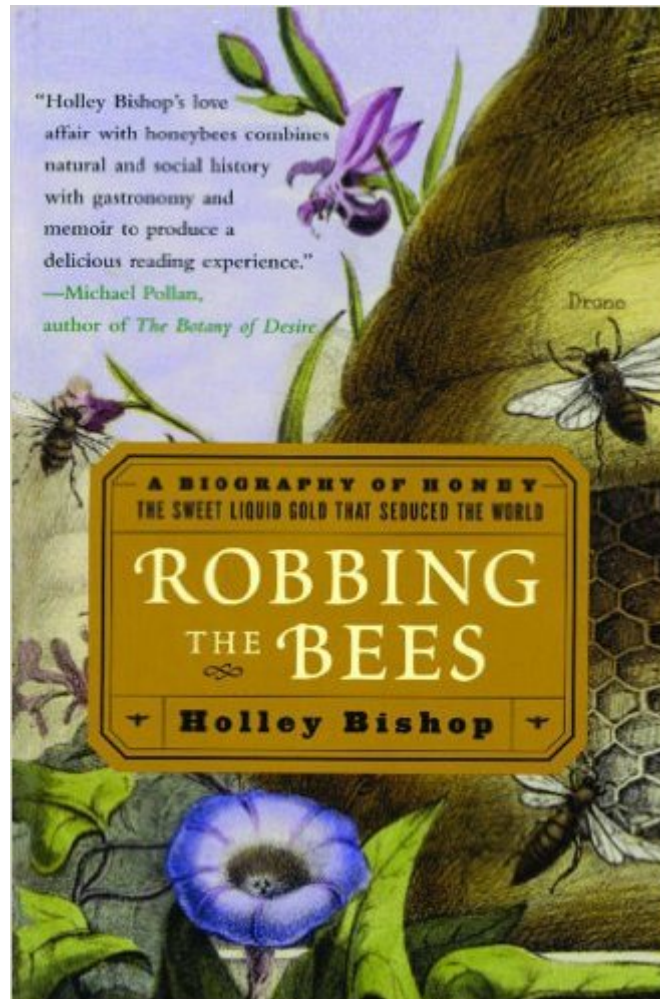


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Robbing The Bees: A Biography Of Honey--The Sweet Liquid Gold That Seduced The World



Synopsis

Honey has been waiting almost ten million years for a good biography. Bees have been making this prized food -- for centuries the world's only sweetener -- for millennia, but we humans started recording our fascination with it only in the past few thousand years. Part history, part love letter, *Robbing the Bees* is a celebration of bees and their magical produce, revealing the varied roles of bees and honey in nature, world civilization, business, and gastronomy. To help navigate the worlds and cultures of honey, Bishop -- beekeeper, writer, and honey aficionado -- apprentices herself to Donald Smiley, a professional beekeeper who harvests tupelo honey in the Florida panhandle. She intersperses the lively lore and science of honey with lyrical reflections on her own and Smiley's beekeeping experiences. Its passionate research, rich detail, and fascinating anecdote and illustrations make Holley Bishop's *Robbing the Bees* a sumptuous look at the oldest, most delectable food in the world.

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Customer Reviews

The first time I read *ROBBING THE BEES* (I have now read it twice), I was on three hour flight across the country. Normally distracted and restless on airplanes, I plunged into this great book from the first page and was so happy to have the uninterrupted time to read it straight through! Somewhat surprisingly, I became completely absorbed by a subject that I didn't expect to be so fascinating, but the author's fluid writing and gorgeous descriptions were enough to draw me in so much that I didn't even notice the passage of time. Everything about this book, from the

fascinating history of beekeeping and honey, to the anecdotes about the quirky Florida beekeeper Don Smiley, move the book along wonderfully. What I really found to be intriguing though, was the intimate tone of the writing and the author's personal story. The fact that she found a home with her bees resonated with me, and I felt an appreciation for the craft of keeping bees more than I ever thought I would. I highly recommend this book to anyone who would like to learn more about bees and honey and anyone who appreciates sitting down with an excellent book.

'Robbing the Bees, A Biography of Honey (The Sweet Liquid Gold that Seduced the World' by novice beekeeper and first time book author, Holley Bishop is a great little read, with a subject matter very similar to Mark Kurlansky's works, 'Cod' and 'Salt' but with an engaging style similar to 'New Yorker' writer, Susan Orlean, author of 'The Orchid Thief'. The fact that the primary subjects in both Orleans' and Bishop's books live and work in Florida is pure coincidence. Bishop evokes Orleans' style by switching back and forth between three main narrative lines. The opening line chronicles Bishop's own foray into beekeeping at her rural Connecticut home. This thread gives us an excellent firsthand picture of the trials of a real beekeeping novice. In the first chapter, we are introduced to the star of the second and, in many ways, the most important thread. This is Donald Smiley, a successful operator of a modest but growing beekeeping operation in the Florida panhandle who, upon being contacted by Bishop had 600 hives which grew to over a thousand in the three year course of writing this book. Aside from the fact that Smiley was the only professional beekeeper to answer Bishop's letter of inquiry, his operation is interesting because the collecting of the very interesting tupelo honey from blossoms native to the southern U.S. swamps is a major part of Smiley's yearly routine. Tupelo honey is distinguished from almost all others in that its sugars never crystallize out of the liquid honey. The story of Smiley's yearly routine is one that makes one scratch one's head in wonder over how anyone can like such a demanding schedule. But since thousands of beekeepers, just like professional chefs, commonly put in twelve to sixteen hour days and love every minute of it, one has to believe the psychic rewards to such a life are high. Smiley does have the advantage of being self-employed AND of running a business which give him an income at about twice the average of rural Florida panhandle residents. The hard part only begins with the dangers of dealing with stinging bees that are, at best, disinterested partners in the collection of honey and beeswax. In order to create a true tupelo or orange or clover specific honey, Smiley and his assistants must run through all 600 to 1000 hives and harvest what is in the hives, clean the honeycomb racks of every last trace of the previous honey, replace the honeycomb racks, and move all these hives to locations close to where the target blossoms or flowers are just

opening. And, all of this has to be done in two or three days so the bees can catch the blossoms just as they start to open. The third thread in Bishop's book covers the backstory of honey, bees, and beeswax. I give Bishop serious extra points for remembering to include a chapter on beeswax. While it is a relatively unimportant product today, it is historically exceedingly important. Its surviving use in Moravian candles, for example, just scratches the surface of its uses. If you imagine a world without plastics, rubber, or synthetic hydrocarbons, the importance of wax should become obvious. It was used in waterproofing, preserving, embalming, and beautifying furniture. Bishop doesn't stop with its uses; she also discusses how bees create beeswax and how they use it to build the hexagonal cells of honeycomb. I was particularly interested in the citations of experiments performed by Charles Darwin in revealing how it was that honey bees were able to construct their marvelously geometric structures which just happen to need the least amount of material to contain the greatest volume. The evidence of Darwin's genius never fails to amaze me. One pitfall which Bishop avoids is a favorite subject of linguistic philosophers back in the 1960's when it was thought that the bees' dance upon returning to the hive was a form of language whereby the bee was telling her colleagues where to find an especially rich source of nectar. This very scholarly topic simply fell to the ground when, I believe, it was discovered that the basis for the dance was to shake loose pollen so that the onlookers could get a sample of the pollen from the rich source of flowers. Every subject's background is covered with the same excellent selection of material from history and modern science. Most of the illustrations are drawings from the dawn of publishing through the 19th century, the heyday of artistically done drawings of subjects from natural history. The subject of stinging, for example, is covered by anecdotes from the author's own experience and from Smiley's experience plus a brief on how a bee's sting works. Like most things in the natural world, it is a lot more complicated than it appears on the surface. The mechanics of a bee's sting make a modern hypodermic needle look crude. The biochemistry of the bee's venom makes injected medical cocktails look primitive. If this story has any dark side, it is in the story of the Africanized bees which were introduced into Brazil in the 1950's to create a strain which would do better than European bees in Brazil's tropical climate. The problem arose because these smaller, less productive bees were both more nomadic and more aggressive than their highly productive European cousins. This meant that the Africanized bees have been moving north through the Americas and colonies have already reached the southern United States. Their stings are no worse than European bee stings, but they will go after a human intruder out of sheer aggression, even if the nearby human makes no move to disturb the hive. As there is no known antidote to this moving ecological danger, one wishes we still had Darwin around to provide some clues to solving the problem. If Bishop's book

has any weaknesses at all, it is the absence of a good bibliography and a few minor inaccuracies that got past her copy editors.

Bees were something to swat when I was growing up and honey never eclipsed my love of chocolate. All that has changed since I read this engrossing, gorgeously written history of the world through the eyes of a beekeeper. I loved the writing, the historical view, the personal stories, the intricacies of hives and, for a city kid, the sense of wonder at seeing Mother Nature at work. But more important, I came away with a new understanding of the interconnectedness of life. If bees were to disappear from the face of the earth we would perish. Bee power! Who knew?

Bishop presents an entertaining history of bees and beekeeping, and gives us an absolutely fascinating tour into the relationship between humans and bees, both ancient and modern. What she misses are her science references: On page 142, Bishop recounts the removal of a stinger: "...he grabbed the whole sac, which simply squeezed in more venom." This is not true. It is an oft-repeated piece of conventional wisdom, but in 1996, entomologists at UC Riverside published an article in *The Lancet* (348:301-302), with the conclusion that rather than removal method, speed is of the essence. Visscher and Vetter wrote of their conclusion: "The method of removal is irrelevant, but even slight delays in removal caused by concerns over performing it correctly (or getting out a knife blade or credit card) are likely to increase the dose of venom received. The advice should be changed to simply emphasize that the sting should be removed, and as quickly as possible." On page 276, Bishop writes about royal jelly "...worker bees secrete and feed exclusively to a select few fertilized eggs, one of which, on this special diet, will grow into a queen." This is patently incorrect. Royal jelly, as all beekeepers know, is fed to all the brood by nursery bees for the first 2-3 days of the brood's development. After this time, most brood who are not destined to be queens will receive pollen as food, whereas queens are fed the jelly all their lives. It is rather stunning that an author who keeps bees herself and obviously spent considerable efforts in researching her book can make such a glaring error in bee knowledge. This was quite a blow to me at this point in the book as I have enjoyed the book very much, and to run into such a blatantly uninformed statement from the author caused me major disappointment. Otherwise, this is quite a good, absorbing read.

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