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Seeing Hidden Worlds: David Hall and "Beneath Cold Seas"

by Abby Luby

A sculpted, steely grey fish, fins flanged and mouth agape, lusts after the tendrils of a gelatinous burst of orange, just out of the fish's reach. And for us, viewing one of many splendid photographs in David Hall's newly released "Beneath Cold Seas, the Underwater Wilderness of the Pacific Northwest," we could almost grab this bright, delicate, wistful plume and feel it glide through our fingers.

This image, one of the first you see in Hall's new book, is a blue rockfish ready to pounce on a lion's mane jelly (a type of jellyfish), exemplary of the award-winning Hall and his innate ability to capture unique moments of undersea life. Our gift from these images? A chance to limitlessly hold our gaze on incredible creatures that exist in a world few of us ever see.

Hall is internationally known for his photography and as a photojournalist. He is unassuming and soft spoken and his passionate explanations about his work are often emphasized by a jump of the eyebrows that set off his twinkling eyes. His work is found in numerous high profile publications including National Geographic, Smithsonian, Natural History, Time, BBC Wildlife, Geo and Terre Sauvage. Hall has co-authored ten children's books in Scholastic's Undersea Encounters series and in 2009 he co-authored a scientific paper with evolutionary biologist Ted Pietsch about the discovery of the psychedelic frogfish off Ambon Island in Indonesia.

Roll Magazine visited Hall in his Ohayo Mountain Road home where he lives with his wife Gayle Jamison, their three snakes, a cat, and their dog Moby. It is a spread of a house that Hall purchased from Bob Dylan some 38 years ago. In a large, well lit room that is more like an indoor garden, Hall recalls how he first got into photography.

"When I was eight years old I was fascinated with all living things. I was first exposed to marine life in Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn. But in 1968, when I went snorkeling in St. Croix for the first time, I was completely blown away. I knew then I had to get a camera." Hall purchased a Kodak Instamatic camera and built his own plastic housing. "In those days there wasn't an off-the-shelf housing and there were no strobes so we had to take about 36 flashbulbs with us in a mesh bag. You had to get out of the water to change a roll of film."

Undoubtedly, the digital age was a boost to underwater photography and Hall fully embraced the new and ever improving technology that rendered his lens a paintbrush, pixels his palette, his canvas a digital spread for infinite possibilities. "Moon Jelly and Clouds," was shot with the lens submerged halfway in the water. A translucent blue and pale pink jelly fish bursts through the surface of the water, its hair-like filaments reach out from its watery habitat, kissing the small, curved sweep of land under a vast blue sky replete with cumulus clouds. Hall calls these "over-under" photographs where you see the land and the sky and under the water. These rare views delight the eye, but are difficult shots to get. Hall perfected his signature technique by leaping out of deep water while snapping the split image at the precise moment. "It takes a lot of concentration, trial and error. I do it over and over again to get exactly what I want."



— Moon Jelly (Jellyfish)

The effect is magical. Another — “A moon jelly and cross jellies” shows silvery blue iridescent jellies as crepuscular creatures orbiting around a larger moon jelly under converging currents of water whose texture separates the jellies from the distant mountains and sky like a lush, satin ribbon.



— Moon Jellyfish and Cross Jellies

Seeing the three layers — sea, land and sky, somehow reflects Hall's philosophy of the how vital it is to preserve all life on earth. "We need to understand about other living things, about oceans and wildernesses, the watersheds and sustainable space. We could lose what we have. Appreciation has to happen before conservation."

Hall is as expressive in his writing as he is with his images. He describes his pursuit to immortalize aquatic life with an articulate, down to earth voice which, at times, is wonderfully poetic. He relates his years of frustration in finding decorative warbonnets, which he describes as having "long, slender bodies and a remarkable coiffure," and that his luck had been "rotten," rendering him an "underwater beggar." Fortunately for us, Hall's luck changed and we are thrilled to now know what a warbonnet actually looks like. Other sections read like an adventure novel, where Hall is waist deep in a fast moving current and finds the pull overpowering him, pushing him downstream laden with equipment. Luckily, his diving partner grabs him and reins him in, the two anchored against a fallen tree.

The underwater life in "In Beneath Cold Seas" (North American Publishers: Greystone Books, University of Washington Press) was shot off the Pacific Coast from California to Alaska, a region known for its wide range of more diverse marine life than any other cold-water ecosystem. Here in the Northeast, we associate this region with sockeye salmon and Hall's remarkable shots of these wild fish are particularly stunning. In the photograph "Sockeye Salmon at Dusk," a group of salmon look directly at us, lit from below, their heads gleaming in their colored splendor of bright red and yellow-green. We become witnesses to what Hall explains as their incredible transformation before mating. The lens becomes an instant conduit of communication, putting us right there in the water with him.



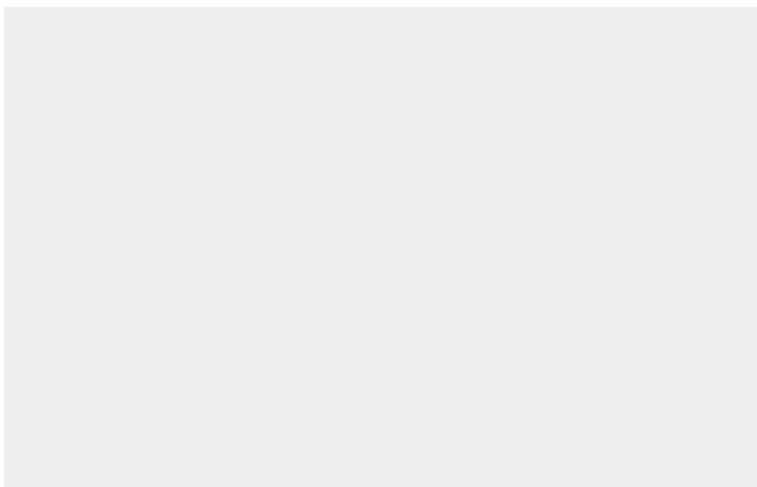
— Sockeye at Dusk

The images are evocative, sensuous, tactile. We can just feel the gentle opaque fingers of the rose anemone sway to the ebb and flow of the water as they surround the flushed pink, inner petals. We get a visual 'shout' from the Frosted Nudibranch whose spikes emanate from a warm, peachy glow.



— Alabaster Nudibranch

Hall found inspiration from the color landscapes and bird photography of Eliot Porter and from Douglas Faulkner for his early, artistically directed work and exploration of underwater photography. He also says Christopher Newbert, who wrote the foreword to this book, was key because of his “uncompromising approach to art and for showing us that the whole is not necessarily equal to the sum of its parts.”



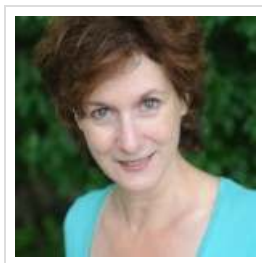


— Rose anemone

Hall says that one of his publishers (there are four) told him to “take the reader down under the water with you.” He further explains his intention: “This book is for people who never dive to better understand how close you are to things you don’t see.”

For those whose curiosity goes beyond the photographs, Hall provides an organized compendium of information at the end of the book in “Notes on the Photographs,” which carefully lists all the plates with interesting factoids.

You can glimpse a slideshow of the book at www.beneathcoldseas.com



Abby Luby, author of the recently published e-book *Nuclear Romance*, has been in the field of communications for over 20 years and a journalist just over 10. She has a Bachelor’s degree in Communications/Music from Indiana University and attended the High School of Music and Art in New York City.

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