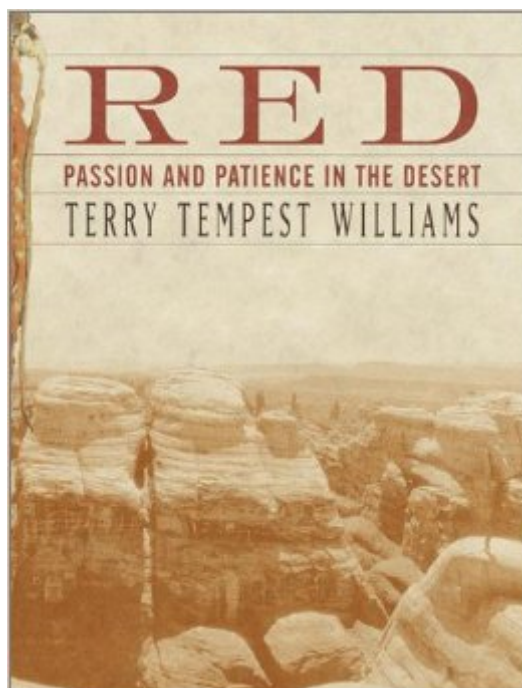


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Red: Passion And Patience In The Desert



Synopsis

“It is a simple equation,” writes Terry Tempest Williams, “place + people = politics.” Nowhere is this more apparent than in the American West, where millions of acres of wilderness are at stake in the redrock desert of southern Utah. “How are we to find our way toward conversation?” she asks. One story at a time. Red traces Williams’s lifelong love of and commitment to the desert, as she explores what draws us to a place and keeps us there. It brings together the lyrical evocations of Coyote’s Canyon and Desert Quartet with new essays of great power and originality, essays that range from a family discussion on the desert tortoise to an investigation of slowness to startling encounters with Anasazi artifacts (including a ceremonial sash made of scarlet macaw feathers). Pursuing the question of why America’s redrock wilderness matters to the soul of this country, Red bridges the divide between the political and the poetic and shows how this harshest and most fragile of landscapes inspires a soulful return to “wild mercy.” The preservation of wildness is not simply a political process but a spiritual one. With grace, humor, and the subtleties of her perception, Williams reminds us of what we have forgotten in the chaos of our lives and what can be reclaimed in the stillness of the desert. Red is further proof that the writings of Terry Tempest Williams possess a revelatory power and an emotional intelligence at once rare and authentic.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

When Terry Tempest Williams starts this book with her simple equation place + people = politics, you know you’ve started reading a book meant to have political impact. But as the equation states,

and as any TTW reader knows, you will be reading about place and about people, and you will be reading about these things as seen through the honest open heart of Terry Tempest Williams. *Red* is a collection of stories, poems, journal entries and thoughts centered in one place, the redrock desert of southern Utah. While reading *Red* I found myself feeling similarities with it and Steinbeck's *The Long Valley* and *The Pastures of Heaven*. Like both of those books, *Red* tells the different stories of separate people and the one place that connects them. But unlike those books, the stories in *Red* span hundreds of years. The place remains relatively unchanged through time. But the people and civilizations pass through this unchanging landscape living, making their mark on the land, and dying. TTW tells these stories in geologic time-desert time. The people stay connected. Hands connect the people. Hands appear everywhere in the book. Hands are the link between past, present and future. Hands come from the past in geologic forms with Anasazi handprints on clay pots and redrock walls, and a sharp obsidian chip "worked by ancient hands". They are in the present in biologic forms with a hand sliced open by the same sharp obsidian chip; one hand on the belly of a petroglyph while the other rests on a human belly in the present; and the story of children holding out hands to catch the desert's tears that drip from ferns. Then in the final paragraph hands are formed in prayer: "The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time. They are kneeling with hands clasped that we might act with restraint...Wild mercy is in our hands." I enjoy reading Terry Tempest Williams. Her writing seems to always reach out and touch me. She's done it again, and this time with *Red* hands.

Terry Tempest Williams is without a doubt one of the finest writers to tackle the intricacies of the American West in literature of any sort. Carrying her own torch is impressive enough, but Williams also evokes the activism and urgent motivation that calls us to appreciate, respect and save our remaining western wilderness that was so powerfully put into words by Edward Abbey. I have reviewed a portion of "*Red*" before (see "*Desert Quartet*"), so I will limit this review to the remainder of "*Red*". Williams carries on the great and ancient tradition of storytelling to raise consciousness about uniquely Western, and specifically Colorado Plateau, issues. From the Hopi and Navajo peoples, down through the early American explorers, the proverbial cowboys and the present activist community, storytelling has been a central method of encapsulating emotion, opinion and experience into messages that have wide appeal. Williams, in stories such as "*Coyote's Canyon*" here in "*Red*", presents her powerful vision of an environmental movement wrapped in the spiritual connection with the stark, often harsh, always awe inspiring desert and given wings by action. Like Abbey, Williams does not shy away from controversy, and her opening to the title essay is a list of

places that strangely grows longer each time I contemplate the names set forth. Williams gets personal here, and the blunt approach of listing over a hundred places brings to my mind the fact that I have walked on much of that ground... and that I have seen the critical need to protect these remaining places from the industrious uses and agricultural manipulation that has occurred on the infinitely vaster balance of the Colorado Plateau. In this way, "Red" has demonstrated its effectiveness. Some may say that as a resident of California I might have no reason to comment on Utah... and I would, as Williams exhorts in "Red", flatly disagree. Every one of us has a responsibility to work toward a better world, and Williams manages to say this without preaching it or patronizing the reader. (Besides, my mother lives in southern Utah, and I have walked hundreds of miles of that beautiful land...). In summary, "Red" is another jewel of a book from Terry Tempest Williams. I am glad to see "Desert Quartet" back in print, though I sorely miss Mary Frank's wonderful illustrations that were in the original. This is a book which is not a difficult read, nor a scholarly treatise... rather, it is a frank, realistic look at a serious challenge facing the United States right now.

Both a piece of literary artistry and passionate activism, "Red"'s audience appeal is the broadest of any book I've ever read. The book's structure, both wild and bounded by cadences of space, conforms strategically to Ms. Williams' conceptual take on the color red - red represents heat, anger, unpredictability, the lifeblood of the earth that runs through human beings and all earth's creatures, and is concentrated in the searing deserts of the American West where Ms. Williams lives. A thematic tapestry though it is, it is, at its core, a living breathing message presented selflessly and succinctly by a woman who I believe understands the need for a lifelong journey down the parallel rails of human and non-human nature until these rails converge. I recommend this book highly.

This book made me feel very guilty that I am not out there taking a stand on conservation, supporting a cause, or putting my land into a conservation easement. Her passion as well as commonsense about wild areas is contagious! She clearly defines the political and social situations surrounding land use through a variety of short stories ranging from disagreements within her family to lyrical myth. Even though Red is about the Southwest US, it is about land use everywhere. As with all Williams's books, the writing is marvelous. This should be required reading for everyone who deals with land use (yes, developers included), is passionate about conservation regardless of what part of the world they live in, and all who recognize the need for wild places to sooth our souls and

give us some perspective on life.

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