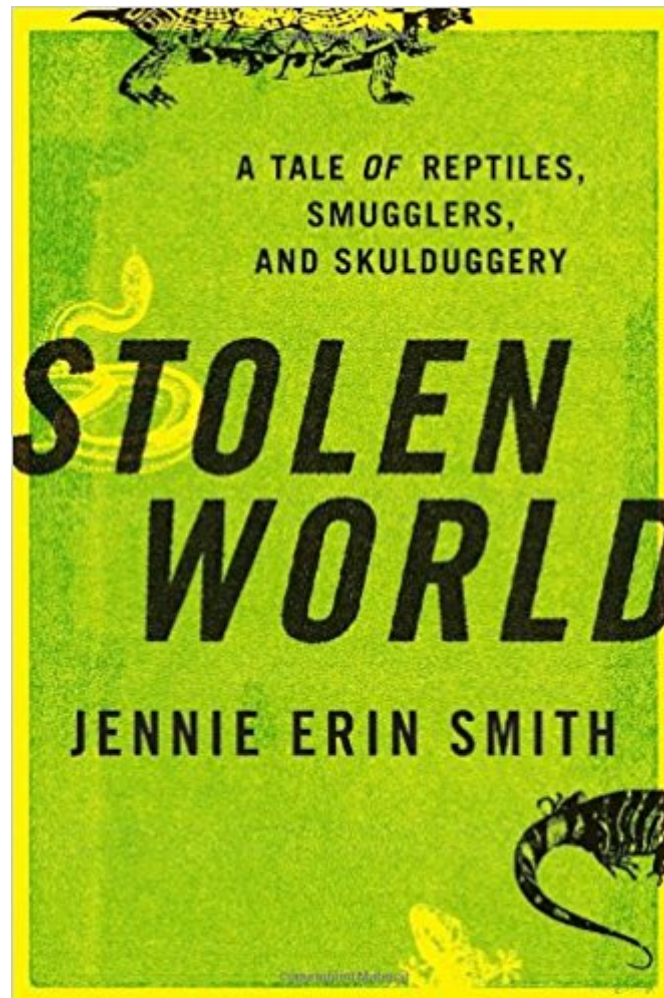




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Stolen World: A Tale Of Reptiles, Smugglers, And Skulduggery



Synopsis

Tortoises disappear from a Madagascar reserve and reappear in the Bronx Zoo. A dead iguana floats in a jar, awaiting its unveiling in a Florida court. A viper causes mayhem from Ethiopia to Virginia. In *Stolen World*, Jennie Erin Smith takes the reader on an unforgettable journey, a dark adventure over five decades and six continents. In 1965, Hank Molt, a young cheese salesman from Philadelphia, reinvented himself as a “specialist dealer in rare fauna,” traveling the world to collect exquisite reptiles for zoos and museums. By the end of the decade that followed, new endangered species laws had turned Molt into a convicted smuggler, and an unrepentant one, who went on to provide many of the same rare reptiles to many of the same institutions, covertly. But Molt soon found a rival in Tommy Crutchfield, a Florida carpet salesman with every intention of usurping Molt as the most accomplished reptile smuggler in the country. Like Molt, Crutchfield had modeled himself after an earlier generation of natural-history collectors celebrated for their service to science, an ideal that, for Molt and Crutchfield, eclipsed the realities of the new wildlife-protection laws. Zoo curators, caught between a desire for rare animals and the conservation-minded focus of their institutions, became the smugglers’ antagonists in court but also their best customers, sometimes simultaneously. Crutchfield forged ties with a criminally inclined Malaysian wildlife trader and emerged a millionaire, beloved by some of the finest zoos in the world. Molt, following a string of inventive but disastrous smuggling schemes in New Guinea, was reduced to hanging around Crutchfield’s Florida compound, plotting Crutchfield’s demise. The fallout from their feud would result in a major federal investigation with tentacles in Germany, Madagascar, Holland, and Malaysia. And yet even after prison, personal ruin, and the depredations of age, Molt and Crutchfield never stopped scheming, never stopped longing for the snake or lizard that would earn each his rightful place in a world that had forgotten them—or rather, had never recognized them to begin with.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. In this very disturbing and very entertaining chronicle of reptile smugglers, the collectors and zoo keepers who trade with them, and the federal agents who try to catch them, the humans are as devious, dangerous, and creepily charming as the cold-blooded creatures they lust after. Science reporter Smith bases her book on extensive original interviews with two smugglers: Henry Molt Jr. is a reptile dealer who, in the 1960s, unable to get a job with a zoo, began a lifelong career of reptile collecting involving restless international travel, partner-stiffing, and jail time, with an undaunted enthusiasm that's survived into his 60s: "The reptile business *is* a disease,' he said, and you can't retire from a disease." Equally outrageous is the volatile, knife-wielding Tommy Crutchfield, who expanded his childhood alligator-and-snake business into a million-dollar empire of reptile hunting and dealing. Even the curators of the Bronx and San Diego zoos let their obsession with the animals lure them into deals in order to obtain illegally imported rare breeds. Smith's affection for these unsavory people gives the book an intriguing moral ambiguity (which might make some environmentalists cringe), but the subculture's brazen shenanigans make for a convoluted, fascinating tale. (Jan.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved.

Smith wades into the dark world of animal smuggling with this look at the decades-long careers of a couple of reptile enthusiasts and subsequent black market traders. Readers will make immediate comparisons to the *The Orchid Thief* (1999) as Hank Molt and Tommy Crutchfield share their experiences tracking animals all over the world and then selling them to willing buyers (including zoos) who were all too aware of the illegality of the transactions. Smith's account is quite compelling and highly readable, but it should be approached with a degree of caution. Although she states that the content was "derived from interviews and court documents," the absence of cited sources leaves one in doubt regarding the veracity of the details. Smith walks a fine line, telling a gripping story that provides a window onto a largely invisible subculture in the annals of collecting while raising questions as to the ratio of "creative" versus "nonfiction" in this nearly thriller-like chronicle. --Colleen Mondor

It is amazing to me how the author was able to investigate and report so thoroughly on what amounts to the entire lives of several key figures in the exotic reptile trade of years past - Molt, Crutchfield and others. They are portrayed warts and all, and you kind of feel by the end of it that you know and have some admiration for these characters, much as you might for a crusty and unlikeable old uncle. Having been involved with exotic animals for most of my life, I have known some of these individuals and have visited the same facilities and reptile shows that the author talks about. I was never so deeply involved that I could imagine living and acting as do the stars of this book, who feel that the quest for the best and rarest makes up for extreme personal hardship, expense, and illegal acts. The net effect of these misadventures is less on conservation and more of the dark underbelly of 'pets' outside the normal companion animal area. This is a better book than *Lizard King*, because it focuses on only a few individuals and tells their stories as completely as anyone could. You will meet some of the same characters in '*Lizard King*' but I would still give the nod to Smith's book as the better treatment of this interesting area.

Ten years of effort can yield a wide diversity of possible results. For writer Jennie Erin Smith, a decade of work has resulted in an incredibly compelling and deeply layered expose that reveals the shadowy underbelly of the reptile trade. In her book *Stolen World*, Smith carefully unravels the adventures, aspirations, personal struggles, and public trials of a legendary few who famously--or infamously--smuggled many of the world's rarest, and most desirable species. *Stolen World* earns high marks from me, as it seems tailor-made for a reptile/Everglades/invasive species egghead like myself (I am the author of *À Snake in the Grass*.) Smith does a masterful job of introducing in great detail many of the names and institutions that have long been well-recognized in Florida. But perhaps most importantly, the book provides a detailed glimpse into the psyche of both those with an insatiable lust for lizards, turtles, and snakes, and those willing to gamble all to satisfy their desire. In the course of just over three hundred pages, it becomes readily apparent that the trade in the cold-blooded often hinges upon the personal faults of the cold-hearted. This is a conclusion drawn not by Smith--but rather--reflects the self-assessment of those entwined hopelessly in the reptile business. The desire for dominion over the world's rarest creatures--as well as the authorities that protect them--is not purely lucrative. Rather, it sometimes finds its origins as compensation for social shortcomings, is often fueled by uncontrolled compulsions, and is frequently reinforced by tragic character flaws. And though it's usually dangerous to paint any group with so broad a brush, Smith's research fails to reveal many well-balanced exceptions. That is both telling and troubling,

considering she was on the case for ten long years.

I didn't know what to expect when I downloaded this book to my Kindle, and I ended up liking this book quite a bit. It's the story of the subculture of exotic reptile collectors and the scoundrels and smugglers who supplied it. It's not a wholly unsympathetic view and Ms. Smith seems to grasp the allure of owning these beautiful little jewels of animals. But she also exposes the corruption of the industry and ultimately the total lack of morality of both smugglers and collectors (and, sadly, some - maybe much? - of the zoo industry which quietly profits while pretending to be advocates for conservation of these highly endangered species). What's ultimately most tragic, of course, is that no one in this sub-culture seems to come to grips with the fundamental immorality of 'owning' any sentient being merely to satisfy one's need to possess beauty. I also find these animals to be exquisitely beautiful and understand the impulse to want to possess them. It's just sad though that these folks apparently don't have the little voice in their head, telling them that, "This is wrong."

Good book about the unknown history. Legal way to "smuggle" wild animals.

You don't have to be interested in Herpetology to love this book. Jennie Smith could write about sea urchins and make it interesting. This book was engaging from the beginning to the end. It obviously represents a huge commitment of time and immersion in her subject matter. The characters in her story are eccentric, interesting and perfectly captured. It took more than a scholarly writer to draw out their stories over the period she did. I rate this as highly as "The Orchid Thief", "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil", "Stiff". Just so much fun to read. Highly recommended!

A bit long, but very interesting. I had no idea how poorly we enforced our regulations or just how wide spread the smuggling business was. The zoo participation by turning a blind eye was not known before and is shameful. And to think this still continues today!

I read this book in 1 breath and finished it within 24 hours !The book is in my opinion well written,fast paced, very well researched and contains a lot of information on a few of the *big* names in the herp world.The only downside is that it may not be so interesting for non herpers.For all your herpers out there: A MUST read !

Great true story about the international world of illegal poaching and trafficking of endangered

reptiles set in a backdrop of nefarious characters and tropical locales. Highlights problems with enforcement of protection regulations and the twin motivations for trading exotic species; money and demand.

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