

Living Shells

Charles E. Rowings

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Seashells reveal as much about their former owners as abandoned homes do about theirs. Some clues may be garnered by the shell shape. But to the layperson, the creators of these remnants remain a mystery. Despite a few of the hardier specimens surviving in aquariums, scarcity and habitat keep mollusks from being easily appreciated. In this collection of marine photography, author and photographer Charles E. Rowings brings readers off the shores and into the depths as he introduces humanity to some of the earth's most alien residents.

Living Shells represents the culmination of Rowings' work with invertebrates. His articles have appeared in professional magazines and his photographs have made the front and back covers of the journal *American Conchologist* a total of fourteen times. In 2010, Rowings won the Grand Prix from the French Association of Conchology at the World Festival of Underwater Pictures in Antibes, France.

In contrast to the specialized nature of his previous publications, Rowings' aesthetic rather than scientific approach opens this book to a broader audience. In each photograph, mollusks are shot in their natural habitat rather than in aquariums. The centered and up-close format of each picture removes the readers' sense of scale and surrounding environment. Instead of viewing the pictures like technical studies, readers appreciate the shells and their inhabitants in Rowings' ninety-three photographs from a sometimes abstract perspective.

Living Shells includes a series of brief introductions separating the major taxonomic classes and families of the pictured invertebrates. The information provided in these introductions is minimal, and captions have been totally eschewed. The effect allows the eye to glide from one image to another without stumbling over text. Readers wanting more information about a particular living shell will find its scientific name, discoverer, and year, as well as the location and depth of shot indexed in the back of the book.

With the publication of Living Shells, Rowings joins other marine photographers whose coffee table books are gaining a sense of urgency as deteriorating marine conditions dominate environmental news coverage. By avoiding contextual references to the global events, Rowings offers an escape rather than a study. Aficionados as well as those with a passing interest in conchology will appreciate this vividly shot introduction to these amazing creatures.

JOSEPH THOMPSON (March 10, 2011)

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