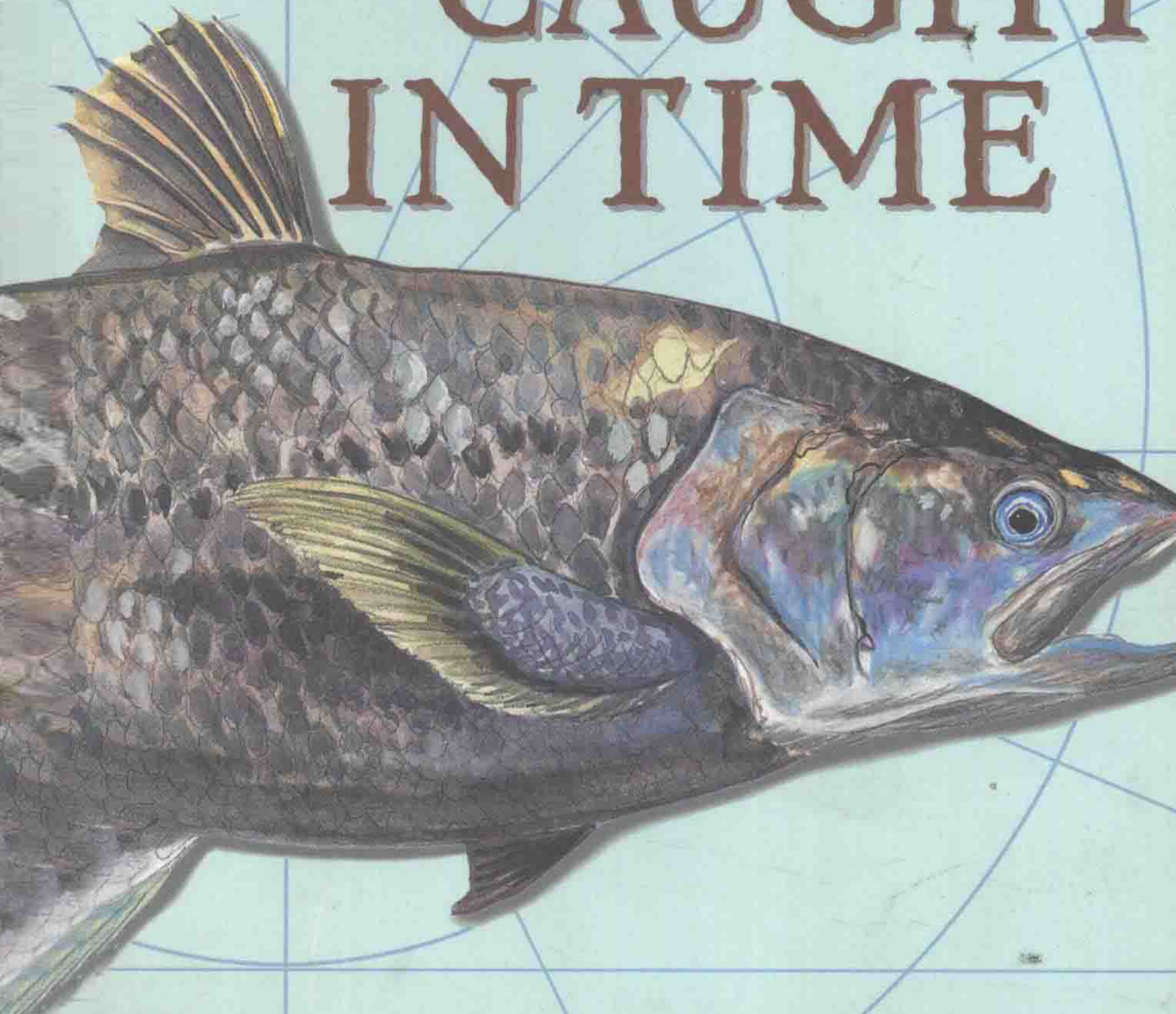
"Reads like some classic Spielberg creation—Indiana Jones let loose in a real-life Jurassic Park."

— *Mail on Sunday*, London

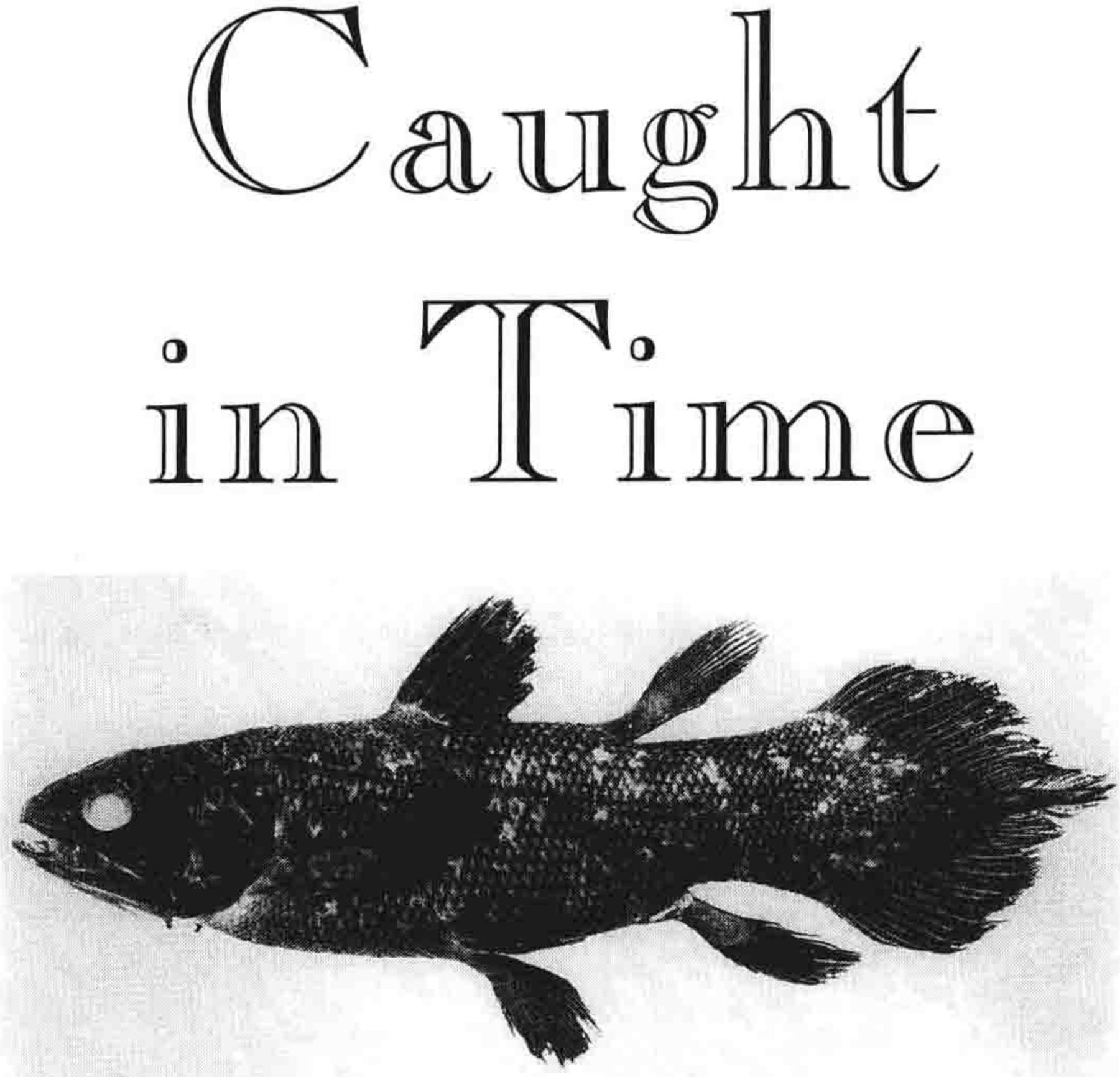
A FISH CAUGHT IN TIME



The Search for the Coelacanth

SAMANTHA WEINBERG

A Fish Caught in Time



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SAMANTHA WEINBERG

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To Mark,
hook, line, and sinker

Consider now the Coelacanth,
Our only living fossil,
Persistent as the amaranth,
And status quo apostle.
It jeers at fish unfossilized
As intellectual snobs elite;
Old Coelacanth, so unrevised
It doesn't know it's obsolete.

Ogden Nash

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Over the last few years, I have immersed myself in the coelacanth and its special world, but I could never have presumed to write a book about this, most studied of creatures, without the generous help and patience of coelacanth experts and junkies the world over.

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and their adventures. For eight months, while the discovery of the Indonesian population of coelacanths was still a secret, they trustingly kept me in the picture, and to them and to their team—Daeng Said, Tantes Ita, and Meli—I dedicate the happy ending of this book.

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INTRODUCTION

I saw my first coelacanth on February 5, 1992. It was a sultry day in the Comoros, a remote and beautiful archipelago on the western fringe of the Indian Ocean. I was researching a book about a French mercenary, Bob Denard, who had fallen in love with the tiny outpost, and staged successive coups over more than a decade, in a strong-arm attempt to make the islands his own. Only a few weeks into a six-month stay, I too was well on the way to becoming entrapped by the mysterious charm of the Comoros.

After several hours exploring the warren of narrow lanes of the medieval old town of Moroni, the capital, I was hot and bathed in sweat. I took refuge inside the grandly named Centre Nationale des Réchèrches Scientifiques—the country's only museum—hoping to find a cool space to catch my breath. But it was just as hot—only the bank has air-conditioning—and as I was about to leave, a strange exhibit caught my eye: a glass tank containing a large, stuffed, on the face of it ugly fish. It was unlike any fish I had seen before—its body was covered in scaly armor and its fins were attached by fat limb-like protuberances. It had large, yellowy-green eyes, and a surprisingly gentle expression on its prehistoric-looking face.

The sign beside the exhibit identified the creature as a coelacanth, the marine equivalent of a dinosaur—only older—and a present-day inhabitant of Comoran waters. But there was little more

information. I studied the coelacanth for a long time, rolling the strange syllables of its name around my tongue. It conjured up distant memories of nature classes at school, and picture books of bizarre, long-lost creatures. How, I wondered, had it survived, virtually unchanged, for all that time, lost at the bottom of the vast, cold ocean, watching silently as other creatures evolved and became extinct? *Homo sapiens* first walked on earth only a hundred thousand years ago; the fish before me, suspended in murky formalin, pre-dated modern man by 399.9 million years.

The coelacanth stayed in my mind during the rest of my time on the Comoro Islands. There was a shabby hotel named after it; I visited a taxidermist on Anjouan—the second-largest island—who had one on display. In my book about Denard, I used the coelacanth to illustrate the remoteness of the islands, and when I got home, I wrote a story using it as a metaphor for innocence, its discovery a metaphor for colonization. Since then, it has stayed in my thoughts, insinuating itself into conversation, trespassing through my dreams.

At the end of 1997, I decided to do something about it. I started looking into the story of the coelacanth's discovery—digging up documents and papers from the bowels of the Natural History Museum in London—and the more I discovered, the more I was hooked. When my idea for a book about this most unlikely of subjects was commissioned, I was overjoyed, and immediately set out for my beloved islands.

I spent several months in the Comoros, over two visits, much of the time with the night fishermen from the south of Grande Comore, the largest of the four islands, and a known habitat of coelacanths. One night, I was taken fishing by Hassani Ahamada, a veteran of many years of lonely nights on the ink-black ocean.

We met on a black, lava rock beach near the village of Itsoundzou, in time to launch our small wooden pirogues in the last, pink light of day. Two to each boat, we pushed them off the rocks, then paddled quickly out to sea. My fellow fishermen were a quiet group: small and wiry, they wore tatty T-shirts and holey shorts, and battered palm frond hats on their heads, even though the sun was

below their sightline. A short way from the shore, Hassani stopped briefly to let out a line, and within a minute he brought it in again, with a small silvery fish on the hook, to use as bait.

He then squatted on the front of two narrow benches that cross the narrow boat, knees under his armpits, beckoning to me to do the same. While I struggled to keep upright, Hassani rowed out to sea with strong, deft strokes, wielding his single short paddle first to one side, then to the other. His movements were swift, but controlled—even with its pair of spidery outriggers, the small pirogue is surprisingly unstable, and a sudden movement to one side could easily topple it.

As the sun slunk beneath the horizon, vertical clouds rose out of the sea, low-lit like a ghostly Gotham city. It was extraordinarily beautiful—a sky of prehistoric dimensions. Night comes quickly in the tropics—a heavy curtain drawn across the heavens—and it was soon dark. There were no lights on the shore, save for the occasional car wending its way along the coast road (even today there is no electricity this far south on Grande Comore), yet it was not lonely. I could hear the muted *plunk* of paddles hitting water, and when my eyes grew used to the night, I could see the dark silhouettes of our fellow fishermen.

They seemed to know exactly where to go. After a lifetime of nights on this inky ocean, they are intimately acquainted with every reef and cave, every dip and rise of the ocean bed. About five hundred meters from shore, Hassani carefully laid his paddles across the boat and prepared the line. He tied two flat black stones, collected from the beach, about eighteen inches above the baited hook, then let out the single line until it touched the sea bed, many hundreds of meters below. When the stone sinkers hit the bottom, he raised the line and jerked free the rocks. He then jiggled the bait along the ocean bed with a quick seesawing action of his arms, feeling its movement through his fingers.

I watched quietly, drinking in the silence of the warm night. We were both waiting, Hassani and I, for a quick tug on his line. We stayed out on the ocean for half a night, beneath the star-filled southern skies, adjusting our position from time to time, occasion-

ally hooking a small fish. Although I knew we had less than a sliver of a chance of catching a coelacanth, I was still half hoping, half dreading that we would haul the magnificent, man-sized fish up from the ocean depths. But a coelacanth never so much as flicked a fin in our direction, and I think I was pleased.

And when a barely perceptible lightening of the sky indicted the coming of dawn, we paddled swiftly back to shore, pulled our boat over the smooth, rounded black lava rocks, and carried our catch to the village to wait for the market to open at daybreak.

I could have gone out with the night fishermen again and again: the rhythm of their lives seeps into one's soul. They have been fishing in the same way for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years—like the coelacanth, the ebbs and swells of the ocean are as familiar as heartbeats. I hope, wish, pray that both man and fish will be allowed to continue their quiet lives for a hundred, a thousand, perhaps a million more years.

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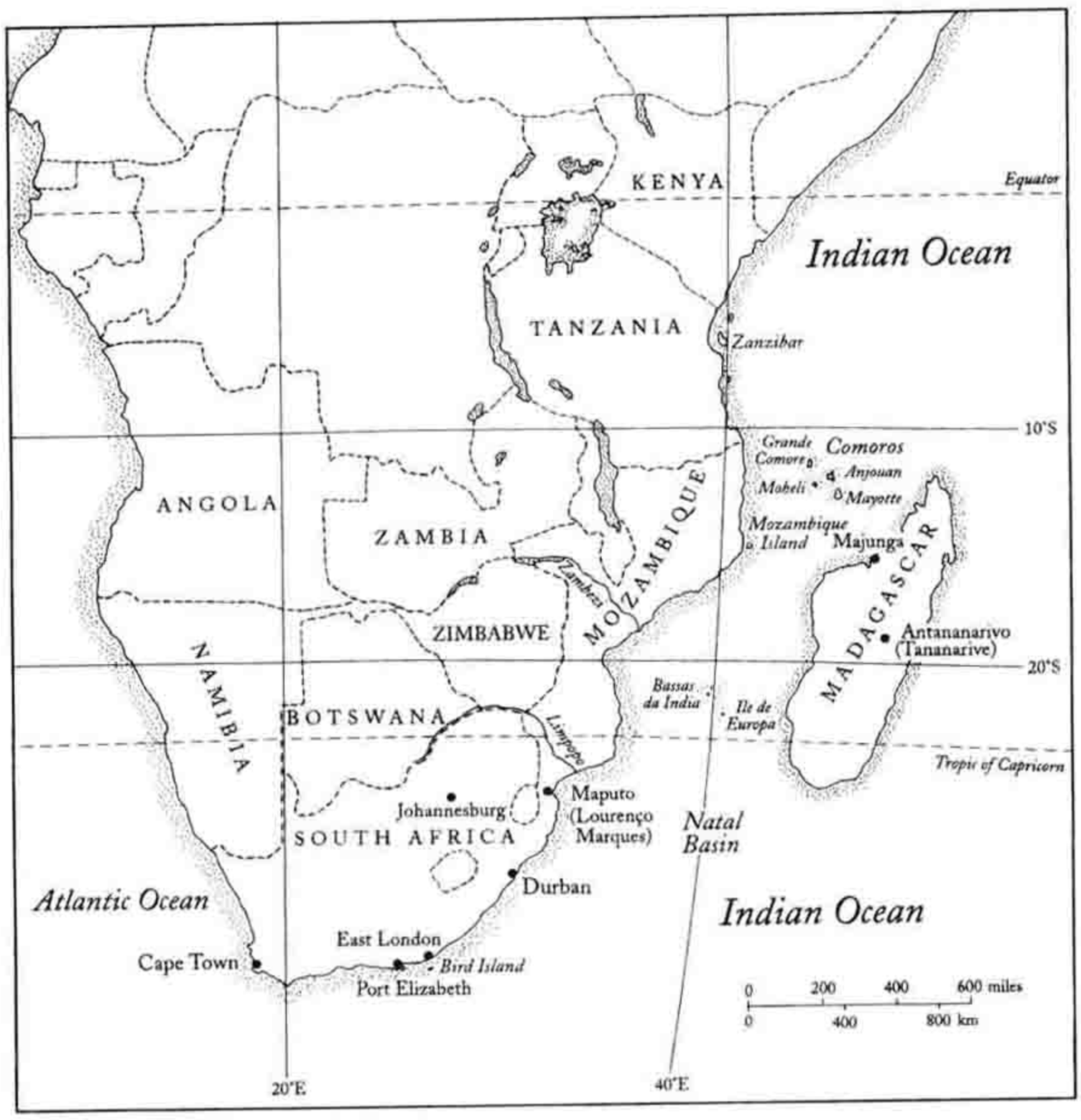
LATIMERIA CHALUMNAE



Southern Africa

December in East London is hot and humid. An ochre haze smothers the small South African city; even the ocean breeze does little to dispel the seasonal lethargy. The year is 1938; *Gone With the Wind* is about to open in America, and Hitler is menacing central Europe. But on the southern tip of Africa, three days before Christmas, most people's minds were on the approaching holidays: offices were beginning to close, families were drifting home to put the finishing touches to their festive arrangements.

At the East London Museum, the thoughts of the young curator, Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer, were far from the upcoming festivities. A

small woman with unruly dark hair and lively black eyes, she was surrounded by bones, racing to complete the assembly of a rare fossil dinosaur she and a friend had excavated in Tarkastad.

At quarter to ten in the morning, a shrill ringing echoed through the two rooms of the tiny museum, shattering the young woman's concentration: the telephone had been installed only two days previously. Mr. Jackson, manager of the Irvin & Johnson trawler fleet, informed her that Captain Hendrik Goosen had just arrived at the docks. "There is a ton and a half of sharks for you on the trawler *Nerine*," he said. "Are you interested?" Marjorie was tempted to say no. She wanted desperately to complete the fossil display before the museum closed for the holidays, and she already had a load of fish specimens from Captain Goosen's last voyage, waiting to be mounted. "But I thought of how good everyone at Irvin & Johnson had been to me, and it being so near to Christmas, I thought the least I could do would be to go down to the docks to wish them the compliments of the season." She grabbed a grain sack and called her native assistant, Enoch, and together they caught a taxi to the wharf.

"I went in to see Mr. Jackson," she recalls, sixty years later, "and as I was going out, he said, 'Well, I don't think it's quite a ton and a half of sharks, but a Happy Christmas to you!' They used to torment the life out of me." She hitched up her cotton dress and climbed onto the 115-foot *Nerine*. The crew had all gone ashore except for an old Scotsman, who told her that the specimens were on the fo'c'sle deck. She looked at the pile of fish: sharks, seaweed, starfish, sponges, rat-tail fishes, all kinds of things. She told the Scotsman she probably would not be taking anything; nevertheless she sorted them out carefully. It was then that she noticed a blue fin sticking up from beneath the pile.

"I picked away the layers of slime to reveal the most beautiful fish I had ever seen," she recounts. "It was five feet long, a pale, mauvy blue with faint flecks of whitish spots; it had an iridescent silver-blue-green sheen all over. It was covered in hard scales, and it had four limb-like fins and a strange little puppy dog tail. It was such a beautiful fish—more like a big china ornament—but I didn't know what it was."

"Yes, miss, it's a strange one," the old Scotsman said. "I have