprised at how wrong my conceptions had been about dolphins and their community interactions. I always envisioned one big happy pod of dolphins swimming and coexisting in harmony. The

book clearly paints a different picture.

I believe her observations were performed in the correct manner, but I would have been interested to hear a lot more about the methods they chose, why they chose them, etc.

Jennifer says

I love dolphins and I especially love books about them created by skilled writers. Rachel Smolker has written a truly beautiful book filled with fascinating dolphin stories and vivid, evocative descriptions of Shark Bay, Australia. She has also helped me understand, respect, and love dolphins all the more.

Leanne says

As a dolphin, whale, and everything-in-the-ocean enthusiast, I loved most of this book. It was very informative and - at times - it was a really emotional and provocative read. There was one anecdote in particular about a blind woman interacting with a wild dolphin for the first time, and it was absolutely heart-breaking and I may have cried (a little).

I wish she had followed the dolphins a bit more closely. Readers are familiar with some names and personalities but the chapters follow language, mother/daughter relations, male alliances, etc. more so than individual dolphins. As an avid reader and aspiring writer, I would have loved to see the dolphins characterized a bit more. It would have been fascinating to see individual dolphins more central to the overall scheme of things.

All in all, I'd recommend it to anyone who genuinely wants to learn more about dolphins. They're spell-binding, beautiful, intelligent creatures!

Sarah says

unfocused but enjoyable. not nearly as scientific as i would have expected from a woman who dedicated much of her professional life to the study of wild dolphins. her answer to everything is, "we could study dolphins for hundreds of years and never know the answer to that question!" so, not that satisfying for someone who likes answers. a nice thing to read on board a cruise with my new elderly friends.

Louise says

To Touch A Wild Dolphin is an attention grabbing adventure story about a scientist named Rachel Smolker who traveled to a place in western Australia called Monkey Mia to observe dolphins. However, these dolphins were not just any dolphins. These dolphins were wild, and she heard some had gotten so comfortable with humans that they could be fed by hand. So, Rachel went to see if the rumors about this place and the dolphins that inhabit it were true. Little did she know that trip to Monkey Mia would change her whole life. After spending her first night at Monkey Mia, she said "The landscape was so beautifully

strange, I felt as if I had woken up on another planet altogether.” (Smolker 24) This quote shows how amazingly different this world is from hers back home in Vermont.

Once Rachel arrived at Monkey Mia she immediately knew she made the right choice. The water was teeming with dolphins, and the people that regularly visited the campgrounds welcomed Rachel and the rest of her crew with open arms. She was drawn to this place -- there was something compelling her to stay with these dolphins, putting her life at home on pause. Thus began her fifteen-year long scientific obsession with these beautiful creatures and everything there is to know about them. (Especially in observing the life of Holeyfin, a dolphin every visitor at Monkey Mia came to love.)

The story follows Rachel taking tests, notes, and collecting enough data to fill a book she takes back home to Vermont. She learned the only way to observe dolphins is in their home, where they belong. No scientist had gotten the opportunity to experience what it's like to live with these dolphins. That was something that I could definitely tell that she was thankful for throughout the course of this book.

If there was one person who I'd recommend this book to, it would be my dad. Ever since I was little, he has told me how amazing dolphins are, and why we should do our best to protect them. Also, as soon as he picked this book up, he was intrigued. Though the book eventually grabbed my attention, it was slow to get into because it's a nonfiction science book -- there's not a lot of action and conflict. However, as the uniqueness of the story sinks in, the book opens up and allows the reader to experience a world that they never even knew existed.

Tatjana says

This book is the personal experience of a biologist. It's not a new age spirituality kind of book (yay!). I enjoyed it. It wasn't exceptional, but I enjoyed it. The reading level is about high school, so it's accessible for most readers.

I checked it out from the library. I'm glad I did since it was such a quick read.

Enjoy!
