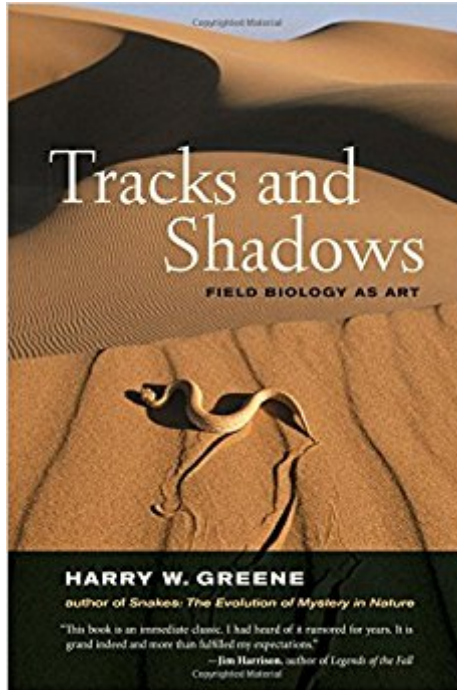


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Tracks And Shadows: Field Biology As Art



Synopsis

Intellectually rich, intensely personal, and beautifully written, *Tracks and Shadows* is both an absorbing autobiography of a celebrated field biologist and a celebration of beauty in nature. Harry W. Greene, award-winning author of *Snakes: The Evolution of Mystery in Nature*, delves into the poetry of field biology, showing how nature eases our existential quandaries. More than a memoir, the book is about the wonder of snakes, the beauty of studying and understanding natural history, and the importance of sharing the love of nature with humanity. Greene begins with his youthful curiosity about the natural world and moves to his stints as a mortician's assistant, ambulance driver, and army medic. In detailing his academic career, he describes how his work led him to believe that nature's most profound lessons lurk in hard-won details. He discusses the nuts and bolts of field research and teaching, contrasts the emotional impact of hot dry habitats with hot wet ones, imparts the basics of snake biology, and introduces the great explorers Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace. He reflects on friendship and happiness, tackles notions like anthropomorphism and wilderness, and argues that organisms remain the core of biology, science plays key roles in conservation, and natural history offers an enlightened form of contentment.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

There are and have been many professional biologists who have specialized in studying the lives of amphibians and reptiles. Yet few of them have chosen to write memoirs of their lives and professional activities and priorities. Such memoirs in recent years have included those by Altig,

Crump, Gibbons, Means, and Pianka, among others. Here, Harry Greene joins this group with an articulate and thoughtful memoir written as he nears 70 years of age after a lifetime of extremely diverse experiences, major accomplishments in his field, mentoring his own students, and associating with his own mentors. None of the latter have written their own memoirs but Greene makes up for this in recounting in detail the lives of expertise and devotion to their work by Henry Fitch, William Pyburn, and Gordon Burghardt. Fitch particularly was a mentor and icon to many of us in this field either directly in person or indirectly through his many publications on field studies of reptiles and other vertebrates, and it was extremely gratifying for me to read here about the breadth of his long career. Greene modestly describes his early life including his initial scientific publications while still in high school, his disastrous attempts to pass courses when he started college, and his rapid maturation with life as an emergency medic dealing with peoples' serious and fatal injuries. He was drafted in the late 1960s and his ambulance experience enabled him to become an Army medic, luckily stationed in Europe for two years where he was able to search out reptiles, do research at museums, and broaden his overall horizons.

"We will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught." [Sengalese environmentalist BABA DIOUM] That quote, as cited in this book's final chapter, admirably sums up one of the primary driving forces behind Greene's career as a herpetologist and professor. He readily admits that society as a whole doesn't naturally experience warm fuzzy feelings when it comes to snakes. Matter of fact, gut reactions usually lean more towards... gutting them. But that doesn't mean conservation efforts should only be extended to cute cuddly critters, does it? Shouldn't society be guided by a desire to preserve nature's diversity... in all its forms? Through decades dedicated to field and lab studies, learning about nature, and subsequently teaching others, Greene has attempted to remove the shroud of fear and mystery surrounding snakes, and to replace it with understanding. With education comes appreciation. This book's largest target audience is probably found among academic and scientific professionals. Those who are already familiar with the scientists and educators discussed within its pages can nod their heads together in agreement, and can chuckle at the inside jokes and anecdotes. But that doesn't mean others can't enjoy it, too. Anyone who's in love with nature... and isn't that most of us?... should enjoy the vivid descriptions of places most of us will never visit, and animals most of us will never encounter in the wild. My favorites? The rainforest, followed closely by the desert. It isn't likely that I'll ever see either of those places in person, but I almost feel as though I've been there now. I almost feel as though that giant green anaconda slipped through MY hands.

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