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Among Giants: A Life with Whales

By Charles “Flip” Nicklin, University of Chicago Press, 2011, 192 pages, ISBN 978-0-226-58099-9, Hardcover, \$40 US

REVIEWED BY KIM SHELLEN

It was on a sunny day in the mid-1970s, bobbing on the waves off Massachusetts in a little 5 m powerboat with my family, that we heard a loud WHOOSH and turned to see a large black form heading straight for our boat. At the last moment, it sank beneath the surface, and as we hurried to the side of the boat to look down, the form glided below us, its large, white pectoral fins spread out like wings at what seemed like mere centimeters beneath the boat. The humpback whale surfaced a short distance from us, spouted a few more times, and then was gone. This was my first encounter with one of these giants of the deep, and it certainly left a lasting impression. Such awe-inspiring, and at times heart-pounding, encounters fill Charles “Flip” Nicklin’s book *Among Giants: A Life with Whales*. Nicklin blends the story of his life with his recollections of the inspirations and guidance from mentors that led him to a career that combined his love of scuba diving and photography, all set against the stunning backdrop of the incredible images of marine life that he has taken over the past 30+ years. Along with these amazing images, Nicklin also pays tribute to a number of the researchers with whom he has worked and who have dedicated their lives to studying these animals. He never sugarcoats how difficult it is to study creatures that spend most of their lives beneath the surface. From rough seas, to

complex logistics, and all too often a lack of funding, these hardships are part and parcel of the trade. Nicklin is also frank about the plights of these animals, many of which are in danger of extinction.

We are introduced to Nicklin’s world through a chance encounter between his father, Chuck, and a net-entangled Bryde’s whale in 1963. Chuck, a diver and photographer, freed the whale, and the story and photographs were the beginning of what would become a long career among whales for both men. In Chapter 1, Nicklin describes his early years diving, learning to take underwater photographs, his first encounters with *National Geographic* photographers, and the beginning of what would become life-long collaborations with biologists in the field. Nicklin continues his story in Chapter 2, describing the field projects that led to his getting progressively better assignments with *National Geographic*. Chapter 3 details the years Nicklin spent photographing, trying to survive, field-work, and marine mammal encounters in the Canadian High Arctic. As conservation issues grew to be just as important as describing these marine mammals and their behaviors, in Chapter 4 Nicklin details assignments he proposed to *National Geographic* that focused on fisheries bycatch, pollution, and hunting. In Chapter 5, Nicklin describes the next generation of photographers, new technologies, and the many questions we still have about marine mammals.

Throughout the book, Nicklin weaves his personal story with what were at that time the first-ever descriptions and underwater photographs of a particular species or behavior: images of singing



humpback whales, killer whales using “rubbing beaches,” and narwhals battling, to name a few. In addition, the scientists that Nicklin spent time with in the field contribute short passages at the end of each chapter about the species or environments they studied together: Jim Darling presents his work on humpback whales, Hal Whitehead on sperm whales, Glenn Williams on a changing Arctic, Jon Stern on minke whales, and Bruce Mate on technology. It is clear on a scientific level that we are just beginning to scratch the surface when it comes to studying marine mammals in the field.

Nicklin’s long association with *National Geographic* has given the public visual access to a world few could ever hope to partake in, and this book takes a behind-the-scenes look at that world. Those who aspire to study marine mammals will gain some valuable insights about field conditions, complex conservation issues, and technological challenges. For those of us who study these animals, mostly obtaining only brief glimpses from above, this book provides that rare, glorious peek beneath the surface and often the knowing cringe and laugh of “been there, done that.”

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