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Coral Gardens



Synopsis

Bound in publisher's original blue cloth over boards. Profusely illustrated in full color. Dust jacket lightly rubbed at head.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Text: English, German (translation)

Another triumph for the lifetime career of Leni Riefenstahl. She broke new ground in every endeavor of her pursuits in film, acting, writing, and now deep sea photography. She developed new equipment techniques for this and the results are in this beautiful book of underwater sea life. The most incredible fact is that she was in her 80's when she began this new craft, doing the diving herself.

Leni Riefenstahl was a great, if politically controversial, movie director, but only later in her life she picked up photography in a serious way. Her books on the Nubians The Last of the Nuba are justly famous. Then, at age 70 (yes, seventy) she decided to pick up SCUBA diving so as to be able to photograph the underwater wonders she had seen in Kenya. She lied about her age, she looked much younger so she could easily pass for a 50 yo when she was 70, and signed up for a course. In a few years she had produced what at the time must have been one of the best underwater photography books around. The book also has a few pages of introduction by the author on how and why she got in this new challenge so late in her life. Today, of course, technology has improved a

lot and some of these pictures do not look so impressive. Also, some may have been blown up too much and show much grain and poor resolution. But this book must be seen in the context of what underwater photography was 40 years ago, in the early seventies. Today, it is still a must for collectors of underwater photography history books. Translations into German, Italian and perhaps other languages are available in the second hand market.

Few individuals have had a more convoluted career, spanning eras, ideologies, and interests. Leni Riefenstahl will be, first and foremost, famous for her 1935 documentary, "Triumph of the Will" which chronicled the Nazi party congress rally in Nuremberg in 1934, and is often considered one of the most influential propagandistic movies ever made. Ms. Riefenstahl was only 32 at the time, and although at the epicenter of Nazi power, always claimed to be naïve as to the politics and intent of the regime. She insisted the movie was primarily a demonstration of her artistic skills, and there seems to be little disagreement that she was a master of this art form. In the rough-hewed justice that the Allies administered after the war, she was interned in various American and French concentration camps for a period of three years. In the post-war era she was never able to produce serious films, with the stain of her association with the Nazi leadership thwarting her attempts. None of the above is mentioned in this beautiful book of underwater photography, but the knowledge of her background underscores this significant achievement. In the post-war era she is probably most famous for her book, "Nuba," a photographic documentary of an African tribe. I felt "Coral Gardens" all the more remarkable, since Ms. Riefenstahl learned how to scuba dive at 72 (lying about her age so she could obtain a certificate). The series of photographs commences with a wonderfully composed "still-life" of a beaker sponge and two gorgonians. The side lighting (done with a "slave" remote flash) and natural surface lighting are most effective. In subsequent photos, she captures angelfish, goatfish, lion fish, parrot fish, coral trout, snappers, butterfly fish, barracuda, argus, as well as others. For the invertebrates, she photographed stinging coral, tube-worms, starfish, sponges, nudibranch, alcyonarian coral, feather stars, and others. There are even a few pictures of her "in action" in the underwater world. Her photograph of the male peacock flounder is most unusual; she also managed to capture the stone fish (which she calls a hairy stingfish, indicating that the common nomenclature is far from being standardized) both in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean. The book begins with a few short chapters on her introduction to diving, ending with a standard "ecological plea" for people and governments to do more to protect the underwater heritage. I felt the book could have been improved by a brief biography, as outlined in the first paragraph above. Furthermore, although there is an appendix which identifies the subject matter of

each photograph, including Latin names, it lacked dates, including time of year. There could also have been a further explanation on the photo equipment used, as well as the diving resorts involved. I also felt that a few of the photographs were enlarged too much for this book, which diminished their crispness. Overall though, it is one of the best books of underwater photography, composed by an individual with eclectic interests and a most unusual "career path." Becoming a propagandist for the natural world is a path of redemption for one who once worked for one of the most evil and reprehensible regimes in the 20th Century. She died in 2003, at the age of 101.

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