

UC SANTA BARBARA

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[Harrison Tasoff](#)

Ichthyology meets ‘Through the Looking Glass,’ in pen and ink

So, you want to learn about fish. And you’ve heard that UC Santa Barbara’s Milton Love is one of the foremost ichthyologists on the West Coast, known for mixing his exhaustive knowledge on rock fishes with a pinch of irreverent humor. You pick up his new book, [“Gonzo Ichthyology,”](#) as an edifying summer read.

Well, strap in and strap on for a wild ride through the fascinating field of fish biology and the zany brilliance of Love, buoyed by the wild and wonderful illustrations of biologist and artist Jessica Eggers.

“Gonzo” is not a bromine beach book. When the reader extends their hand in introduction, Love and Eggers take that as an invitation to place their unsuspecting reader in a headlock and engage in a bit of good-natured sparring. And the authors expect their readers not to pull any punches once they come to.

“First, we should emphasize that this is our book and, as such, we make the rules,” the authors state in the preface. “Yes, you are reading this book and may have paid for this copy, but that only makes you the owner of this copy.”

“Gonzo” is less technical treatise and more creative experimentation. “The book is supposed to be a work of art,” said Love, who previously penned the more academic (yet still whimsical) volume “Certainly More Than You Want to Know about the Fishes of the Pacific Coast: A Postmodern Experience” (Really Big Press, 2011).

Art, as Love sees it, is about conveying truth to a viewer, listener or reader. In this case, that would be truth about fishes transmitted through illustrations and the written word. "Sometimes the connection to fish is very tenuous," he admitted, such as an entire spread on the symmetry between the life of Argentinian dictator Juan Perón and great moments in ichthyological history.

The book was a long time coming, although neither author may have known this. Several years back, Love was searching Eggers' Etsy site for a specific anglerfish T-shirt to gift to a colleague. Not finding it, he messaged her. "We started emailing back and forth, and she eventually said one of her goals was to produce an ichthyology textbook in the form of a graphic novel," he recalled.

"I read those words, and I thought, 'I must have been a saint in a previous life, and



Photo Credit
Jessica Eggers

Jessica Eggers is a globetrotting fisheries biologist with an inspired talent for illustration. Born in South Africa and raised in Kenya and Switzerland, she didn't live near an ocean until attending university in Australia. She eventually earned a master's degree in fisheries management back in South Africa and now lives on a houseboat in the Dutch canals.

Eggers still finds the watery world both fantastical and fascinating, and wanted to create a work to share these feelings. "I started doing a couple of sample pages for myself and realized that it was going to be a huge chunk of work," she said.

Meanwhile, Love is an emeritus research biologist with decades of expertise in research, publishing and, yes, fish. After that first email, the two hit it off over a joint vision for a creative exploration of an ichthyological persuasion: Love would provide the facts and the wit, and Eggers would bring it to life in illustration. "It came together perfectly," she said.

And the literati seem to agree. The book has already garnered notice from The Association of Illustrators, which has [longlisted the work](#) for the 2026 World Illustration Awards.

Egger's style can be described as the love child of Peter Broegel and M.C. Escher, raised by Aubrey Beardsley. Her pen-and-ink images with meticulous stippling recall early biological illustrations. And yet the spirit often cleaves closer to the swirling psychedelia of Martin Sharp.

Eggers tried to balance the book between wonky and whimsy. "I would think about the subject matter and how to make it fishy," she said. "And when the text was too fishy, then I would try to pull it into a more cultural or artistic dimension."

You may think the artist needed to coax the veteran biologist out of his comfort zone, but Eggers was more often the balancing force to the madcap Love. "Sometimes I would write things that were just weird, and Jess would try to pull back the riff into the normal with her illustrations," Love admitted. "Meanwhile, her rendering of topics like the lateral line system would be more artistic to bring it out of the purely mundane."

Alongside treatments of fish biology and the history of ichthyology are some truly perplexing sections. The idea for the *Mis-en-abyme* “Rosie Minnow Frontier Ichthyologist” literally came to Love in a dream. He fleshed out the character and sent the idea to Eggers, who responded a couple weeks later with a fully realized introduction to the fictitious comic.

And there’s the Juan Perón riff. Why?

“Well, to answer that question, you have to ask the question, what are all the riffs for?” Love countered. “And it comes back to art.” A major function of art is to surprise the viewer, he said. “And when I thought that section up, it was part and parcel of that. It was something that would surprise and engage the reader.”

Surprise is also intrinsic to Love’s unique manner of blending science with humor, although he says the two often mix like oil and water. “Humor is antithetical to scientific writing,” he said, “because humor is based on surprise, which is the absolute worst thing you can put in a scientific study. You have to present your data like in a newspaper.” But the wonder and serendipity of humor find a natural home in science itself, where every discovery is a surprise and the bizarre is commonplace.

“Certainly More” included a hearty dose of humorous riffs and anecdotes — Love estimates about 20% of the book’s content — far more than the standard textbook usually devotes to such things. “‘Gonzo’ is 60% riffs and 40% facts,” Love said, “and is much less tethered to my interest in sales.”

In fact, editors had great trouble shoehorning the manuscript into any particular genre. Toward the end of a long and fruitless search, Eggers had even suggested pitching the book to the Library of Congress. Love acquiesced, and wrote a very sympathetic rejection letter for them with a stamped envelope, “to soften the blow,” he said. “But they didn’t even have the courtesy to stick my letter in my envelope!”

Rather than change the work to fit the marketing, the authors decided to self publish. And Love said he’d be satisfied even if the work doesn’t sell a single copy. “Like any artist, first you please yourself, and then if other people want to come along on the ride, great,” he said. “This book is one of the coolest things I’ve ever

done.”

Eggers is also proud of how the book came out, though she is quite keen on it gaining some commercial traction, as well, if only so she can repair her houseboat. “I wanted to create a coalescence of science communication and art,” she said. “A work that would share that fascination and that knowledge I learned through my studies.”

Love and Eggers freely admit in the book that they are “just messing with you.” And joke that they “have never claimed that this book is anything more than the product of an ego that demands to be continuously fed, and is certainly not meant to teach you much of anything.”

Yet, despite the authors’ best efforts, you may actually learn something.

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