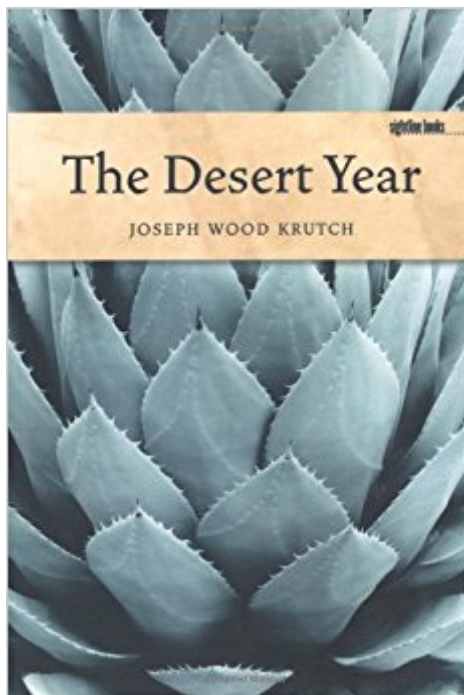


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# The Desert Year (Sightline Books)



## 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 is often called the Cactus Walden, he 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

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## Customer Reviews

"In prose that holds something of the clear, dry light of the land he loves, [Krutch] shares with us his discoveries and his associations. They are richly worth sharing." Paul

Horgan, New York Times

“Krutch’s *Desert Year* stands, with Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* and Mary Austin’s *Land of Little Rain*, as a classic, must-read work on the arid Southwest. Krutch, a drama critic and professor of English at Columbia, demonstrates that professional training in field biology is not required to write evocatively about the natural world. What is required, instead, is a well-trained eye, a sympathetic heart, and an inquisitive mind. The *Desert Year* stands as a celebration of an austere landscape, a work of beauty and joy. I recommend this book equally to old desert hands, and to those who have not yet had the good fortune to wander among the cacti, heat blasted arroyos, and sheltering canyons of the Southwest.”

• Christopher Norment, author, *Return to Warden’s Grove: Science, Desire, and the Lives of Sparrows*

“Krutch’s Thoreauvian observations of the southern Arizona desert force a renewed appreciation for all forms of desert life.”

• Arizona Highways

Joseph Wood Krutch (1893–1970) was the Brander Matthews Chair of Dramatic Literature at Columbia University for two decades and served as the Nation’s drama critic for nearly thirty years. A Burroughs Medal laureate, Krutch published more than a dozen books, including *The Great Chain of Life* (Iowa reprint, 2000). A noted illustrator and artist, Rudolf Freund contributed to numerous nature guides and during the 1960s worked at Yale’s Peabody Museum.

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 masterful writer of the likes rarely experienced. This is a gem of a book to be savored like fine wine. His insights into our human condition deftly expressed along with his observations of desert life read like poetry.

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.

Good book. First read it about 35 years ago....Krutch was a fine essayist.

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.

Too much philosophy  
Not enough nature

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.

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