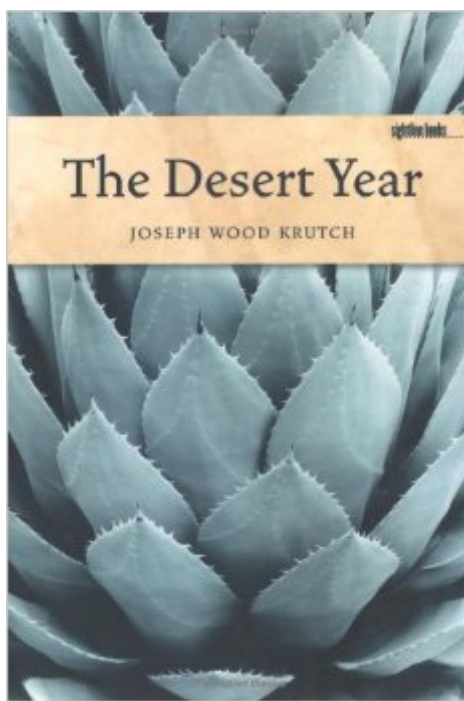


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The Desert Year (Sightline Books)



Synopsis

Now back in print, Joseph Wood Krutch's Burroughs Award-winning *The Desert Year* is as beautiful as it is philosophically profound. Although Krutch—often called the Cactus Walden—came to the desert relatively late in his life, his curiosity and delight in his surroundings abound throughout *The Desert Year*, whether he is marveling at the majesty of the endless dry sea, at flowers carpeting the desert floor, or at the unexpected appearance of an army of frogs after a heavy rain. Krutch's trenchant observations about life prospering in the hostile environment of Arizona's Sonoran Desert turn to weighty questions about humanity and the precariousness of our existence, putting lie to Western denials of mind in the lower forms of life: "Let us not say that this animal or even this plant has become adapted to desert conditions. Let us say rather that they have all shown courage and ingenuity in making the best of the world as they found it. And let us remember that if to use such terms in connection with them is a fallacy then it can only be somewhat less a fallacy to use the same terms in connection with ourselves." This edition contains 33 exacting drawings by noted illustrator Rudolf Freund. Closely tied to Krutch's uncluttered text, the drawings tell a story of ineffable beauty.

Book Information

Series: Sightline Books

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Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (10 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Written over 50 years ago, this classic book of nature writing captures the near timelessness of the southern Arizona desert in a series of essays describing the author's fifteen-month sojourn there. While Krutch harks back to Thoreau, his perspective, turns of thought, and style of expression are

similar to the reflective essays of E. B. White. They begin with observations of plant and animal life and evolve into ruminations on the nature of human life. Krutch writes of birds, the night sky, bats, saguaro cactus, ocotillo, and desert flowers. Considering them, he rediscovers the truth in ideas he has so long held as true that they've become near platitudes. Where there is plenitude in some things, for instance, there is no need for it in others. Nature cares for the species but not individuals, while human values tend toward the opposite. While every rose has its thorn, the blooming cactus shows us that the reverse is also true. A visit to the vastness and forbidding desert monuments of Cathedral Valley in south central Utah reminds him of the precariousness of human life. The desert leads Krutch to contemplation of its paradoxes, as well. For instance, the struggle for life here where conditions for survival are more restrictive actually create an uncrowded and more serene ecosystem by comparison with the tropics. The varieties of bird life are vastly greater here than in more temperate climates. A species of toads can live unseen and unheard for 363 days of the year, emerging after a rain fall to sing and reproduce, then disappear and survive somehow in the waterless months between. Finally, there's one question he's never able to answer: why bats fly clockwise from Carlsbad cave. You can't really know a place, he believes, until you have seen it both as novel and as familiar.

I grew up with Joseph Wood Krutch, so to speak. He wrote a weekly column for the Sunday New York Times during a portion of the '60's. Always refreshingly different from all the other columns of the day which involved societal problems; Krutch's column was an introduction to writing about the natural world, and there was a strong theme of the progression of the seasons, resulting in weekly gradients and nuances in his beloved New England landscape. I had never read any of his books, and had meant to "revisit him," so, when I was recently in an independent bookstore in Santa Fe, and spotted this work... and realized that he had also lived in my increasingly "semi-native" Southwest, it became a "must" purchase. Krutch was approximately 60 years old when he took a sabbatical year from teaching at a New York university, and moved to a farm house, set on many acres, near Tucson, Arizona, in the lower Sonoran desert. In his postscript, he quotes from E.V. Lucas: "Many of us are so constituted that we never use our eyes until we are on foreign soil. It is as though a Cook's ticket performed an operation for cataract." Of course, Krutch was famous for being able to see in his native New England, but his powers of observation seemed heightened, and his spirit seems moved by the delightful differences of observing natural phenomenon in the desert. The book is comprised of 16 essays, largely independent, but united by the desert theme. He drove from New England, and thus he could observe the landscape gradually changing. As with others, he

wanted to determine a practical criteria for "where the West began.

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