

Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles Times Book & Television Reviews

a sampling by Susan Dworski

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ALLEGORY OF NATURE

Hoagland on Nature: Essays, by Edward Hoagland

Hoagland's natural world is a glorious bestiary besotted with roiling life forms -- plant, animal and human -- and he revels in exploring and dissecting all of them. His intense, egalitarian essays celebrating bear stalkers, red wolves, garter snakes, penguins, midges, tigers, elephants and frogs continue the tradition of 19th century Emersonian rhapsodists who believed that heaven is right here on Earth if we can pay attention to nature.

He's a magpie writer, piling fact on vertiginous fact, ramping up details, ferreting out wilderness mysteries with nonstop exuberance and compassionate, sharp-witted intelligence. Large or small, nothing escapes his omnivorous, roving eye: Belizean basilisks, reprobate gringos, growling icebergs, canoodling crustaceans, cannibal foxes or the "glacial chatter" of hoarfrost on a pane. "There is a slow-fuse, out-of-body ecstasy at the doorstep, if we have the eyes and ears for it," he writes. After you've read Hoagland, your backyard will never look the same.

IT'S US, JUST A LOT HAIRIER

My Family Album, by Frans de Waal

Primatologist Frans de Waal takes us to a family reunion, with a photo gallery that captures our closest relatives -- chimpanzees, bonobos, macaques, baboons and dainty New World capuchins -- as they go about their busy, very social, lives. De Waal combines a crisp, insightful text culled from 30 years of fieldwork with 122 arresting photographs that shock us into recognition that these complex, dignified, highly emotional, sexy roustabouts are without doubt our cousins.

The eyes say it all. Sorrow, fear, rebellion, mischief, seduction, confusion and love gleam from under hairy, furrowed brows. Their subtle hand gestures, facial theatrics, ecstatic lovemaking, intelligent strategizing and flat-out funny monkeyshines are sensitively interpreted by De Waal's highly personal captions, which expand our understanding of the extended family and cement our kinship with guys just like us.

GET READY TO SOP UP THE TEARS

Chicken Soup for the Nature Lover's Soul, Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, Steve Zikman

Crank out the Kleenex, the Chicken Soup boys are back with a volley of misty-eyed sound bites direct from Mother Nature's ample bosom. Their golden formula remains unaltered: authentic tales of heartwarming "wow" moments penned by humble folks, with a star or two thrown in for bling.

It's impossible to read just one of these sappy heart-crunchers. You find yourself going from bad-mouthing to bawling in the nanoseconds it takes to skim these treacly tale-ettes, calculated to wring tears from the most cynical curmudgeon. Like country-western songs, the subject matter is pure, home-spun heart: love lost and won, untimely death and spiritual transformation -- this time with nature's glories providing background music.

Plucking shamelessly upon the heartstrings of the common man, the Chicken Soup empire serves up another sentimental American broth and takes it to the bank.

TAILING THE ROVING RAPTOR

On the Wing, Alan Tennant

Migrating peregrines are incandescently fierce raptors, pushing on through storm, famine, down-pour and sudden predation, streaming homeward with unerring accuracy over inconceivable distances. Alan Tennant buckles us into a rattletrap Cessna flown by a septuagenarian stunt pilot and flings us aloft to share an obsessive, madcap, death-defying and often illegal adventure attempting to radio-track the transcontinental migrations of these majestic, endangered birds from the salt flats of Texas' barrier islands north to Alaska, and as far south as Belize.

Falcon chasing's no game for sissies. The plane's a bust-loose mess of epoxy and duct tape. The U.S. Army, Canadian Mounties and Guatemalan smugglers try to clip the fliers' wings, but they keep cranking. As we skim over the Great Plains and ruined Mayan temples, Tennant regales us with wide-ranging natural history: medieval falconry, Tyrannosaurus rex, how polar bears hunt, the ongoing decimation of wildlife by toxic agricultural chemicals. An exhilarating, hilarious and cautionary tale.

SHOWCASING HER RANGE

Little Things in a Big Country, Hannah Hinchman

Turn a gifted, "aging, single, unrepentant environmentalist" artist loose for a year on western Montana's Front Range armed with an artillery of pens and watercolors and a keen naturalist's eye and you've got a flat-out beaut of a book. Handwritten and illustrated throughout in colors ranging from sizzling to shy, it's an intimate journal of two pals, a woman (Hannah) and her dog (Sisu) and what they turn up poking around in some of America's last wild country.

A more inquisitive pair of comrades-in-rambles would be hard to find. Together they skirt hidden sandhill crane nests, watch amorous waterstriders, marvel at migrating swans. Hinchman's pen is everywhere, detailing the smallest natural event. Not even the shadow of bees' wings in a snow-drift escapes her eye. Humorous, insightful, personal, this is nature journaling at the highest level, an exhilarating spy hole into the wilderness by an alchemical artist-writer.

JAMMING IN BIRDLAND

Why Birds Sing, David Rothenberg

Darwin said that beauty must be loved by nature to be found so often. Rothenberg, a philosophy teacher and jazz musician, embarks on a playful, exuberant, intellectual journey to unravel the baffling mystery of why and how birds sing, taking us from ancient Sanskrit texts to cutting-edge

neuroscience. Besides jamming on his clarinet with a rare Albert's lyrebird in the rain forests of southern Australia, he researches with composers and scientists to find out why birds put so much energy and invention into singing. We learn that birds settle disputes and cry for love with song. Rothenberg stalks the mystery brilliantly, but in the end it eludes him. Perhaps, he suggests, that like us, birds sing for joy, simply because they can.

SNAKE WRANGLERS

Swimming With Sea Snakes, National Geographic Channel

"Heyyyy! Snake!!" hollers extreme herpetologist Zoltan Takacs as he plunges into the turquoise shallows off Vanuatu, bare-handing a deadly yellow-lipped banded sea krait. "I hit the jackpot tonight!"

Takacs has been in hot pursuit of slithery sylphs since childhood. His wrangling mission: figure out why these lethal marine legends, whose one bite contains enough venom to kill a man, are resistant to their own poison. These boldly striped serpents are bodacious beauties, and we share Takacs' gleeful enthusiasm as the krait count piles up.

Whether diving into snake-infested waters under a full moon in Fiji or snagging a big mama in its jungle lair, Takacs is having so much fun catching these "charming creatures" that we lose any fear in the joy of the chase.