



The Medusa and the Snail: More Notes of a Biology Watcher

Lewis Thomas

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The medusa is a tiny jellfish that lives on the ventral surface of a sea slug found in the Bay of Naples. Readers will find themselves caught up in the fate of the medusa and the snail as a metaphor for eternal issues of life and death as Lewis Thomas further extends the exploration of a man and his world begun in "The Lives of a Cell." Among the treasures in this magnificent book are essays on the human genius for making mistakes, on disease and natural death, on cloning, on warts, and on Montaigne, as well as an assessment of medical science and health care. In these essays and others, Thomas once again conveys his observations of the scientific world in prose marked by wonder and wit.

The Medusa and the Snail: More Notes of a Biology Watcher Details

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Author : Lewis Thomas

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From Reader Review The Medusa and the Snail: More Notes of a Biology Watcher for online ebook

Kathy Petersen says

This is a thoroughly pleasant little book, a compilation of short, simple, thoughtful essays about a random collection of topics by a physician whose interests are centered on biology but range more widely and quite articulately. With that excessively long but grammatically correct sentence, I will stop.

Sam Motes says

An interesting collection of thoughts by a prominent biologist on a diverse set of topics. His sense of humor makes this an engaging read.

Jane says

This is a book that I will cherish. If asked what book I'd choose if I were in isolation The Medusa and the Snail would be a fierce contender for MVP.

Heidi says

An interesting science author writes on interesting social implications of science and scientific examples of social organization. The book is from 1974 but still feels pretty current - I'm actually surprised we've known some of this stuff since the 70s. The topics were wide ranging, including death, symbiosis, the history of science, specifically about antibiotics and the medical world, and some predictions of the future of science. One of my favorite points was that the world is made of very complex systems and the biggest blunders are often the result of people trying to meddle with one very small part and not realizing the many implications. He also derided colleges for encouraging students, particularly pre-med students to study the sciences too early and directionally - stifling the real scientific urges and curiosity. Finally, and with recourse to old poetry, he speaks of a mishandling of concepts of disease, injury and death - hiding death away from people. I recommend the book overall, and apparently it's the sequel to a bestseller so I might have to track down his other books.

Heather Denkmire says

What a lovely little book. I don't know why it feels little to me; the subjects are pithy and the thoughts are big. I suppose it's how he made everything so basic and simple. I especially liked his sense of humor. (Paraphrasing:) "Consider highly complex systems such as a dense urban center or a hamster."

David says

I read the famous first book by this author, "The Lives of a Cell", way back in my college years and loved it. I think I also read this collection of essays, but when I came across it recently, I felt like it was worth a second look. I enjoyed it quite a bit. The writing style is clever and witty, and the insights are good even after three decades. Since Lewis was a physician by training, many of the essays are grounded in medical research or issues. But he also considers language, music, etymology, biology, death, warts, grammar, and much more. He clearly has a sense of wonder for the world around him, which I have come to consider so important and valuable.

Lynne King says

"If Montaigne had possessed a deep knowledge of twentieth-century biology, he would have been Lewis Thomas."

So quoted Edward O. Lewis on the back cover of this paperback. Now I'm beginning to feel that I'm about to commence upon another magical mystery tour as I've never heard of this individual before. According to the Wikipedia, and I hope the following information is correct:

"Edward O. Wilson is an American biologist, researcher (sociobiology, biodiversity), theorist (consilience, biophilia), naturalist (conservationist) and author. His biological specialty is myrmecology, the study of ants, on which he is considered to be the world's leading authority".

I've never come across an ant specialist before. Surely that must be rather boring after a while?

I have also never heard of Lewis Thomas, who was a doctor, a poet, and an essayist among other things but the title intrigued me and as I like anything to do with biology that was enough to spark my interest. But what could the "medusa", a jellyfish, possibly have in common with a "snail" and what kind of snail is this? Well I was soon to be enlightened. But is the author playing games here because it's a question of a symbiotic, well indirectly as not everything is shared, relationship between a jelly fish and a nudibranch, in other words your common sea slug. But this is no ordinary slug, oh no, it's a member of Nudibranchia, a group of soft-bodied, marine gastropod mollusks which shed their shell after their larval stage and this all happens in the Bay of Naples.

This is a delightful book with a collection of relatively short essays covering so many subjects and they are all rather witty even when dealing with somewhat sad issues such as death. But Mr Thomas' take on the latter is delightful. We have a physician here but with eclectic tastes as is apparent throughout the different essays in the book. In one it all happens in the Tucson Zoo with the beavers, otters and ants (now remember the ants!); others on warts, meddling, committees, premedical curriculum, medical lessons from history, cloning, etc. I preferred the essay on the medusa and the snail with a close second in a wonderful essay on why Montaigne is not a bore. That particular essay was so witty. Also I began to wonder why Wilson had given his particular quote on Montaigne. It appeared extraneous to the book but it certainly wasn't.

I've never really thought of bacteria in a positive way although I've always thought that they are pretty deadly and they are running all over our body (admittedly we can't see them and that's a relief) and also within but now I've found out that they are essential for our life on earth:

"Without bacteria for starters, we would never have had enough oxygen to go around, nor could we have found and fixed the nitrogen for making enzymes, nor could we recycle the solid matter of life for new

generations.”

Thomas feels that we are a species still at the learning stage, fumbling around with our language and thought processes and yet, we're not that bad really because we have music and we have the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, so that cannot be all bad.

There's a wonderful description on the evolution of medicine and the strange practices that were carried on. There's an interesting concept at the beginning of the 20th century, “the theory of auto-intoxication, evolved, and a large part of therapy was directed at emptying the large intestine and keeping it empty.” I wonder how they managed to achieve that.

It must be remembered that this book was published in 1974 and science is viewed so differently nowadays, as it has naturally evolved so much.

He also believes that medicine has now returned to magic and changes in health fads, and running has now acquired the medicinal value formerly attributed to rare herbs from Indonesia. Why Indonesia?

As for DNA, yes it has been scientifically proven but the author still believes we are here by chance.

In conclusion, this is a thought-provoking book, with amusing turns of phrase but at the same time a delight to read; and also to be taken down from the shelf to be read in the future. I'm so pleased that I discovered it. The author's whole book as a biology watcher is fascinating and makes me envious that I never worked in this area. It's never too late I guess...

Cindy Sikkema says

This book is aaaahhhhhmazing! So amazing, in fact, that if I were Queen of the World I would make it required reading for the entire planet.

It's filled with brilliant, slightly off kilter observations about all kinds of things, most of which circle back to the human experience. I'd quote some of it here, but it's better to get into Dr. Thomas' head and splash around a little -- an undeniably refreshing experience.

Read it and I doubt you'll come away with any less than one (or two hundred) AHA! moments.

Dan says

I have fairly jumbled thoughts about this book - perhaps because the writing style is so disorderly itself. The book opens with some really interesting and unique perspectives on the state of science and society in general. There were a few key phrases that really caught my attention and inspired one of those "aha!" moments that are the hallmark of a master writer and observationist. Unfortunately, what starts out as a quirky philosophical romp with the author rapidly sours. The essay style becomes somewhat inappropriate after a while when some of the topics loom so large and get such short shrift. By the time that Lewis Thomas got towards the end of the book, he had quite lost my attention and sympathy - what with many of the essays sounding much more random rants than anything inspired.

Disappointing in the end, but the first third of the book was pretty incredible and makes me want to read more of Thomas' works. There is no doubt that he is an excellent writer. I guess it was silly of me to read this book before *The Lives of a Cell*.

Terry Bonner says

What can I say? This was the book that inspired me to go to medical school. It will always hold a special place in my heart.

Krista says

The only solid piece of scientific truth about which I feel totally confident is that we are profoundly ignorant about nature. Indeed, I regard this as the major discovery of the past hundred years of biology. It is, in its way, an illuminating piece of news... It is this sudden confrontation with the depth and scope of ignorance that represents the most significant contribution of twentieth-century science to the human intellect.

In the blurb for *The Medusa and the Snail*, it says that listening to this book on audio “is like being fortunate enough to sit next to the most intelligent and witty guest at a dinner party“, and that is a very apt analogy. Listening to the thoughts of Lewis Thomas – a poet-physician and old-fashioned public intellectual – on subjects ranging from the horrific symbiotic nature of the two title creatures to public health policy to word origins can be inconsistently interesting but constantly impressive. Thomas had a sense of humour, dry and ironic, that made even the most esoteric subjects relatable, and it was most intriguing to me that, forty years after its publication, so much of his thought on science is still relevant today.

Mistakes are at the very base of human thought feeding the structure like root nodules. If we were not provided with the knack of being wrong, we could never get anything useful done.

When Thomas speaks about computers, they are room-sized with vacuum tubes and punch cards, but even at the time he could conceive of their power. And whether talking about computers or the idea of human cloning, he warns of the same danger: mistakes should be built into all human-made systems since it is the mutations and hiccups that have driven everything from evolution to art.

The capacity to blunder slightly is the real marvel of DNA. Without this special attribute, we would still be anaerobic bacteria and there would be no music.

While I was fairly bored during an entire essay on word origins which ended on an examination of the word “hubris”, I did enjoy the next essay about the debate that was raging at the time over whether or not scientists should be manipulating viruses at the risk of creating an uncontrollable superbug: with accusations of *hubris* from one side and anti-science ignorance from the other. As I see this debate is still playing out today, it was interesting to me to see where Thomas landed (the pursuit of all knowledge is noble but there should be limits to how it is used).

As with the essay on etymology, there was a strange one on punctuation:

Sometimes you get a glimpse of a semicolon coming, a few lines farther on, and it is like climbing a steep path through woods and seeing a wooden bench just at a bend in the road ahead, a place where you can expect to sit for a moment, catching your breath.

But for every essay like this that seemed like private musings (or like how to imagine that the universe is revolving around the tip of your pencil), there was one like an examination of warts, of all things, that had me completely fascinated. The breadth of the subject matter in this small collection ought to guarantee that there's something interesting for everyone within it, and I'd have to agree that Lewis Thomas would have made an ideal dinner guest; if only because you could turn your attention to someone else if Thomas had started rambling about something less than fascinating.

Adrian Colesberry says

I read this back in high school, but I reread the introduction recently. There's a fascinating discussion of the history of pharmaceuticals in the 20th century. When Thomas was trained as a doctor, the pharmaceutical industry, then patent medicine industry, was being placed firmly under the thumb of doctors, who had surgical techniques and other therapies that far surpassed the effectiveness of the medicines being sold. Then sulfa drugs and penicillin changed the game and pharmaceuticals took over, even though they never came up with anything even half as good as penicillin. In many ways, pharmacy as a whole is still riding on the coattails of penicillin.

Neilina Corbeau says

It took me a little time to adjust to Lewis Thomas' sense of humour. It's somewhat unconventional. But once I got it, it was kinda hilarious. The last popular science book I read was by Richard Dawkins and Thomas certainly has a very different writing style than Dawkins. It was great though. Some great ideas were expressed. It did feel very tangential at times, but I was ok with that. The part on Transcendental Metaworry was pretty hilarious. The current state of health, cloning, and other topics were covered that gave me some new perspectives which I appreciated.

Jim says

Thomas is best known for *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher*, a book I read in high school of which I have only the vaguest of recollections. I remember liking it, but it seems to have dribbled away. I can't find that old copy either. I'm buying both books through Abebooks for under \$7. Both won awards & are collections of essays published in 1974, many in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. His wonders wander over a variety of topics; medicine, biology, general science, linguistics, & some off the wall topics like how much he enjoys Michel de Montaigne's essays & why. He often displays a subtle humor, but occasionally a simmering sarcasm. He doesn't give in to the last often, but several times he mentions how far we've come only to realize how little we know. There is no going back, so we must press on even though it isn't comfortable.

Wikipedia:

Lewis Thomas (November 25, 1913 – December 3, 1993) was an American physician, poet, etymologist, essayist, administrator, educator, policy advisor, and researcher.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewis_Th...

Audio is not the best way to read this book. The chapters, each a disparate essay, are short, but contain a lot of information & need contemplation. He tends to large ideas & often leaves me with questions, especially given that his views are 40 years old, yet seem so pertinent today. I'm buying the paperback so I can read some chapters closer.

One of the things I wanted to reread was when he was talking about how some diseases are simply our body over-reacting to a disease. I think meningitis was one. Apparently many are infected, but only a few respond to it poorly & then it's awful. Did I get that right?

I was also intrigued by how he put harmful bacteria in to a different perspective. They're not preying on us. They're just evolution gone a bit wrong. They're too similar & that causes bad side effects. There is a very tiny number that are interested in us at all & most of those are beneficial. That's a neat way of looking at it. It's amazing how much we've extended life in the past century.

I can't do an in-depth review for this edition, but will wait until I can go through the paperback. I wouldn't do his ideas justice. I will say that if you can't read it in print, this is the next best thing. Just be ready to pause & rewind occasionally. Listen closely. Excellent.

Elise says

Lewis Thomas has a way of making science understandable and attractive to the "lay" scientist. Barring his evolutionary worldview, he is spot on.

Julie says

I love this man's mind. This is the first I've read by him. I've neglected "The lives of a cell; notes of a biology watcher" despite several people recommending it to me. Now I am eager to read it. This Thomas is playful, funny and loves biology, music and language and somehow blends the three in some of his essays. A delight.

Judy Richey says

A must read for anyone who loves nature, one of my top 10

Jake Berlin says

just as delightful as thomas's classic "the lives of a cell". as always, some chapters will thrill you more than others, but there's always plenty for everyone -- not to mention just "plenty"; rarely has such a short book

packed so many ideas into it. and thomas's writing is as brilliant and lovely on the ear as ever. "on punctuation" is a fun little romp that any writing nerd would enjoy.

Petra X says

[My favourite is cassiopeia whic

Brian Switek says

Ah, a book from a time when science writers composed beautiful essays that respected the intelligence of the reader. The Medusa and the Snail is a wandering exploration of our nature that is fully at home with the questions that drive discovery, science, and our struggle to come to terms with ourselves. It's so comfortable a chat that the implications of the last page and a half sneak up on you, yet the thread was there all along. I should have read this earlier, but I'm glad I read it now.
