The Soul of an Octopus

By Sy Montgomery

1. Sy Montgomery writes about her scientific and emotional attraction to octopuses. Did anything surprise you in her poetic language about the octopuses? Does she make clear what science cannot explain about them?
2. How does Montgomery describe the different personalities that the octopuses have? Do you agree with her assessments of their attributes? Can you relate to the emotions that she interprets them to have?
3. Otherness is a central issue in the book--the otherness of the octopus and its dramatically different nature from other mollusks as well as the differences between cephalopods and people. How does Montgomery use the otherness of the octopus to show the ways the human characters in the story can feel that they don’t fit or belong? How do the humans with their varied backgrounds find ways of coming together and belonging?
4. The similarities between octopuses and humans are another theme. What are the similarities that Montgomery sees? Would you share her point of view or do you see the differences more than the similarities?
5. What does Montgomery reveal about what constitutes consciousness, in humans and animals? Does she show that octopuses have consciousness?
6. Does Montgomery address and answer the question of whether or not an octopus can have a soul? If so, how does she show it?
7. What is anthropomorphism? Given what science knows now about the consciousness of animals, is anthropomorphism a problem? If so, why?
8. What are the issues involved in collecting wild octopuses from the oceans and studying them in an aquarium?
9. Many cultures consume octopuses as food. Do you see any issues regarding eating octopuses?
10. For a book that imparts a wealth of scientific information about octopuses, Montgomery uses humor and also a deep sense of feeling and respect for the octopus and all of nature. How does Montgomery convey the major conservation issues, such as climate change and the health of the oceans, in the stories she tells in this book about people and animals?
11. Has your view of the human consciousness changed after reading this book? Has your view of animal consciousness changed? What information specifically influenced you?
12. Has your perspective on nature and on octopuses been influenced by this book? What views has the book reinforced and what views has it changed your mind about?