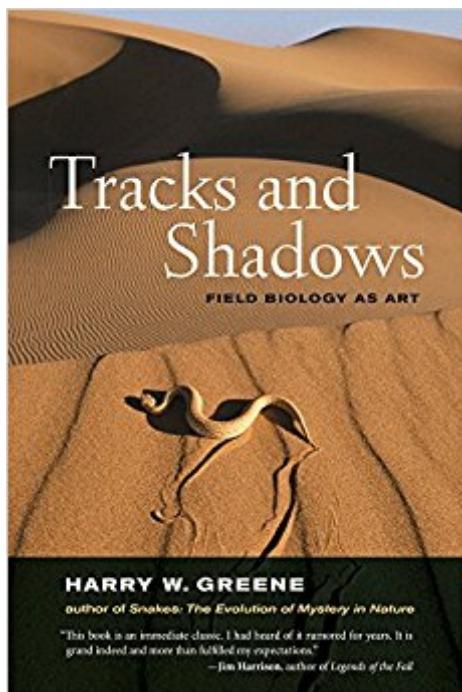


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# Tracks And Shadows: Field Biology As Art



## Synopsis

Intellectually rich, intensely personal, and beautifully written, *Tracks and Shadows* is both an absorbing autobiography of a celebrated field biologist and a celebration of beauty in nature. Harry W. Greene, award-winning author of *Snakes: The Evolution of Mystery in Nature*, delves into the poetry of field biology, showing how nature eases our existential quandaries. More than a memoir, the book is about the wonder of snakes, the beauty of studying and understanding natural history, and the importance of sharing the love of nature with humanity. Greene begins with his youthful curiosity about the natural world and moves to his stints as a mortician's assistant, ambulance driver, and army medic. In detailing his academic career, he describes how his work led him to believe that nature's most profound lessons lurk in hard-won details. He discusses the nuts and bolts of field research and teaching, contrasts the emotional impact of hot dry habitats with hot wet ones, imparts the basics of snake biology, and introduces the great explorers Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace. He reflects on friendship and happiness, tackles notions like anthropomorphism and wilderness, and argues that organisms remain the core of biology, science plays key roles in conservation, and natural history offers an enlightened form of contentment.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Noted herpetologist and Cornell University professor Greene's vibrant blending of memoir and natural history heightens our appreciation of ecological preservation by demonstrating how curiosity becomes science, and by extension how what we understand becomes what we

value. Striking evocations of his Texas and Oklahoma childhood reveal a lifelong fascination with reptiles, specifically snakes, which launched a career in academia and research circling the globe. Some may flinch at Greene's close encounters with snakes, but armchair eco-tourists will savor his rousing, splendidly depicted forays into ian rainforests and the jungles of the Congo. While scientific specificity abounds, the book also brings his adventures and fellow adventurers boisterously to life, in the tradition of Jim Harrison and Norman Maclean. "writers Greene openly admires. His reflections on humanity's interconnectedness with the Earth and all its inhabitants give an achingly beautiful expansiveness to his narrative, while quieter musings on the deaths of loved ones and the impact of his mentors find Greene reaching for soundly resonating poetry. Roomy enough to embrace black-tailed rattlesnakes, African bushmasters, and green anacondas alongside Pablo Neruda, Jackson Browne, and Immanuel Kant, Greene (Snakes: The Evolution of Mystery in Nature) succeeds in illuminating the world as a place of beauty, harmony, and danger, deeply interconnected and worthy of cherishing and preserving. 17 b&w photos. (Oct.)

Biologist Greene delves deeply into his own career and those of the mentors who influenced him in this elegantly written love letter to the field of natural history. From his days as a curious child at his grandparents' rural Texas farm through years in the field and classroom, Greene has been unwavering in his search for scientific knowledge. He writes with passion and eloquence as he pays homage to decades of work done by researchers whose names are rarely heard by the public and yet have had a profound impact on how we interact with nature and the development of ecological studies. While his discussions of Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace are satisfying, Greene truly shines when writing about his friends, most especially fellow naturalist Ben Dial. Greene's artful pivot from fascinating details about the behavior of snakes to the loss of someone close to him is proof that this scientist has a poet's heart. Praised by David Quammen and Jim Harrison, Tracks and Shadows is a sweet surprise; rarely has science been so tender. --Colleen Mondor

There are and have been many professional biologists who have specialized in studying the lives of amphibians and reptiles. Yet few of them have chosen to write memoirs of their lives and professional activities and priorities. Such memoirs in recent years have included those by Altig, Crump, Gibbons, Means, and Pianka, among others. Here, Harry Greene joins this group with an articulate and thoughtful memoir written as he nears 70 years of age after a lifetime of extremely diverse experiences, major accomplishments in his field, mentoring his own students, and associating with his own mentors. None of the latter have written their own memoirs but Greene

makes up for this in recounting in detail the lives of expertise and devotion to their work by Henry Fitch, William Pyburn, and Gordon Burghardt. Fitch particularly was a mentor and icon to many of us in this field either directly in person or indirectly through his many publications on field studies of reptiles and other vertebrates, and it was extremely gratifying for me to read here about the breadth of his long career. Greene modestly describes his early life including his initial scientific publications while still in high school, his disastrous attempts to pass courses when he started college, and his rapid maturation with life as an emergency medic dealing with peoples' serious and fatal injuries. He was drafted in the late 1960s and his ambulance experience enabled him to become an Army medic, luckily stationed in Europe for two years where he was able to search out reptiles, do research at museums, and broaden his overall horizons. As we follow his career as a faculty member at UC Berkeley and Cornell University, Greene describes his field trips with students to diverse environments ranging from deserts of California to rain forests of Costa Rica. Subsequent chapters describe his pursuit of giant snakes in South America and Africa and a long-term study of rattlesnakes in Arizona. Snakes, spouses, mentors, and good friends and colleagues are recurrent themes throughout. Most personal anecdotes are interesting and serve mainly as ways to personalize the narrative. I found a chapter on hunting deer and wild hogs to be less interesting, although that may be more because I have never been a hunter. This chapter seemed only tenuously connected to the major themes of conservation, evolution, and snake behavior and ecology. Greene's work eloquently describes the joy and wonder and devotion that many of us in this field have had the good fortune to enjoy during our lives - the contact with iconic mentors, colleagues, and students, the field work on amazing animals, and the satisfaction of publication and recognition often shared with significant others.

This book is beautifully complex and layered. Greene is a scientist, and his vast and accurate research shows it. But he writes like a poet. It's the best of all possible worlds: great writing; fantastic story; fresh insights and reflections; in-depth and innovative reportage and research. It's truly a book of heart and mind. It's a must read for any scientist who wants to learn to write, or for any writer who wants to learn to incorporate science/fact into his/her writing. I can't think of another book that blends so many diverse topics so seamlessly and poetically. Simply beautiful.

As a biologist and a professor I found this book mirrored much of my own life and brought back many fond memories. From past field work to mentors I could relate to almost everything he discussed although my studies were on large mammals, not reptiles. I think anyone that enjoys the

outdoors will enjoy it especially those fascinated by "herp's". For a non biologists certain concepts may be hard to grasp so it's hard for me to say what percentage of readers would enjoy it as much as I did. But I think even the most amateur herpetologists, or even a birder will enjoy Green's tales of adventure. Maybe even his in depth look at Acadamia. Thanks Harry from some excellent stories and thought provoking discussions.

Harry Greene, a life-long advocate for nature and leading research herpetologist, has written an amazing book here. Some, but certainly not all, of us who study nature understand that humans are part of nature and that there is a, well, peculiar "human" element to being human. This book interweaves, often with bold personal confessions, how Harry Greene moved forward with his state-of-the-art biological studies, always keenly aware of his own human-ness and the omnipresent perspective that simply being a living human brought to his research. All biologists study life from the inevitable perspective of being alive themselves, but I've never seen any of my colleagues address that unique intersection of subjective and objective perspectives as has been done here. This book is perhaps more about being a human being as it is about nature or herpetology. Highly recommended.

I generally avoid natural history books. They are generally all the same. Overworked description of the natural world, depressing, and syrupy. Not this time. Stunning prose occasionally interrupts clear narration - a poignant story of growing up, war, love, and beauty. The closest thing to Sand County Almanac I have ever read and far more bloody. This is the one book I love giving out to anyone with the slightest interest in the natural world. Its the book I wish one day to write.

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