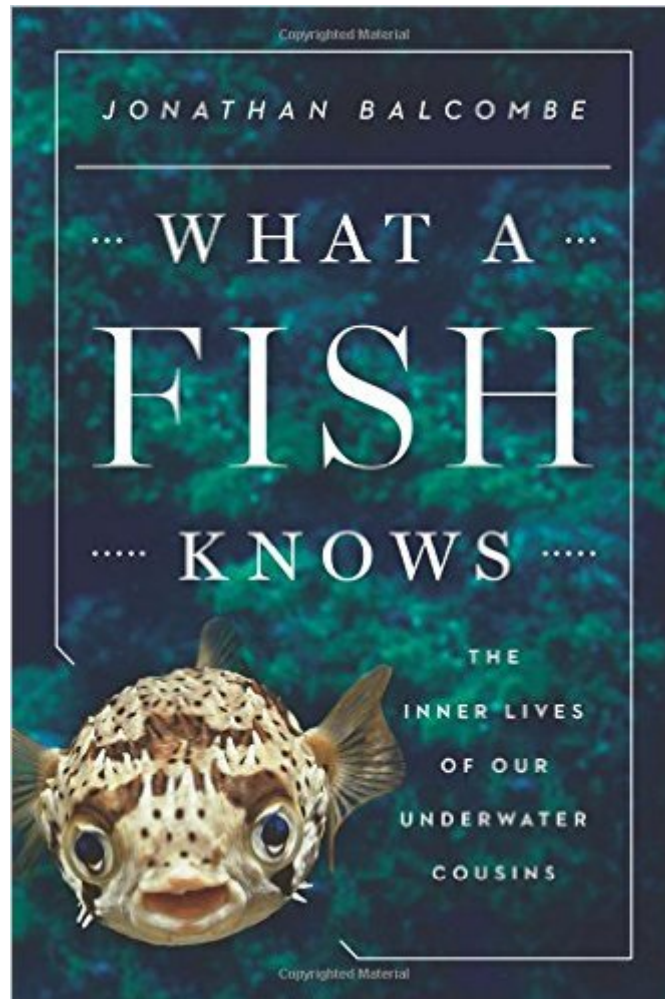


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# What A Fish Knows: The Inner Lives Of Our Underwater Cousins



## Synopsis

A New York Times Bestseller Do fishes think? Do they really have three-second memories? And can they recognize the humans who peer back at them from above the surface of the water? In *What a Fish Knows*, the myth-busting ethologist Jonathan Balcombe addresses these questions and more, taking us under the sea, through streams and estuaries, and to the other side of the aquarium glass to reveal the surprising capabilities of fishes. Although there are more than thirty thousand species of fish—more than all mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians combined—we rarely consider how individual fishes think, feel, and behave. Balcombe upends our assumptions about fishes, portraying them not as unfeeling, dead-eyed feeding machines but as sentient, aware, social, and even Machiavellian—in other words, much like us. *What a Fish Knows* draws on the latest science to present a fresh look at these remarkable creatures in all their breathtaking diversity and beauty. Fishes conduct elaborate courtship rituals and develop lifelong bonds with shoalmates. They also plan, hunt cooperatively, use tools, curry favor, deceive one another, and punish wrongdoers. We may imagine that fishes lead simple, fleeting lives—a mode of existence that boils down to a place on the food chain, rote spawning, and lots of aimless swimming. But, as Balcombe demonstrates, the truth is far richer and more complex, worthy of the grandest social novel. Highlighting breakthrough discoveries from fish enthusiasts and scientists around the world and pondering his own encounters with fishes, Balcombe examines the fascinating means by which fishes gain knowledge of the places they inhabit, from shallow tide pools to the deepest reaches of the ocean. Teeming with insights and exciting discoveries, *What a Fish Knows* offers a thoughtful appraisal of our relationships with fishes and inspires us to take a more enlightened view of the planet's increasingly imperiled marine life. *What a Fish Knows* will forever change how we see our aquatic cousins—the pet goldfish included.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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 "æfishes" 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.

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, a 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: fishes' 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.

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