

Book Review: The Silent World

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The Silent World

by Capt. Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Frederic Dumas

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What can be said about Jacques Cousteau and his groundbreaking book that hasn't been said a thousand times? He is undoubtedly the defining figure of modern scuba diving, his books, films, and documentaries known to millions or billions. Even the name of his ship, the *Calypso*, is known the world over. It's a small volume, this book, just 160 pages, yet it's absolutely mandatory reading for anyone interested in what Cousteau termed "the silent world" under the surface of the water that covers 71% of our planet. *The Silent World* is the bible of modern scuba diving.

Jacques Cousteau himself died in 1997 at the age of 87, but the legacy of his pioneering work with diving and diving physiology lives on. It is all well documented and disseminated worldwide, thanks to this French explorer's unique combination of instinctive understanding of the world under the surface and his equally unique knack of spellbinding the world with his words and images. A total master of public relations and getting the word out, Cousteau managed to grab attention and media coverage wherever he went. Critics went so far as suggesting his media talents exceeded his actual contributions to understanding the seas.

At first it's hard to figure out why this slim volume became such a success. It's not a textbook, it doesn't cover the history of diving or even much of Cousteau's own research, and it's not an adventure book. Though Cousteau was French, he wrote *The Silent World* in English as he had attended American schools in his youth, widely traveled the US, and, of course, extensively lectured in his enchanting French-accented English. Yet, *The Silent World* clearly reveals its author's non-English origin and decidedly "non-English" thinking. The writing, while precise, often suggests that Cousteau frequently described a word or concept that existed in his native French, but did not directly translate into English. As a result, the writing at times seems a bit flowery and, well, foreign, and you need to read a sentence or paragraph two or three times to figure out what it actually means. Cousteau's liberal use of metaphors, artistic nuances, poetic concepts and words that have since fallen out of current language only serve to make *The Silent World* even more unusual of a literary treat.

Anyone looking for technical explanations, precise history, a logical flow of events, or anything one might expect from a world-famous documentary maker and researcher will not find it in this book. *The Silent World* is a totally unique, very compressed tale flowing from Cousteau's mind. Read half a chapter and you know the man; he's

a unique combination of inspired philosophical observer and gifted researcher with uncanny intuition. While others conducted their research methodically and ploddingly, Cousteau always just seemed to know what to expect, how to behave, and what to seek and avoid to make it all seem easy. He and his close associates and friends Phillippe Tailliez and Frederic Dumas used their “aqualung” to experient liberally in sort of a “Hmmm... this is probably what will happen, let’s go check it out!” approach.

Using this, Cousteau describes the difference between “helmet divers” and the newly liberated users of their “aqualung” — what we now know as air tanks and regulators. The book casually touches on all the principles of diving physics and physiology, the stuff we learn in our PADI and NAUI classes. He describes sea life, how it reacts, where it lives, how it behaves, and what is dangerous and what is not. They see just how deep they can go. They check how colors change. What nitrogen does and why we need recompression chambers. He offers his views on treasure hunting (not worth it; if you find real treasure authorities and hordes of lawyers will soon apprehend it). He reports on atrocities he witnessed underwater, like the needless destruction of corals and cruel killing of fish. He debunks myths of sea monsters, seeks answers to geological phenomena such as the Fountain of Vaucluse near Avignon, one that almost cost him and Dumas their lives in a pioneering effort at extreme cave diving. He describes what fish do and how they react. And sea mammals and other sea critters. Sharks remain an enigma to Cousteau as his conclusion is that you simply cannot understand or predict them.

So *The Silent World* relates, in 14 fascinating self-contained chapters, pretty much everything we know about diving today, 60 years after Cousteau began researching as a “manfish,” all the principles we know, and it’s all neatly and attractively presented in tales that always mix research with adventure. Cousteau never preaches or lectures. He just explores, pushes, interprets, and reports. Maybe Captain Jacques-Yves Cousteau was a showman as much as a researcher. If so, good for him as otherwise we may never have had the opportunity to learn from him and enjoy his remarkable insights.

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