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Spirals In Time: The Secret Life And Curious Afterlife Of Seashells (Bloomsbury Sigma)



Synopsis

Seashells, stretching from the deep past into the present day, are touchstones leading into fascinating realms of the natural world and cutting-edge science. Members of the phylum Mollusca are among the most ancient animals on the planet. Their shells provide homes for other animals, and across the ages, people have used shells not only as trinkets but also as a form of money, and as powerful symbols of sex and death, prestige and war. The science and natural history of shells are woven into a compelling narrative, revealing their cultural importance and the ways they have been used by humans over the millennia. (Seashells have even been tapped as a source of mind-bending drugs.) Marine biologist Helen Scales shows how seashells have been sculpted by the fundamental rules of mathematics and evolution; how they gave us color, gems, food, and new medicines. After surviving multiple mass extinctions millions of years ago, molluscs and their shells still face an onslaught of anthropogenic challenges, including climate change and corrosive oceans. But rather than dwelling on all that is lost, Scales emphasizes that seashells offer an accessible way to reconnect people with nature, helping to bridge the gap between ourselves and the living world. *Spirals in Time: The Secret Life and Curious Afterlife of Seashells* shows why nature matters, and reveals the hidden wonders that you can hold in the palm of your hand.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“Marine biologist Helen Scales sees a vast and complicated universe inside a shell . . . [A]

wide-ranging natural history . . . surprising and shocking. [Washington Post](#) “Helen Scales delivers accessible answers . . . It’s a history and catalog not just of what those little animals do, but what humans do with them . . . riveting. [The Seattle Times](#) “Scales demonstrates her encyclopedic knowledge . . . an enchanting, accessible tour of the seashell and its place and purpose within the natural world. [Kirkus Reviews](#) “Scales . . . brings a marine biologist’s eye and aficionado’s heart to these musings on seashells . . . [her] eclectic approach to this ancient bridge between the human and natural worlds conveys her curiosity and appreciation. [Publishers Weekly](#) “Helen Scales, a marine biologist-turned-science writer, makes an impassioned and convincing case . . . insights, and [Scales’s] enthusiasm for them, fill every page of this book. [The Economist](#) “Carefully researched and entertaining throughout . . . relentlessly interesting. [Science Magazine](#) “With the soul of a poet and a talent for finding the most intriguing trivia about familiar seaside sights, marine biologist Scales turns the mundane into the magical. [Discover Magazine](#)

Helen Scales is a marine biologist who has tagged sharks in California and studied the diverse fish that live on coral reefs in the South Pacific. She is a freelance researcher and science reporter, and is a long-standing member of the award-winning science communication collective, The Naked Scientists, based at the University of Cambridge. Scales is the author of *Poseidon’s Steed: The Story of Seahorses, from Myth to Reality*, and lives in Cambridge, England.

If you know anything about hermit crabs you probably know that they live in empty snail shells that they wear to protect their tender parts, and you may know that eventually they outgrow the shell that they are living in and have to look for a bigger one. If a hermit crab who is looking for a new home finds an empty shell, explores it and finds that it is too big, he does not just sigh and head on down the line, he sits down and waits. Other hermit crabs will take notice of the situation, come over and have a look at the empty shell, and all interested crabs will then form a line in size order, biggest nearest the empty shell. Eventually a hermit crab will come along, find that the empty shell is a perfect fit, abandon the shell he came in, and move in. The first crab in line will move into the shell he just abandoned, the next crab will move into the shell that one leaves behind, and so-on down the line. Every crab in line gets a perfectly-fitting new home. This is the first thing I learned when I opened *Spirals in Time* at random and read a page or two, to see if it was a book I would be interested in reading. If you are looking for a typical seashell book, filled with masterful color

photographs of intricately-patterned shells, this is most definitely not the book for you. If you are enough of a naturalist to be interested in learning that the intricate shell patterns may have served as a memory-aide to the shell maker, helping him construct his shell in good order, or in learning that the rasping teeth of the limpet are made of an iron compound that is the hardest biological material known, or in finding out that the marine snail called the giant triton eats tire-sized, poisonous, coral-reef-destroying crown of thorns starfish, then you will probably enjoy reading *Spirals in Time*. Author Helen Scales says just enough about each of the many topics in the book to spark curiosity, and if you have as much curiosity as I do you will find yourself checking google to learn more, and to look at pictures of the pretty shells. But, with so many topics covered, the reader may find interest waxing and waning. I, for instance, was intrigued when learning about some of the details of what is known or suspected about the evolution of mollusks (spell check insists on "mollusk" while google seems to be just as set on "mollusc") but found myself much less interested in the details of commercial shellfish farming.

This book is full of fascinating facts, enough to make you want to go to the beach right now. But it is also a bad-news bringer, the grim discussion about the probable future of the shelled creatures that may or may not survive or adapt to higher ocean acidity.

As all great books it talks about the 500 million years of development and makes it seem real. It is a story about evolution and how million of years of experimentation creates way more than you could expect from a mollusk.

An entertaining and enlightening look at our mollusk friends I will never look at a clam the same way again

Excellent! Must read if you have any curiosity or attraction to sea shells.

Brilliant. Studied. Perfectly written.

Good book, but I expected more pictures.

Spirals in Time: The Secret Life and Curious Afterlife of Seashells by Helen Scales is a very highly

recommended, fascinating nonfiction book about conchology, and, honestly, who doesn't appreciate seashells? (Just a quick glance through my home makes it clearly evident that I do.) "Members of the phylum Mollusca are among the most ancient animals on the planet. Their shells provide homes for other animals, and across the ages, people have used shells not only as trinkets but also as a form of money, and as powerful symbols of sex and death, prestige and war."Spirals in Time is not only interesting and entertaining, it is also a thoroughly engaging look at the history, biology and the scientists (and mathematicians) who study seashells, primarily mollusks. The information is presented through stories and personal experience. As author Helen Scales writes in her introduction: "This book is made up of my choice of shell stories, ones that together paint a picture of a remarkable company of animals along with some of the more offbeat, forgotten and little-known tales of how those shells have made their way into the human world."Scales is a wonderful story teller. Her sound science and knowledge of the subject matter combined with the ability to present the information in an entertaining and engaging manner made Spirals in Time an utterly delightful and accessible book. She has some great stories to tell that just happen to pass along a bountiful amount of information.Disclosure: My Kindle edition was courtesy of Bloomsbury USA for review purposes.

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