

BOOK REVIEW

Bees: Nature's Little Wonders

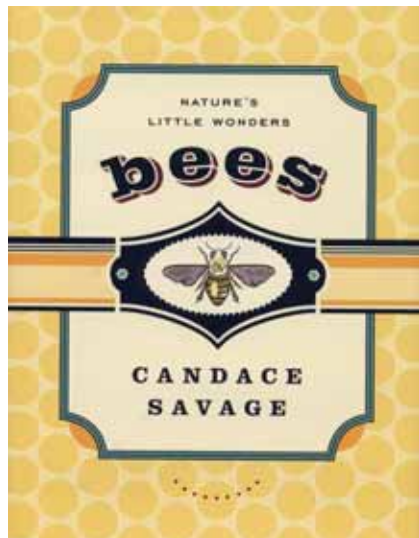
Candace Savage (2008)

Published by Greystone Books, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, ISBN 9781553653219
127pp. RRP A\$36.50 (hardcover)

There are few insects that hold as revered a position in popular culture as the bee. The biology, behaviour and ecology of these colourful flying insects fascinates both the young and old but with a direct link to our breakfast table, and occasional painful sting, the world of bees can also impact many aspects of our day-to-day lives. Rather than professional entomologists or apiarists, the primary audience of this book would probably be best described as “bee enthusiasts”. While not professing to be an expert on bees as such, Candace Savage is an award-winning author who has previously published a number of books on subjects covering topics from natural history to popular culture. With this book, she has managed to draw upon the knowledge of the scientific community to guide the reader along a path from bee biology and ecology to the interactions between bees, humans and agriculture punctuated by photographs, illustrations, cartoons and poetry featuring the beloved bee. Savage maps out the ups and downs of life in “Beesville”. Based primarily on the observations of German bee behaviouralist Martin Lindauer, the life of the queen, drone and worker is laid out. The origins and role of each is described in simple layperson’s terms, from the misfortunes of the “stupid and lazy” drones to the queen’s “monotonous maternal mission” through to the worker who “sees a job that needs done and that she is able to perform, and the gets busy and does it”. It is easy to get the feeling that Savage wishes humans could build the kind of harmonious community exhibited within each bee colony with a sense that the intelligence of the colony exceeds the sum of its parts, in stark contrast to humans where the opposite case is all too often the norm.

There are some wonderful colour photographs throughout the book but the real gems are the selections of historic illustrations and cartoons. Ranging from 3000-year-old archaeological reference to bees to woodcut prints from the 1600s to scientific illustrations from the 19th century. Throughout these illustrations is a feeling of great romance and fondness for bees and bee keeping with my favourite the 1882 illustration of two women modelling bee dresses, from the looks on their faces, they’re either extremely hot or the dresses are not offering nearly enough protection from beestings! Scattered throughout the book are short pieces of prose including pieces by Emily Dickinson and William Shakespeare amongst poems from more recent writers. One of the more interesting inclusions is that of “*Against Idleness and Mischief*” by Isaac Watts that makes an example of bees to illustrate the virtues of hard work. However, the poem has become more famous as the inspiration for “*How doth the little crocodile*” that features prominently in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*.

Bees: Nature's Little Wonders is a wonderful and entertaining hardcover book that will fascinate anyone with an interest in bees while still providing enough of interest for professional entomologists and apiarists alike. There may already be plenty of scientific and non-scientific publications dealing with the topics of bees and beekeeping but this charming book would make a fine addition to any collection.



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BOOK REVIEW

Spiders: Learning to love them

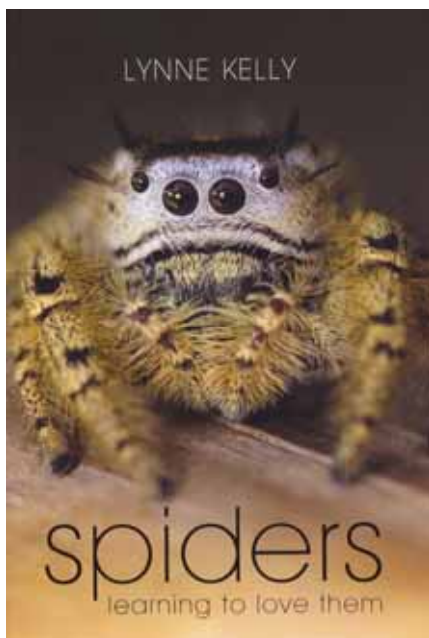
Lynne Kelly (2009)

Published by Jacana Books/Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, ISBN 9781741751796

264pp. RRP A\$32.99 (Paperback)

Given the severity of spider phobias suffered by some people, you could be forgiven for thinking a book titled **Spiders: Learning how to love them** would be found in the self help and not the natural history section of the local bookstore! Self confessed arachnophobe Lynne Kelly has, however, made a noble effort at highlighting the many varied and fascinating (and not so scary) facets of spiders and their lifestyles so perhaps the book deserves a place in both sections. This isn't a field guide as such and nor is it a scientific text designed to replace some of the already excellent books on Australian spiders. This book is really a document of Kelly's personal journey into the world of spiders from her fall into arachnophobia, through her study of various aspects of their lifestyles, including the web weaving habitats and sex-lives of her backyard arachnids, to a discussion of the changing attitudes towards spiders and how a shift in their perception can be achieved through popular culture and education. The book is divided into ten chapters, each dealing with a different aspect of a spider's life. Throughout each of these chapters, Kelly has consulted an expert in the field to guide her through the topic adding, not only an informed commentary on spider taxonomy, biology or behaviour but an insight into the world (and often sense of humour) of arachnologists themselves. One of the more interesting chapters, '*Murderous or misunderstood – the spider bite*', will be of interest to many who spend their summers fearful of "deadly spider bites". It discusses many aspects of spider bite and resulting reactions but also discusses some of the misconceptions and inaccuracies perpetuated by the media, urban myths and popular culture. No better example is the plight of the white-tailed spider that has become increasingly, and falsely, associated with 'necrotic arachnidism' to the point that it is now often clumped together with the Sydney funnel-web as one of the most dangerous spiders in Australia.

Charmingly, Kelly disposes of the spider's scientific names, and even their common names in most instances, focusing on the names she's christened them with such as *Tiny* and *Cutesy* the black house spiders, *Helen* and *Frank* the huntsman spiders and *Erio* the golden orb weaver spider. As well as the 'humanising' of spiders, one of the other aspects of this book that will make it appealing for most readers is that it deals heavily with the spiders commonly found in suburban backyards. For those with an interest in spiders, much of what is presented in the book can be observed by simply walking outside. The book is scattered with black and white photographs, augmented by 16 pages of colour plates, of both spiders and those who study them as well as Kelly's own illustrations. Supported by a useful glossary and helpful appendices covering a listing of spider families, a guide to web types as well as a guide to "spider-spotting" equipment and data sheets, this book would be a good starting point for those interested in studying spiders or beating their spider phobias.



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