

## **Book Review of *Robbing the Bees: A Biography of Honey, the Sweet Liquid That Seduced the World***

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*Robbing the Bees: A Biography of Honey, the Sweet Liquid That Seduced the World* by Holly Bishop. Free Press, 2005.

Various news media outlets are broadcasting investigative stories on the disappearance of bees. From mainstream newspapers to late-night radio call-in shows, the “buzz” is about the mysterious demise of honeybees, known as Colony Collapse Disorder, around the country.

A month ago I would have paid scant attention to the stories. But that was before I heard author Holly Bishop discussing her book, *Robbing the Bees*, on public radio.

I admit that my only acquaintance with bees has been on the receiving end of locally produced honey given to me by a beekeeper friend. But hearing Bishop’s enthusiasm for *Apis mellifera* was infectious and I was game to increase my bee knowledge.

Bishop provides the history, theory and practice of beekeeping in her book in a way that keeps the reader’s attention without sounding like a “how-to” manual by introducing Donald Smiley, a beekeeper in Wewahitchka, Florida. Interspersed between historical facts is the modern-day tale of Smiley’s beekeeping business, as well as chronicles of Bishop’s own foray into beekeeping, a device that maintains the writer’s fascination with her subject without becoming as dry as an old honeycomb.

If forced to choose which part of the book I enjoyed most, I would be hard pressed to name a favorite. Don Smiley became an old friend as his story unfolded and I expect that I’ll be ordering some of his famed tupelo honey in the near future. The descriptions of him “robbing his bees” left me sweating as if I, too, was wearing the heavy white suit and veiled hat while tending the hives.

But then there are the many interesting facts about bees that Bishop drops on nearly every page, such as how early beekeepers kept their hives on barges that they floated up and down rivers to take advantage of the various blooming times of flowers. Or how they used hives as weapons to dissuade invading armies from advancing. Or the many, many uses that have been found for honey, from currency to medicine. And then there is whole hierarchy of the bee hive—how can I not like a society run by a queen who has a devoted following of male drones?

Some people might be tempted to dabble in beekeeping after reading this book. I am not one of them. But I have extracted a promise from my honey source to allow me to watch the next time his hives are ready to be emptied (a promise I suspect was given in order to stop my incessant questioning).

This book makes a convincing case for the importance of bees and pollination in the cycle of life—

animal, plant, and human—that cannot be ignored. Searching for a solution to Colony Collapse Disorder may not be a popular cause but it is one that needs to be addressed. We can at least learn more about honeybees—and Bishop’s book is the perfect start for that subject.