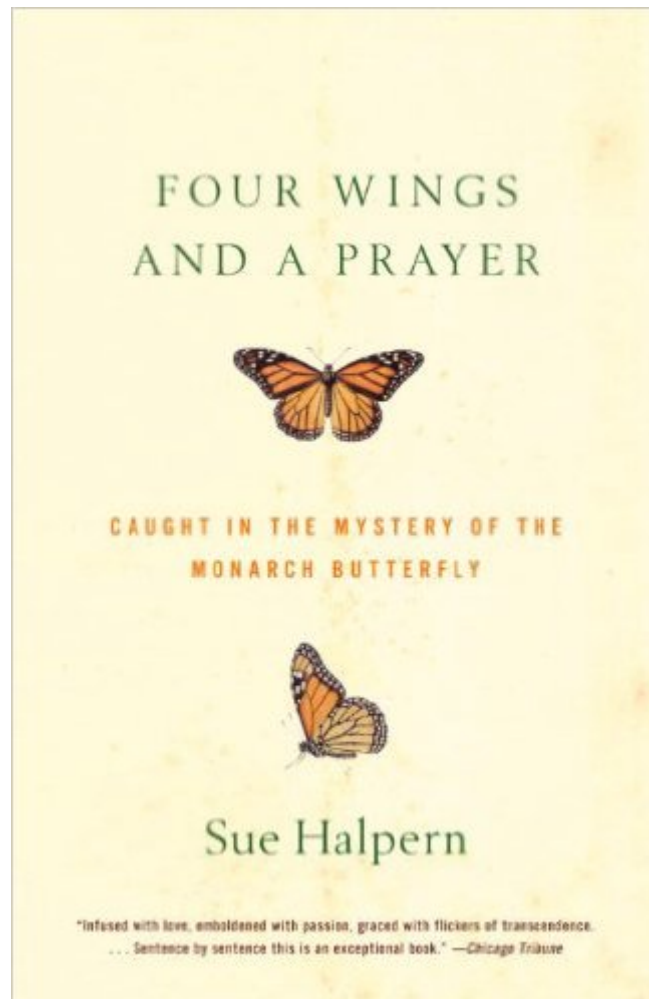


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Four Wings And A Prayer: Caught In The Mystery Of The Monarch Butterfly



Synopsis

Every autumn, the monarch butterflies east of the Rockies migrate from as far north as Canada to Mexico. Memory is not their guide — no one butterfly makes the round trip — but each year somehow find their way to the same fifty acres of forest on the high slopes of Mexico's Neovolcanic Mountains, and then make the return trip in the spring. In *Four Wings and a Prayer*, Sue Halpern sets off on an adventure to delve into the secrets behind this extraordinary phenomenon. She visits scientists and butterfly lovers across the country, offering a keenly observed portrait of the monarchs' migration and of the people for whom they have become a glorious obsession. Combining science, memoir, and travel writing, *Four Wings and a Prayer* is an absorbing travelogue and a fascinating meditation on a profound mystery of the natural world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Author Sue Halpern has written a book about her time spent with people across North America who follow the supposed migration of Monarch Butterflies through the United States to Mexico. Entitled *Four Wings and a Prayer - Caught in the Mystery of the Monarch Butterfly*, the book chronicles her journeys throughout the US and Canada in pursuit of knowledge about the Monarch butterfly while detailing her interaction with the various butterfly enthusiasts (lepidopterists) that she meets along the way. Superficially, the book's subject would seem to hold much promise. Interesting people, little-known facts, sweeping vistas described in stirring detail; there would seem to much that this book could offer the reader, sadly, not much of it is here. Like far too many writers today, Halpern can't seem to keep herself out of the story. In the context of this book, which indeed includes some

fine passages, Halpern's New Age navel-gazing is largely unwanted and often tiresome; "What is passion? I asked myself again." Halpern writes (and the reader cringes) and then goes on to wax philosophically about 'knowing before understanding' or some other such airy-fairy mysticism. It's unfortunate that in a book that offers glimpses of some true characters Halpern can't help interjecting herself. The reader is told that Bill Calvert is a legend among Lepidopterists not only for his research but for his passion and unique character, yet description of that character is largely limited to repeated references to his messy truck and trite answers to the questions of others. The reader can forgive Calvert this though after having been subjected to Halpern's rhetorical wonking - by the end of the book the reader suspects that Calvert might not have been so taciturn had the company been less vocal.

Sue Halpern has written a wonderful, balanced book of one of nature's magnificent, enigmatic phenomenon - the migration of the monarch butterfly. Each winter the monarchs stay, by the millions, in a relatively small area in the forests of the Michoacan mountains, to the west of Mexico City. In the spring they migrate north, covering much of the area east of the Rockies. No single butterfly makes the entire journey; rather they complete the entire journey in two or three generations. They feed on milkweed, extracting toxins that make them poisonous to many species of birds. Halpern logged many a mile in pursuit of the butterfly migration, including stays in Cape May, NJ, Kansas, Texas, rough rides in Mexico, and as far removed as Hawaii, glimpsing the elusive albino monarch. Halpern has an excellent grasp of the current science on the monarchs, and is able to explain it to the non-lepidopterists, which is most of us. Mainly though, science still has far more questions than answers, which is part of the fun. But as the subject quote indicates, the book is very much about passion, the force that motivates the many people involved in studying the monarchs. Halpern devotes an equal measure to describing the people involved with these butterflies. She starts with laconic Bill Calvert, in his '50's, driving an old pick-up truck, and she accompanies him on one of his pilgrimages to Mexico. Naturally there are serious, and essentially petty feuds among the long-time "leadership" in the monarch field, captured when Fred Urquhart, a Canadian professor who was one of the first to start the tagging of monarch, refused to shake the hand of Lincoln Brower, another professor who had deduced, with Calvert's help, the place of the monarch's over-winter refuge.

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