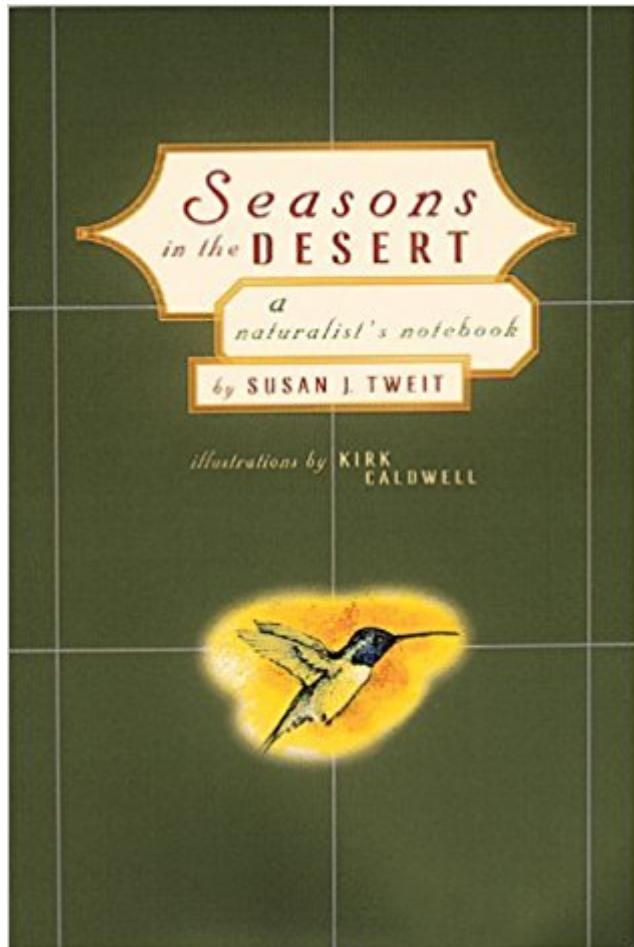


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Seasons In The Desert: A Naturalist's Notebook



Synopsis

Bargain Books are non-returnable. Seasons in the Desert is a rare and wonderful combination of lyrical writing, natural history, and fine art. Esteemed nature writer Susan J. Tweit reveals the hidden life thriving in the deserts of the American Southwest, from the tiny fairy shrimp to the regal saguaro cactus. Her witty, factual, and heartfelt reflections combine with Kirk Caldwell's beautiful illustrations to illuminate the ways and mythologies of forty eccentric plants and animals. Sharing the qualities of the works of Terry Tempest Williams, Sue Hubbell, and Gretel Ehrlich, Seasons in the Desert is a wondrous and thoughtful foray into the living world of vast desert spaces.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The American Heritage Dictionary defines a desert as "a region rendered barren or partially barren by environmental extremes." Susan Tweit obviously does not agree with the writers at American Heritage. With her book in hand, readers will come to the same conclusion. Consider a desert pothole, one of those shallow, soil-filled pits in sandstone. At first glance they seem lifeless, but after a desert rain supplies the water, eggs and larvae that have lay dormant in the soil for months or years burst into life. Within hours animals as exotic as tadpole shrimp, which resemble miniature horseshoe crabs, and their crustacean cousins, fairy shrimp, begin to ply the pool. Other pothole denizens may include microscopic mites, that only occur in South Africa and the desert southwest, or spadefoot toads, which have been buried two feet deep in soil near the pothole waiting for the revivifying moisture. During the ephemeral life of the pothole the animals spend most of their time

feeding and breeding. As the water evaporates the frenzy continues with cannibalism a common occurrence. Before the soil dries out again, though, eggs and larvae will settle down into the mud to wait for the next rain storm. And the next miracle of the pothole. In her new collection of essays, Susan Tweit circumvents the sterile dictionary definition by exploring 40 desert lives as diverse as rattlesnakes, fairy shrimp, Christmas cholla, and screwbean mesquite. The 900-word-stories are told with a naturalist's sensibility and care for the natural world. "I think of these desert characters as my relatives, in the sense that all life is kin." She does not, however, preach or anthropomorphize. Nor does she slip into new-age polemics. The book is organized by season, starting with spring. Each essay focuses on one animal or plant but also interweaves a kaleidoscope of pollinators, predators, scientists and explorers. The stories paint a full picture not just of the star of the story, but of the lives that revolve around it. Tweit also adds voices of researchers and writers who offer another level of insight into these desert lives. Tweit's language conveys her intimate knowledge and deep care for the flora and fauna she describes. She concludes her essay on Couch's spadefoot toad with: "To hear the swelling nighttime chorus of spadefoot toads is to know joy. When I hear sapitos [the Spanish term], I am overcome with the urge to dance barefoot in puddles, ... to celebrate the return of water to this parched land." In the early 1900s the great naturalist John Burroughs wrote "Indeed, nature-study, as it appeals to us in books, fails of its chief end if it does not send us to nature itself." Susan Tweit's new book admirably meets Burrough's standard-seducing its readers to go out and make their own discoveries in the desert.

At the start I have to say that Susan Tweit is a friend of our family and I have known her for a number of years. She moved here to Las Cruces, New Mexico, from Colorado and then back during my 28 year tenure at the local university. I was also given a probably undeserved acknowledgement in this book. Thus you can keep in mind that I might be biased, but I always try my best to produce an honest review. Susan's "Seasons in the Desert: A Naturalist's Notebook" is, in my opinion, an excellent introductory book to the biota of the Southwest deserts of the United States. Deserts have had more than their share of flawed books with some questionable "facts" (see at least two of my past reviews), but this is one of those that the reader can generally depend on for accuracy. This book is part of a Seasons series and is organized by Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. In each of these sections are chapters on selected organisms such as "Night-blooming Cereus," "Giant Desert Centipede," "Tube-forming Termite," "Fremont Cottonwood", and "Desert Bighorn Sheep." Each of these is well illustrated with a painting by the artist Kirk Caldwell. All in all this is a easy book to read and will help the novice gain some basis for understanding the varied biota of the great

American deserts. Susan gives her accounts the personal touch of one who is familiar with her subjects and in fact knows them intimately. I recommend it for those who are visitors to or even long time residents in the deserts of the American South. You will not be disappointed!

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