



BOOK REVIEW

The Poetry of Natural History

Tracks and Shadows. Field Biology as Art. 2013. Harry W. Greene. University of California Press, Berkeley. 296 pp. Hardcover — ISBN-13: 978-0-520232-75-4. \$29.95.

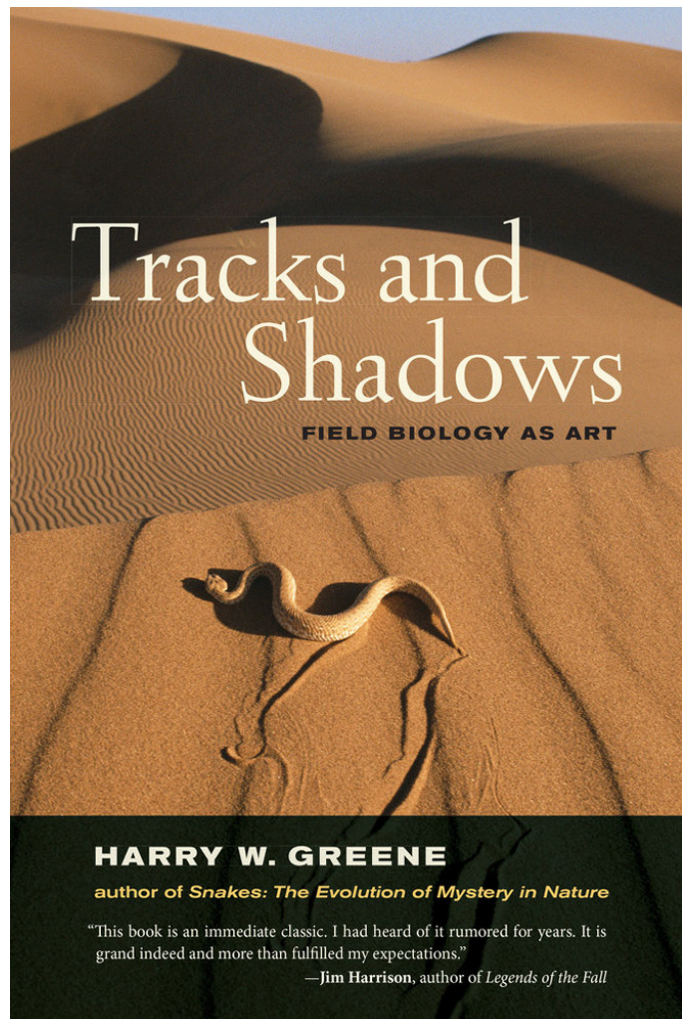
Over a decade after the publication of the much-lauded *Snakes: The Evolution of Mystery in Nature*, Harry Greene returns to examine herpetology from a more personal perspective. The result — *Tracks and Shadows: Field Biology as Art* — is an amalgam of natural history and memoir, with a dash of existential inquiry.

The book is divided into three parts with four or five essays in each. Part one reflects on Greene's initial experiences with and curiosity about the natural world, as well as various serendipitous interactions with local herpetologists who kindled his growing interest in the field. Of particular interest here are abridged biographies of Henry Fitch, Charles Carpenter, and Joseph Grinnell, which intersect deftly with the larger narrative. Part two moves “from youthful obsessions to academic jobs,” introduces serpent biology, some of the particular difficulties of fieldwork, and “focus[es] on [Greene's] favorite places and the creatures that inhabit them.” Knoxville, Tennessee; the Mohave Desert; Costa Rica; Bwindi, and African rainforests in general receive special consideration. Part three contains Greene's meditations on friendship and mentorship, the state of biodiversity, and the challenges of engaging the public in conservation efforts. Photographs of animal and human subjects are sparsely though effectively interspersed throughout the book, notable among them a six-year old Henry Fitch, an impressive freshly-killed Reticulated Python, and a fourteen-foot African python.

Well known for his research, Greene establishes himself as a more than competent writer. Take for example this robust description of a Costa Rican rainforest: “Rainforests are dimly lit and exceptionally diverse — claustrophobically dark and fecund — so no wonder tropical biologists end up puzzling over existential questions. At La Selva Biological Station in Costa Rica, giant trees with buttressed trunks tower overhead, obscuring the sky, and every glimpse holds the vibrant greens and somber browns of plants and their decaying remains.” In the paragraphs that follow this passage, Greene touches on exceptional diversity, tropical biotas, the difference between rainforests and jungles, and provides new insights into dietary overlap, all while maintaining an enviable fluidity of prose —

such a satisfying synthesis of science and poetry. Both enthusiasts and experts surely will find his excitement infectious, or at the very least nostalgia-evoking.

While the prose is often beautiful, inclusion of scientific and personal anecdotes, biographical notes, musings, scholarly advice, and ecology lessons sometimes results in a loss of focus. Greene attempts to rein in this scattering by concluding some of his chapters with a brief introduction to the following chapter's narrative focus. “How do research and teaching play into conservation, and in particular how do they affect the values we place on biological diversity? What do ‘wild’ and ‘natural’ signify, and how do they influence our search for meaning and happiness?” Greene asks in one



of the book's latter chapters. "Why *should* humans admire and conserve things that might hurt us?" and "must something be useful or beautiful to matter?" he asks in another. Certainly, for professional herpetologists and conservation biologists, these will not be novel questions, although much of the book's pleasure, for professional and novice alike, is derived from Greene's numerous, compelling anecdotes seeking to answer them. However, Greene's lofty thoughts on art, meaning, happiness, etc. are not always fully clarified. When Greene deviates from memoir or speculation into explication of research or biology, his prose becomes more lucid, more sure. His most engaging chapters are those in which he appreciates natural history through a scientific lens.

Ultimately, the book provides a personal glimpse into the life of several biologists, a view we would not otherwise have received. It is an interesting and humanizing portrait of a field often at odds with accessibility to the public, and Greene goes to some effort to demystify the process by which one can enter and succeed as a researcher and teacher in the field: a bit of luck, a lot of passion, but mostly, a desire to be close to the natural world and to experience it in the fullest way possible.

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