



# **A Fish Caught in Time: The Search for the Coelacanth**

*Samantha Weinberg*

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Just before Christmas in 1938, the young woman curator of a small South African museum spotted a strange-looking fish on a trawler's deck. It was five feet long, with steel-blue scales, luminescent eyes and remarkable limb-like fins, unlike those of any fish she had ever seen. Determined to preserve her unusual find, she searched for days for a way to save it, but ended up with only the skin and a few bones.

A charismatic amateur ichthyologist, J.L.B. Smith, saw a thumbnail sketch of the fish and was thunderstruck. He recognized it as a coelacanth (pronounced see-la-kanth), a creature known from fossils dating back 400 million years and thought to have died out with the dinosaurs. With its extraordinary limbs, the coelacanth was believed to be the first fish to crawl from the sea and evolve into reptiles, mammals and eventually mankind. The discovery was immediately dubbed the "greatest scientific find of the century."

Smith devoted his life to the search for a complete specimen, a fourteen-year odyssey that culminated in a dramatic act of international piracy. As the fame of the coelacanth spread, so did rumors and obsessions. Nations fought over it, multimillion-dollar expeditions were launched, and submarines hand-built to find it. In 1998, the rumors and the truth came together in a gripping climax, which brought the coelacanth back into the international limelight.

*A Fish Caught in Time* is the entrancing story of the most rare and precious fish in the world--our own great uncle forty million times removed.

## A Fish Caught in Time: The Search for the Coelacanth Details

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# From Reader Review A Fish Caught in Time: The Search for the Coelacanth for online ebook

## Juha says

This is both an educative and entertaining book about the search for a prehistoric fish. Long believed extinct, the Coelacanth was first discovered off the waters of South Africa in the Indian Ocean in 1938. Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer was a young curator at the East London museum when she recognized there was something odd in one of the fish brought to her by a fishing boat. She contacted J.L.B. Smith, a recognized scientist who would become obsessed with the living fossil--and would later name the fish Latimeria Chalumnae, after Marjorie. The first two-thirds of the book read like a suspense novel, with international politics and intrigue mounting as the search for the Coelacanth heats up in the waters surrounding the Comoros. Samantha Weinberg writes in an engaging manner while painting lively portraits of Marjorie, J.L.B., his wife Margaret, and other protagonists in the story. The final part of the book, which traces later efforts to first capture and then protect the fish, is interesting but no longer equally suspenseful. All in all a fine book for anyone interested in natural history and evolutionary biology--and even those who just enjoy an unusual story in an exotic setting.

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## Mandy Setterfield says

This is one of my favourite non-fiction books of all time. If you are interested in fish or fossils or conservation it's for you. And if you're not particularly into any of those, read it anyway! It is entertaining and fast paced, and so readable. Don't be put off by the weird subject matter, it's all part of the charm!

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## Anna Baillie-Karas says

The story of the coelacanth fish. I didn't know what this was but was completely hooked by the story (so to speak, ha ha). Thought to be extinct, fossils date back 400m years. It may be humans' ancestor in the evolutionary chain. One was found in the Comoros islands in 1938, to huge excitement & a quest ever since. Loved the stories of the people involved, especially the amazing Marjorie Courtney-Latimer who saw its significance in 1938. Simon Winchester fans will enjoy.

I read this for #passportlitsy for 'Comoros'. It gave me a good sense of life in the Comoros islands, and was a great read as well. All in all, a winner!

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## Tweedledum says

In A Fish Caught In Time Samantha Weinberg has written the fantastic and fascinating story of the discovery of the coelacanth . Weinberg was able to undertake direct research for the book including speaking directly with many of the people closely involved with the story and the book reads like a great mystery story. In the video below Weinberg reads from her book and touches on the journey of discovery that she herself went on in researching the story. Her enthusiasm is infectious and having finished the book I found myself wanting to

look up for myself as much as I could not just about the coelacanth itself but also about the wonderful people who have had a part in the story.

Marjorie Courtney-Latimer who started the whole story off in 1938 when she realised that the fish she had been offered for the East London Museum in South Africa could possibly be a "living fossil" lived to see the publication of the book and the first video footage of a coelacanth in the deep ocean.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwYNiw...>

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### **Robyn McIntyre says**

This is what I look for in a book on a scholarly subject. The author handles the facts well, but is able to make the people involved come alive, allowing the reader to care about them. Weinberg's good writing makes the transitions from fact to biography in such a manner that you never feel disconnected from the story of the search. I found myself getting excited about the search and the trip to a far-away island to collect a specimen was almost daring-do. And amidst all of this publicity, concern for conservation, egos, and political machinations, the Coelacanth continues its fishy business, surprising us with its unusual makeup and behaviours.

The compilation of known facts about the fish found at the end of the book was a bonus, as was the video of it available on the website still being maintained by one of its enthusiastic admirers.

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### **Deborah Ideiosepius says**

This fascinating history of the Coelacanth is beautifully written, lighthearted and fascinating. A brilliant yarn in every sense of the word, it tells the story of how the Coelacanth went from being a fossil considered to be extinct for 50-70 million years to being one of the few distinguished 'living fossils' of our time.

The story takes us back to East London, South Africa 1938 when a young museum curator, Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer went down to examine a trawler catch and found a fish that was so beautiful that the image stayed with her for the rest of her life, but a fish that was mysteriously unidentifiable and strange.

Throughout the book the people who see the Coelacanth, especially unexpectedly, all seem to have a moment when they realise they are seeing something unique, perhaps because it is so unlike modern fish.

I learnt about the Coelacanth of course, I am sure that anyone who studied Zoology or Marine Biology did. Even on me the very small segment of course spent on it stirred the imagination and this book about how it was discovered, exposed to modern science and slowly revealed and the layers of mystery were slowly peeled back was just amazing. Loved this book.

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### **GoldGato says**

Old Four Legs. While that may sound like someone leaving a pub run, it's really the affectionate name given to the Coelacanth, a fish thought to have been extinct until its mind-altering appearance in 1938. Since then,

more have surfaced with their electrifying blue color and prehistoric everything else. They were supposed to be extinct! How amazing. Like Jurassic Park underwater.

I first became fascinated with this living fossil thanks to a *National Geographic* issue dedicated to this strange being. This book continues that accessibility by not being very scientific and teaching the reader as much about the trade of the fishermen in the Comoros, as about the fish itself. What else is lurking down there? Captain Nemo? The Loch Ness Monster?

I believe.

Book Season = Summer (blue fish and green mojitos)

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## **Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says**

I tried to see if this fish was featured in the Jason Momoa-starrer film AQUAMAN but failed to find it there (some scenes were quite a blur, though). But maybe it wasn't really there. For this is not a violent fish.

I consider this fish, the Coelacanth (pronounced: "silly cunt"), as the rock star of all the fishes in our seas and oceans. The world was shocked when a live specimen of this fish was caught in 1938, just before the outbreak of the second world war. Utter disbelief and amazement was the initial reaction of those knowledgeable in fishes who first saw it. Another 14 years passed before a second live specimen was caught, and this was even after tremendous efforts were spent catching it, with handsome rewards put up for whoever would succeed in catching another one.

(Of course, local fishermen have been catching this fish occasionally even before this but were unaware of its rarity and importance. It was only in 1938 when the same was brought to the attention of scientists and experts, and to the world in general).

But what's so special about this fish? It is a living fossil. Before this shock of a discovery in 1938, it was known only by the fossils it had left which had been dated to be around 400 MILLION years old. How long ago is 400 million years? That was before human beings (and their precursors) ever existed, before the dinosaurs, before the early mammals, before the early amphibians. This fish was in fact among the early fishes suspected to have learned how to walk on land, then evolved into reptiles and amphibians and dinosaurs and ultimately humans, in an evolutionary process involving millions of years.

It is even very much older than another living fossil (subject of my earlier good review), the Wollemi Pine, called the "Dinosaur Tree" because prior to its discovery in a remote part of Australia it was known to have been extinct also after flourishing during the age of the dinosaurs.

This 1938 fish was said to have been caught by a deep sea trawler somewhere in the Indian Ocean, near the Comoros Islands located between the African mainland and the island of Madagascar. Several decades after, however, the world was again astounded when another live specimen was caught in the seas of Indonesia.

Any fisherman who catches another Coelacanth in a place other than Indonesia and the Comoros islands could become rich and famous. But it seems this is a fish which is not easy to find, much less catch, even though it is a large fish which can grow to as big as 6 feet and as heavy as 200 plus pounds. For not only is it rare, it also stays in underwater caves during daytime and go out only at night to hunt for food (basically just staying in one place and waiting for food (squid, small fishes, etc.) to come near it. It also does not survive in captivity. If you catch a live one and haul it up to shallow waters, it wouldn't be able to survive the stress and will die slowly even if you set it free. No one knows how they mate but recent discoveries show that the female Coelacanth hatch her eggs inside her and give birth to baby Coelacanths.

Some other strange characteristics of this fish (aside from its appearance) are: it is edible but does not taste great; if you eat it, you most likely will have diarrhoea later; it sometimes swim vertically with its head pointed at the ocean floor; its four limb-like fins appear to be rotating while swimming; it is covered by very hard scales; and it has a strange puppy dog tail.

You can find rare footages of this fish live underwater at youtube.

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### **Lara says**

This is not really about the coelacanth itself, but is, instead, about the men and women involved in first realizing what it was and what it meant when one was caught by fishermen in 1938, and about the quest to find out where they live and how they function. I suppose you could call it a modern history of the coelacanth, though a fairly shallow one. I would have liked more back story--information about the first coelacanth fossils found and what people thought about them when they were discovered, etc., but I guess there are other books for that. As it is, it's an interesting story, just...very light on details.

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### **Daren says**

This is a well written book of good pace and very good explanation - and with the subject matter that was necessary, to stop it turning text-book.

In 1938 a fish was caught by a fishing boat off the coast of South Africa. The local museum curator took it from the fishermen, and despite it being Christmas time, set about trying to contact people to assist with the identification. The fish was a Coelacanth, thought long extinct.

This is the story of the curator, Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer, or JLB Smith, an amateur ichthyologist (fish scientist!) and of Mark Erdmann, a marine biologist. The story travels from South Africa to the Comoro Islands, to Mozambique to Indonesia.

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### **Marta Rodriguez says**

I am not into non-fiction... this book was absolutely fascinating!! As a boat owner, I've always dreaming of this happening to me.

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## **Jessica says**

This was my second time with this one. The first time was several years ago when it was a new-ish release, long before kids. This time it was a morning read-aloud selection. K gave it a 3, L gave it a 5...no surprise there, she loves the true stories of weird and wonderful things. It doesn't get too much weirder than the coelacanth. This is the story of the odd 'living fossil' and how it was identified by the scientific community. In particular, I love the story of Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer, the head of a very small South African museum, who happened to recognize the first specimen as a very special fish in 1938. The book feels only a little out of date now, since it was written before the sequencing of the coelacanth genome in 2013, but little matter. We've got the Google, and coelacanth science moves about as slowly as the fish reproduces...that is to say, really very slowly.

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## **Brett Miller says**

What a delightful little book about the crowd pleasing living fossil. I would have thought a book about this subject would become bloated at times, but the pace of the book and the number of facts she included were spot on. I enjoyed how she framed the story from the beginning off her experience in the Comoros with the fisherman-and throughout the story she never let the scientists or the European side dominate, frequently returning to local customs and interviews.

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## **Evelyn says**

"The fact that living coelacanths could escape detection in an area well studied by ichthyologists for over 100 years is wonderful". I would add amazing to this thought. What other mysteries are out there waiting to be discovered?

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## **J.M. says**

Excellent book. The writing grabs you from the first page and reels you in (no pun intended). I'm not even a big fan of fish, but at times I couldn't put this down. I'd definitely be interested in reading more by this author on other subjects, as she made this one so accessible.

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