

Pearls: reading

Tina: "I'm with my father in a room full of beautiful jewellery - earrings, necklaces and rings. All the items are made from pearls and they all look lovely. I'm very happy too. We are here because my dad is going to buy me a pair of pearl earrings! There is also an exhibition which explains where pearls come from, why they are so lovely and why they can be so expensive.



I realise how little I know about pearls. It seems they form naturally in some shellfish, mainly oysters. When something enters the oyster shell that could be dangerous, the oyster covers the object with layers and layers of nacre, which we call mother-of-pearl. You can see mother-of-pearl on the inside of many shells. After some years there are so many layers of nacre covering the object that it has become much larger and is now a beautiful pearl. This doesn't happen naturally very often, there is only one pearl in thousands of oysters - no wonder natural pearls are so expensive!

"I don't think I'll buy you a pair of natural pearl earrings," says my dad. "They cost more than my car!"

Nowadays, most pearls are cultured. This means they are real but not natural. An object is deliberately put inside an oyster so that it turns into a pearl; this takes about three years. They are still very beautiful of course. The first cultured pearls were produced a hundred years ago in Japan, and today most cultured pearls are still produced in Japan. There are also bigger pearls produced in the warm South Pacific and black ones from Tahiti. In China freshwater pearls are produced from freshwater mussels.

"I like all the pearls but I really want some pale pink ones," I tell my dad. "But when I look closely I can see lots of other colours too - blue, green and orange. It's amazing!"

"That's the nacre again," he explains. "It's so thin, and there are so many layers on the pearl that it makes the light break up which creates lots of different colours. That's why they're so beautiful."

There are also some fake pearls for us to look at. To us, though, they look very similar to real pearls. Usually fake pearls are made from glass beads and have mother-of-pearl painted on them. This makes them lighter and much smoother. Real pearls are heavier and very slightly rough. When we rub the pearls along our teeth we notice that the fake ones are very smooth, like glass.

At last I can choose my earrings! And I'm especially pleased to discover that the pearl is the birthstone of June, perhaps that's why I think pearls are nicer than diamonds. The earrings I choose are simple and I feel wonderful wearing them.

"Thanks a lot, dad!"