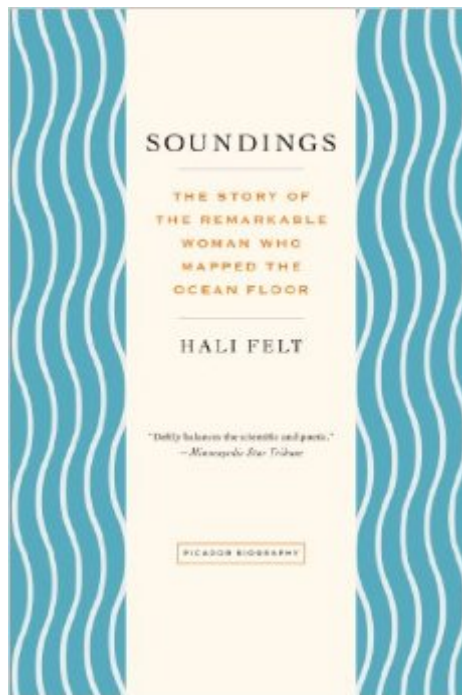


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Soundings: The Story Of The Remarkable Woman Who Mapped The Ocean Floor



Synopsis

"Deftly balances the scientific and poetic." •Minneapolis Star Tribune"Soundings is an eloquent testament both to Tharp's importance and to Felt's powers of imagination." •The New York Times Book Review

Before Marie Tharp's groundbreaking work in the 1950s, the ocean floor was a mystery •then, as now, we knew less about the bottom of the sea than we did about outer space. In a time when women were held back by the casually sexist atmosphere of mid-twentieth-century academia •a time when trained geologists and scientists like Tharp were routinely relegated to the role of secretary or assistant •Tharp's work would completely change the world's understanding of our planet's evolution. By transforming dry data into beautifully detailed maps that laid the groundwork for proving the then controversial theory of continental drift, Tharp, along with her lifelong partner in science, Bruce Heezen, upended scientific consensus and ushered in a new era in geology and oceanography. "A playful, wildly thoughtful writer" (Oprah.com), Hali Felt vividly captures the romance of scientific discovery and brings to life this "strong-willed woman living according to her own rules, defying the constraints of her time" (The Washington Post).

Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: Picador; Reprint edition (July 2, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1250031451

ISBN-13: 978-1250031457

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 1 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars • See all reviews • (36 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #32,161 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #3 in Books > Science & Math > Earth Sciences > Geology > Geomorphology #9 in Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Oceans & Seas > Oceanography #99 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Scientists

Customer Reviews

It must be hard to write convincingly about science and the often-opaque people who do science if you are not a scientist. For that reason, Ms. Felt's effort to illuminate the enigmatic Marie Tharp is convincing and interesting. It is perhaps least illuminating about the talented but impenetrable Marie Tharp, but that is not for lack of trying. Other biographers gave up trying to capture Tharp but Ms.

Felt brought her project to a most satisfactory completion. The work is more illuminating about the almost-bizarre Bruce Heezen and even more illuminating about how the world-class Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory rose to eminence. In a way, the most interesting part are her insights into its leader, Doc Ewing. Ewing was clearly a man used to getting his way and there was no one more capable of driving him mad - or at least out of LDEO - than Marie and Bruce. Especially Marie, her obstinence must have driven him nuts! On the other hand, we read a book ostensibly about Marie but at the end know almost as little about her motivations as we did at the outset. Still, it is a great read about the history of marine mapping and one woman's experience in science, at a time when doors were starting to open for a new generation of women marine geoscientists, even as they closed for Marie. That makes it a bit surprising that some of the other early women marine geoscientists are not interviewed about Marie. There were some, and some of them are still alive. Quibbles: 1) Bob Dietz - the man who coined the term "spreading seafloor", who published his Nature article a year before Hess published his "essay in geopoetry, the generous soul who referenced Hess twice and that Hess studiously ignored - is not mentioned.

In the literature of the history of science we seldom get a glimpse at the personalities involved in scientific discoveries. In Soundings Hali Felt has applied a style that can only be termed intimate to the life and times of Marie Tharp - a style that is a blend of autobiography and biography. Perhaps it will be considered sexist, but Marie Tharp could easily be called the "mother" of Plate Tectonics. Yet her name often appears only in passing when the history of the Plate Tectonic revolution is told. What was it about Marie's life story that might have presaged her accomplishments, and, why, the author repeatedly asks, does she not rate a more prominent position in the history of science? In the first half of Soundings, Hali Felt does a good job in establishing how Marie's eclectic early life and education probably provided the foundation for her unique and revolutionary approach to visualizing the ocean floor. But the author fails to document (despite several passing comments) Marie's "abundant other contributions" to marine science. Reading the second half of the book brought to mind images of Leonardo endlessly retouching La Gioconda. How significantly did Marie influence ideas that Bruce Heezen went on to publish and take credit for? What impact did the updates of her ocean floor maps have on the course of marine science after their initial dramatic appearance? To her credit, the author does not dwell on discrimination as the basis for Marie's eventual banishment from Lamont. Sexism was certainly a component of the social atmosphere of Lamont, but it was not the primary driving force that defined status at the lab. That role fell to a hierarchical system based on education, friendships, and a sustaining (and perhaps fanatical) commitment to hard work and

productivity.

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