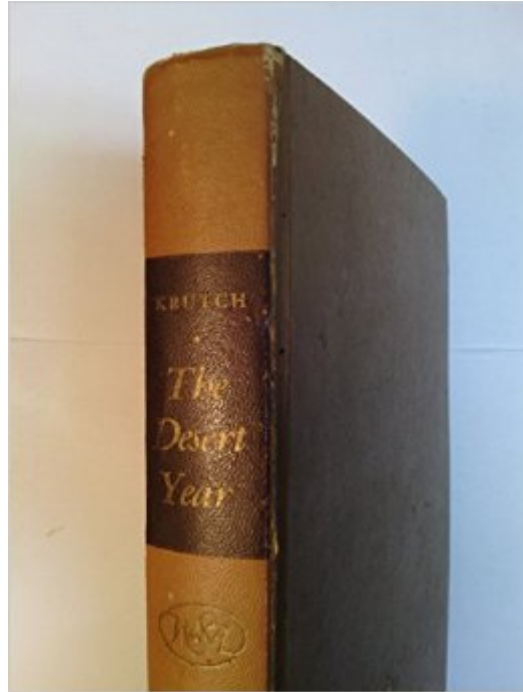


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# The Desert Year



## 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. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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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 plenty 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. A landscape is no more than a picture postcard until you have spent time there and discover yourself in the midst of it. "The Desert Year" is a wonderful account of that process and a celebration of the joy that can be found in settling down for a while in a place that gradually comes to feel like home.

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." Though he does not mention antecedents, he concludes, like John Wesley Powell, that the West, the "land of scant rainfall" commences at the hundredth meridian, which roughly corresponds with the eastern side of the Texas panhandle. West of the hundredth means that the average rainfall is under 20 inches, and therefore non-irrigated farming cannot be sustained. Like others also, Krutch is enthralled by the night sky, where one can note the phases of the moon EVERY night, since cloud cover is so much rarer. By and large though, it is the same sky as in New England, but he is thrilled one winter evening, to realize that he has come far enough south to be able to observe the brightest star of the southern hemisphere, Canopus, which he could never have seen in NE. On the ground, he observes the courtship rituals, and is astonished that toads, yes amphibian, should find a home in the desert. In this substantial essay, he notes the deficiencies of academia, in mainly studying dead fauna, and "going light" on observations of the living. He "lit one candle" against this darkness by conducting his own experiment on the time required for tadpoles to become toads, finding that it was 20-30% less in a desert environment than that usually observed in wetter climes. There is also a separate essay on bird life. During his year, he mainly observed from his one Tucson location, but managed a road trip to San Diego, and thus crossed another desert, the Mojave. He also visited the "white spot" on the map, the truly "empty" land north of the Colorado, in Arizona, as well as in southern Utah. And he ponders why bats always fly out of the Carlsbad Caverns in a counter-clockwise direction. The Coriolis effect, or no? Unlike the columns in the NYT's Krutch also devotes some essays to the larger issues of man's place in this world. Written in the '50's, when the US population was around 150 million, he was a strong advocate for a limit to population, and realized that "free and open space" might be the ultimate luxury. What would he think now, at 310 million, and climbing, with the golden calves of continued growth and development still being worshipped? And there was a fine ontological piece on the ultimate nature of the color "purple." He states he is not a part of the Proudhon "all property is theft school" but he presents some insightful observations on the "problems" of trying to claim ownership of the natural world. Far from satiating my need to re-visit Krutch, this book, of the natural world of the desert, has only whetted my appetite, as it were, for more, and I suspect that *The Best Nature Writing of Joseph Wood Krutch* cannot be far (relatively) behind. 5-stars for this effort.

If you have an interest in the desert and why we live here with JOY you must read this book. Krutch was an extraordinary man and he lived an extraordinary life his first year here. This book is the story of why he stayed instead of returning to New York. It is perhaps the most admired book about Tucson that has ever been written.

This is a top-notch gift-quality book. Not only is it beautifully written, in actual English with no errors, but also the cover is a soft, fabric composition that feels wonderful in your hands. It couldn't be a lovelier description of a desert experience.

Joseph Wood Krutch was a literary critique and a Thoreau scholar, so there is no surprise that his writing in this book had more than a touch of the "Thoreau flavor". There are many quotable sentences -- in the opening chapter he gave us 'A "tour" is like a cocktail party. One "meets" everybody and knows no one', and the book ends with 'Wherever one goes one has one's self for company'. Krutch wrote with clarity, this book is probably the most "Thoreau like" book I've ever read (since Thoreau, of course). It consists of the description of the desert and its flora and fauna and the author's philosophical musing. I only wish he had done a bit more of the former and less of the latter. In some part of the book, such as "The Metaphor of the Grasslands", the philosophical contemplations feel a bit too long and dry. And overall, after reading the book, I had the feeling that there was probably still a lot more that could have been written about the desert. If the book had 50% more of observations, which would also put the philosophical contemplations to their proper proportions, it would have been more satisfying. Nonetheless, this is probably one of the best nature books as an introduction to the Desert Southwest.

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