

MY OCTOPUS TEACHER

This is a heart-gripping tale of a relationship – one might even call it a romance – between a human and a young female octopus, beautifully told and stunningly photographed. For anyone who has experienced a real bond with an animal, this is a film not to be missed.

Craig Foster, film maker and naturalist, was at a crossroads in his life – burnt out and sick from pressure – when he returned to his childhood home to seek inspiration in the turbulent seas of the Atlantic at the Western Cape of South Africa. Diving without a wet suit or an oxygen tank in the freezing waters so that he could experience the ecology of the kelp forest more intimately, he comes across a strange collection of shells which he later discovers is an octopus in disguise. Feeling there was something special about this animal, he made the decision to visit the mollusk every day to discover more about her and her environment.

Over the many months, visiting her den and tracking her movements, not only does he learn a great deal about her – how innately *intelligent she is – but he wins her trust and develops a special bond. He also gains some very profound knowledge about life. Craig said, “She taught me about her secret world, and she taught me tremendous humility”.

What comes across in the film is Craig’s ability to ‘open up’ and share his emotions, seldom seen in such a way in a nature film. You can see and feel in Craig’s face and voice the depth of emotion he had for the tiny creature and it is very moving.

He recalled there was a definite moment when her fear of him subsided. He put his hand out towards her and she placed an arm on his finger and they connected. “When you have that connection with an animal, there is no greater feeling on earth.” On one occasion she was following him, and he dropped one of his lenses. She was frightened and disappeared for a week. When he finally found her, he felt he had won her trust at a deeper level. She moved up on him until she covered his whole hand and stayed there until he swam up to the surface. By far the most powerful moment is when she comes out of her den when he is there – she had no protection, and it is then that he knows she fully trusts him. You watch as the little octopus rides on Craig’s chest while he strokes her with one finger, and you see and feel the intimacy of the moment.

He said, “I hadn’t been a person that had been over-sentimental towards animals before. I realized I was changing. My relationship with people, with humans, was changing. What she taught me was that you are part of this place, not a visitor, and that is a huge difference.”

This tiny creature also opens Craig to his own vulnerability as every day is precious for the octopus because her life is short. After being attacked and hurt by a Pyjama Shark (named because of its parallel dark stripes running along its stout body), the octopus miraculously begins to grow back her lost leg. Craig has this incredible feeling that she could get past her difficulties as he was getting over his difficulties. In a strange way, he felt their lives were mirroring each other.

Through Craig's connection to the octopus, he began to get a deep sense about the human's place in the natural world. "She taught me that nature and humans are woven with the same thread, with same cloth. We are not separate, and we need each other to survive on this planet."

By the end of the film, Craig has formed a strong relationship with his son and has passed on to him his love for the natural worlds. The most important thing he feels that his son has learnt from being in nature is gentleness.

Craig still dives every day, but he no longer swims alone. He now takes others who want to be in touch in the same way with the wonders that our planet and its creatures have to offer. He now has so much energy to give back and has founded the Sea Change Project, set up to preserve the wild places in the oceans.

**Octopus are the most intelligent invertebrates on our planet. A lot of their intelligence is outside of their brain. Two thirds of their cognition is in their arms.*

Deirdre Chitwood, Certified Tellington TTouch Practitioner for Companion Animals