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The Dancing Bees: Karl Von Frisch And The Discovery Of The Honeybee Language



Synopsis

We think of bees as being among the busiest workers in the garden, admiring them for their productivity. But amid their buzzing, they are also great communicators and unusual dancers. As Karl von Frisch (1886–1982) discovered during World War II, bees communicate the location of food sources to each other through complex circle and waggle dances. For centuries, beekeepers had observed these curious movements in hives, and others had speculated about the possibility of a bee language used to manage the work of the hive. But it took von Frisch to determine that the bees' dances communicated precise information about the distance and direction of food sources. As Tania Munz shows in this exploration of von Frisch's life and research, this important discovery came amid the tense circumstances of the Third Reich. *The Dancing Bees* draws on previously unexplored archival sources in order to reveal von Frisch's full story, including how the Nazi government in 1940 determined that he was one-quarter Jewish, revoked his teaching privileges, and sought to prevent him from working altogether until circumstances intervened. In the 1940s, bee populations throughout Europe were facing the devastating effects of a plague (just as they are today), and because the bees were essential to the pollination of crops, von Frisch's research was deemed critical to maintaining the food supply of a nation at war. The bees, as von Frisch put it years later, saved his life. Munz not only explores von Frisch's complicated career in the Third Reich, she looks closely at the legacy of his work and the later debates about the significance of the bee language and the science of animal communication. This first in-depth biography of von Frisch paints a complex and nuanced portrait of a scientist at work under Nazi rule. *The Dancing Bees* will be welcomed by anyone seeking to better understand not only this chapter of the history of science but also the peculiar waggles of our garden visitors. Â

Book Information

Hardcover: 296 pages

Publisher: University Of Chicago Press (May 10, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 022602086X

ISBN-13: 978-0226020860

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

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Customer Reviews

I finally know the answer to a trivia question more of us should know the answer to: Karl von Frisch. Herr Professor von Frisch was the German scientist that described how the "dance" that bees do when they come back with news of a new nectar or pollen source conveys the location of the goodies. Amongst other things, of course. And while "The Dancing Bees" is of great interest to us, the rest of von Frisch's story, both scientific and human, is worth knowing, too. In her new book, Tania Munz entertainingly but factually, clearly, and succinctly, tells us von Frisch's story. Tania Munz, previously at Northwestern University and a fellow at the Max Planck Institute in Berlin, and now the Vice President for Research and Scholarship at the Linda Hall Library in Kansas City, has written a welcome biography of von Frisch, bringing a hitherto poorly-known but very successful scientist out from the back of the dusty cupboard of mid-twentieth century history so that we might meet him and appreciate his work and life. Her biography of the German scientist is the first of serious depth in English, at the very least. Karl von Frisch was born into a successful family of German professionals and academics; his father was a noted surgeon, his mother's family included lawyers, physicists, physicians and artists, nearly all of them holding university professorships, and the trend would continue with Karl and his brothers. Karl began his professional training with three years of medical school, but subsequently diverted onto the path of biology and behavioral science and neurology in animals, in spite of passing his exams with distinction.

No, really. I've been a hobbyist beekeeper all my life, read von Frische's books and have a good library of entomology, esp. honeybees and the hymenoptera, including a dozen antiquarian bee books. My training was in philosophy and a special intersat in philosophy and history of science. Cherry on top, my family was from Bavaria, spoke German at home and I've studied a little on Nazi history and the aftermath. This is not a book for the bees are disappearing and I love them crowd. There are plenty of books on bee dancing which will suit them better. Muntz describes the process by which a scientist (ethologist) came to investigate the means by which the honeybee finds her food and the sensorium she deploys in her search. Frisch refined his experiments over his lifetime and this part of the story is well told. It's interesting toward the end when Frisch is compelled to revise his assumptions and observations. Science on the ground. I had forgotten the

clever markings which allowed Frisch to specifically identify hundreds of individuals in the hive. Skipping to the German thing, we learn here how it was possible (for the lucky few) to maneuver within the Purity Laws (Frisch was one quarter Jew). It's a touchy subject, to say the least. But as the philosopher Bernard Williams put it, many choices are not black and white, but morally thick. On some pages, Muntz is exculpatory on other condemnatory. I understand the urge to be one or another, the reader hopefully will find Williams a surer guide. It's the theory of science thing which wiggled my neurons. (1) Early on she remarks how Frisch's B&W films condition the viewer (us) to see color and smell odors where none are present.

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