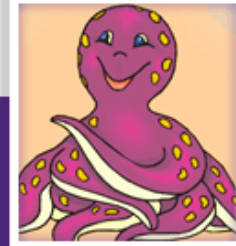


Aubrey's Octopus

story of the month

By Richard W. Jennings, the author of Orwell's Luck
"The Master of Middle American Whimsy"



When you live in a small town in Wisconsin, your chances of encountering an octopus are slim to none.

Yet Aubrey, the shortest kid in the fifth grade at Sunflower Elementary School, had always been curious about octopuses. Not octopi, as her teacher, Mrs. Bastianich, called them, but octopuses. Octopi is a Latin plural. Octopus, as Aubrey knew, is a Greek word. To pluralize a Greek word with a Latin word would be like calling Aubrey Audrey.

It's not her name.

So scientists throughout the world, realizing that nobody would ever say "octopodes," the Greek plural, settled on the English plural "octopuses."

They also know that octopuses have arms, not tentacles, even though your average person gets this wrong, too.

Not Aubrey.

Aubrey is a smart girl.

On this occasion, it wasn't just science that intrigued her. It was the fact that the octopus is the world's smartest invertebrate, possibly even smarter than Aubrey. Furthermore, the octopus has a brain that never stops growing.

Amazing!

But where and how would Aubrey, a resident of a small town in Wisconsin, ever find one?

One day, quite by chance, Aubrey was reading a catalog from Foster and Smith Aquatics® to her orange cat Porchie when she came across an item that said Doctors Foster and Smith worked with a company in California through their LiveAquaria.com web site that sold live sea creatures. Among these, it explained, were a variety of invertebrates. Anemones. Snails. Crabs. Clams. Saltwater strangers of all kinds.

"Bingo," she said aloud to Porchie who had no idea what

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she meant although he hoped in his little feline heart that it had something to do with food.

(In a way, it did.)

The catalog warned, however, that keeping an octopus is only for "experts."

Aubrey and Porchie had settled onto Aubrey's bed to watch a back-to-back series of cooking shows on PBS-TV3, unusual behavior for most cats and fifth-grade girls, but not this pair of best friends. The bed was piled high with fluffy pillows and tattered quilts. "What's the definition of an expert?" Aubrey asked Porchie, not waiting for his reply. "Someone who knows what they are doing, that's what," she concluded.

The only way to become an expert, Aubrey figured, is to study everything about a subject that you can.

Study takes many forms. Observation. Questions. Trial and error. Travel. Calls, letters and emails. And perhaps most importantly, reading.

Aubrey was well into the reading part of the process, having learned a great deal from Foster and Smith Aquatics, a free catalog of supplies for aquariums, ever-changing, up-to-date, information posted on FosterandSmithAquatics.com, and a newly published hardcover, photo-packed coffee-table book on cephalopods that she'd borrowed from her neighborhood library, Miss Denna, senior librarian.

Alas, as every scientist from Madame Curie to Dr. Frankenstein knows, there comes a moment in research when things can take a terribly wrong turn.

For Aubrey it was an episode of "Lidia's Italy," starring a famous Italian chef with the same last name as Aubrey's fifth-grade teacher. This particular show was all about octopuses, a promising beginning, Aubrey thought, but then to Aubrey's horror she discovered it was not about raising these miraculous eight-armed brainiacs, it was about something else which I will leave to your own imagination with the reminder that this was a cooking show.

Quickly Aubrey covered Porchie's eyes. But for a housecat with an appetite like Garfield's, the damage had been done. An idea was firmly implanted in his carnivorous feline brain.

Two busy months passed during which time Aubrey acquired a gifted and necessary partner, her uncle Gordon, her mother's generous and brilliant brother, who lived on nearby Tree Street, six blocks west of Aubrey's house on Cheery Street, further evidence that the developer of the neighborhood was not only a bad speller, having dropped out of school much too early, but was equally short on ideas.



Uncle Gordon was a part time amateur songwriter and a full-time professional plumber and as it turns out had been working with saltwater fish for years. Raising an octopus, as the catalog said, is for experts, so it was good that Aubrey's uncle already knew his stuff.

He had the tools, the know-how and the love for his little niece to assemble the complex habitat needed for saltwater life, all acquired from worldwide resources of Doctors Foster & Smith. A fifty-five gallon aquarium with a tightly sealed glass top. A series of interconnected tubes, filters and pumps. Live sand, live ocean rock, natural caves, hideouts and surreal, coral reef beauty. All made possible by one man with respect for chemistry and plenty of patience.

Aubrey and Porchie were thrilled with the outcome.

Thanks to Uncle Gordon, a perfect ecosystem now existed in Aubrey's room. Undersea plants were growing happily beneath colored fluorescent lamps. Crabs, snails, shrimp and plankton were living a normal sea life in their own ideal home in the second floor bedroom of a curious Wisconsin schoolgirl.

Only one thing was left.

An octopus for which an order had been placed and a song composed.

Oh, I'm a deep-sea fancy dandy

Little Sandy is my name

An Octopus bimaculoides with eight dancing legs

Capable of laying a hundred thousand tiny eggs

A real fine specimen and one lucky find

No bigger than a quarter with a brilliant growing mind

Yes, I'm a deep-sea fancy dandy

A South Pacific sweetie packed with facts and brains

Little Sandy is my name.

Overnight, via FedEx, Sandy traveled from the Asian-Pacific to coastal California to a warehouse in Indianapolis to Aubrey's front door in Wisconsin. Greeted by Aubrey, Porchie and Uncle Gordon, and Aubrey's anxious mother Anne, the little cephalopod's arrival was an event never to be forgotten.

When the proper moment arrived to release her from her darkened multi-layered plastic bags into the waiting aquarium, Sandy quickly clamored out onto Aubrey's pink right hand



looking Aubrey squarely into her eyes.

No one noticed that Porchie, too, had joined the party, bounding like a spry kangaroo onto the temporarily open glass plate covering the habitat top.

As girl and invertebrate were becoming acquainted, Porchie leaned over and licked Sandy's third arm just as he'd seen Lidia do on a cooking show months before.

"Porchie!" Aubrey screamed. "No, no, no!"

"Umm, umm, umm," Porchie responded. "Delicious," promptly sniffing and licking a lumbering hermit crab from the peak of a mountaintop of live Pacific rock.

Quickly, Uncle Gordon grabbed the cat and handed him off to his sister Anne who scolded the cat as mother's do.

Little worry for Sandy. The appetizer-like lick by Porchie had done her no harm. Less of an outcome awaited the crab, however. Indeed, regarding the shrimp, snails and crabs, what Porchie failed to achieve, Sandy soon would.

She attached her suckers to the aquarium glass and releasing herself from Aubrey's hand selected a cave.

In a brief, upsetting moment, a lesson had been learned. Octopuses may have huge brains that never stop growing, but cats have a mind of their own.

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