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Peer reviewed

Review: Tracks and Shadows, Field Biology as Art
By Harry W. Greene

Reviewed by Ryder W. Miller
San Francisco, California, USA

Greene, Harry W. *Tracks and Shadows, Field Biology as Art*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2013. 296 pp. ISBN 9780520232754, hardcover, US\$29.95.

Cornell University Herpetology Professor Harry W. Greene takes the reader on a fascinating personal journey into the study of the wild. Here is an unusual book on an unusual subject by a man who is fascinated with snakes and reptiles. It is a dark journey from a veteran who has also worked with the sick and dying in the medical field. Greene, however, has found his subject of inquiry and this is also his personal story. One will find humor, pathos, wonder, escapism, and the sublime, with Greene asking questions not only about the ecology and evolution of snakes and reptiles. He also takes one on a journey through his experiences as a field biologist in search of answers to some of the questions he poses. Greene writes:

“This book is about studying nature, incorporating one’s findings into broader biological and societal concerns, and reaping the emotional rewards of those activities. Doing natural history involves people-as I’ll show later, observing and recording are primal aspects of *human* natural history-and however much solitude beckons, we’re no more truly separate from others than from our surroundings.” (p. 169)

This book requires a slow read so one is not likely to miss or forget things. It is also a great defense of creatures many do not like or worry about. One hears much about the charisma of wild animals and how the gentle giants, the fuzzy, the streamlined, others deserve our protection. Here the author confronts us with our bias and fears and reminds that even scary creatures are fascinating and in need of protection. Whether created or having evolved through natural selection, they came from the same process as even the creatures we hold dear.

The book also benefits from being inspirational in that one’s search into Nature can be profound and personal. Greene has seen some tough and dangerous times preparing him to appreciate wild creatures that seek to survive and perpetuate themselves like everything else. There are also not that many books written by specialists like Greene to inspire in this area.

This is a great book for herpetologists who will know all the players mentioned, the kinds of snakes described, and the drive to study dangerous creatures. This is also an interesting book for those who want to study fieldwork. The treatment is profound and one may not get answers to the questions posed until the end. The book is not an animal rights book for snakes, but one will get caught up in the reverence the author has for them. He does points out:

"Field biologists observe organisms, discern patterns, and determine their causes; then ideally, society uses that knowledge to coexist with those with whom we share the planet." (p. 220)

Tracks and Shadows would make a useful zoology book for people who are looking for philosophy and inspiration rather than only natural history. One is likely to better learn about the natural history of snakes from other books, including the book Greene co-wrote with Michael Fogden and Patrician Fogden: *Snakes: The Evolution of Mystery in Nature* (2000).

This title, however, is a great book about why people study snakes, and more so why they choose to do fieldwork. As shown, questions can have a profound effect on people's lives. Here, the search in the wild is compelling and life changing. This would be an inspirational book for herpetologists, field biologists, monster fans, and those who are curious about natural historians. The book is not political or controversial. It is however a fascinating, dark, and personal odyssey into wild kingdoms.

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