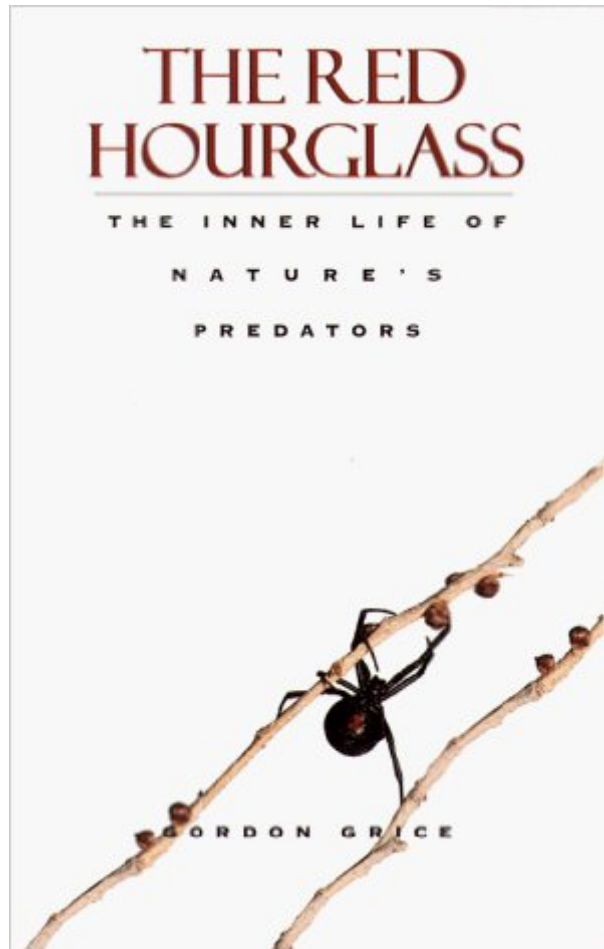


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The Red Hourglass: Lives Of The Predators



Synopsis

Snake venom that digests human flesh. A building cleared of every living thing by a band of tiny spiders. An infant insect eating its living prey from within, saving the vital organs for last. These are among the deadly feats of natural engineering you'll witness in *The Red Hourglass*, prize-winning author Gordon Grice's masterful, poetic, often dryly funny exploration of predators he has encountered around his rural Oklahoma home. Grice is a witty and intrepid guide through a world where mating ends in cannibalism, where killers possess toxins so lethal as to defy our ideas of a benevolent God, where spider remains, scattered like "the cast-off coats of untidy children," tell a quiet story of violent self-extermination. It's a world you'll recognize despite its exotic strangeness--the world in which we live. Unabashedly stepping into the mix, Grice abandons his role as objective observer with beguiling dark humor--collecting spiders and other vermin, decorating a tarantula's terrarium with dollhouse furniture, or forcing a battle between captive insects because he deems one "too stupid to live." Kill. Eat. Mate. Die. Charting the simple brutality of the lives of these predators, Grice's starkly graceful essays guide us toward startling truths about our own predatory nature. *The Red Hourglass* brings us face to fanged face with the inadequacy of our distinctions between normal and abnormal, dead and alive, innocent and evil.

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Customer Reviews

This is without doubt the most gruesomely graphic book on predation that I have ever read. The predators are: the black widow spider, the praying mantis, the rattlesnake, the tarantula, the pig, the

dog, and the brown recluse spider. Another half dozen or so ghastly creatures also make their appearance such as the crocodile, a bizarre "cricket-beast," hawk wasps and wolf spiders, not to mention humans. Gordon Grice, who is a gifted amateur naturalist who teaches humanities and English at Seward County Community College in Kansas is the kind of guy who collects crickets and spiders and beetles in jars so he can feed them live creatures and watch them chow down. He is the kind of guy who goes to rattlesnake roundups and breathes deeply. He is the kind of guy who stops for road kill and likes to attend vivisections. He's like the guy who goes to the top of a tall building just for the thrill of looking down; but what excites Grice's fancy is to watch how predators kill and devour their prey. The creepier the predator, the better. You can put those quick, clean and "humane" lion kills back in your VCR and watch it on TV. What Grice wants us to experience is exactly how the mandibles of the "cricket-beast" sound as they crunch through the beetle's exoskeleton and just how it feels to die, or nearly die, of rattlesnake or black widow venom. He's not particularly interested in scholarship (there are no footnotes or references), although he is careful about letting us know when he thinks a certain report, say of a nine foot rattler, is probably an exaggeration. He is an excellent writer who knows the value of concrete detail, tersely put; and he has the scientist's love for finding out exactly how something happens. What he does that no other writer in my recall has done is to emphasize the disgusting and revolting details of predation without euphemism or the use of any fig leaves. Be forewarned then that this is NOT the sort of nature book your eight-year-old grandson needs to read before going to bed--although if he gets his hands on it, he will! And he will have nightmares. The question that might be asked is why is Grice so intent on rubbing our faces in the brutality of nature? Clearly he has an agenda over and above grossing us out. I get the idea that he thinks a lot of what we hear about ourselves and our fellow creatures is so much pollyannaish tripe. He doesn't say as much directly but consider this from page 245: "There is actually nothing your average scientist hates more than information from nonscientists, all of whom he assumes to be unwashed, idol-worshipping degenerates good only for working on cars. The thing your average scientist despises second most is a fact that doesn't fit his theory..." Grice is able to dazzle us with his own observations about the animals he studies, but being an English prof he knows that his standing in the scientific community is (or before he wrote this book, was) zilch. It's easy to identify with his frustration in this matter, and acknowledge that it is a shame that scientists tend to run the other way when they see a nonscientist coming, or that they will not give credence to ideas that come from nonscientists. And it is especially true that nothing is worse for a scientist than a fact that doesn't fit his theory! Grice's inclusion of dogs and pigs as predators goes toward making what I see as one of the messages of this book. Simply put, we humans are domesticated animals.

We have--helped along by our dogs, pigs, sheep and cattle, our grains and fruits, our social and political structures--become "tamed." Grice darkly hints, as H. G. Wells did in his novel *The Time Machine* (1895), that this may not be all to the good. With our effete fussiness about the vulgarity of the animal world we are becoming like the Eloi who will be eaten by the brutal Morlocks. If we lose our ability to act without inhibition as the creatures Grice describes do when in pursuit of their dinners, we may indeed become something akin to sheep. Grice doesn't mention it directly but there is some considerable evidence that domesticated animals are not as smart as the wild kind. After advising us of just how horrid dogs can be, especially as pack hunters, Grice presents the counterpoint: "The care of animals, along with the tending of crops, is a root of our social structure. It dictates our need for permanent homes, our construction of walls and fences, ultimately our economy and culture. The dog makes this possible, because it was the dog, with his keener nose and ears, that made it feasible for us to protect livestock from nocturnal predators. Our tools, intelligence, and eyesight complement his senses; we share a territorial instinct that gives us a common goal." (p 231) He adds, "This bond [between man and dog] distinguishes the dog from other canids. It also distinguishes modern humanity from its older branches, because it is an essential element of the change from hunter-gatherer to the settled life." (p. 232) Finally, in a kind of summation, after observing the collapse and then rise again of the brown recluse spider populations in his shed, Grice writes, "Serial murder, war, genocide, and even witch hunts have all been linked to population changes and competition. We let ourselves off the hook ["kid ourselves," I would say] when we define such killing as 'abnormal.' We put the behavior at a distance, letting ourselves think of it as something alien, something we normal folk could never do.... But the capacity to murder, to become demonic, is in our nature." "One of our natures, anyway." (p. 258)

Gordon Grice has a disturbing fascination with bugs, spiders in particular. But his fascination is our entertainment, as he writes in flowing prose his observations of these nasty little crawlers. *The Red Hourglass* is an extremely well-written account of the habits and habitats of things that creep in the night. The book is divided into seven different studies, Black Widow, Mantid, Rattlesnake, Tarantula, Pig, Canid, and Recluse. Though Grice gives fascinating accounts of the darker aspects of pigs and dogs, it is painfully clear in his writings that his love is truly for the spider. *The Red Hourglass* is a non-fiction book that is written with such interesting and personal observations that it feels somewhat like a monster story at times. If you want to find out more about these creepy, crawly, nasty little arachnids, Grice is an excellent way to learn. This would be a great book to get kids started on taking interest with biology or even anthropology studies, it's that well written And I hate

spiders. Go ahead and grab up a copy of *The Red Hourglass*, I doubt you will ever find non-fiction reading as fun as Grice, having the same flair with his biology studies as Kurt Vonnegut does with his political studies. Enjoy!

What the reader gets with this book are seven essays written by a literary/humanities based college professor on seven particular predators: the black widow, the praying mantis, rattlesnakes, tarantulas, pigs, dogs, and the brown recluse spider. The writing is surprisingly good and the subject matter, while somewhat dark and gory, is fascinating. The reader from Michigan calls this book 'backyard naturalism' in a derogatory manner. I am a biology major and, although the majority of Grice's claims appear consistent with similar data I have seen, this is not a hard science book; criticizing it in that context is an apples versus oranges category mistake. Conversely, I praise this work as 'backyard naturalism' at its best. I thoroughly enjoyed reading *The Red Hourglass* from front to back. Take a bit of Peter Matthiessen's literary organicism, a pinch of Steven King's macabre involvement, E. O. Wilson's entomology, a dash of Desiderius Erasmus' sad, pragmatic humor, and some of Montaigne's candor, and you can wile away sumptuous moments zoosynthesizing the adventure of the 'The Incredible Shrinking Man' crossed with a bored boy's deific experimentation with arthropods, among other animals; all written with starkness and skill. What's a long pig? one may ask. The very sight of egregious brown recluse bites makes me kiss the soil of northern California. This book is a good mix of the literary and scientific milieus. It draws one in by the curiosity and repulsion of the subject matter as ruse for the author's peculiar expository skill.

Do yourself a favor and buy this book. If you like to read about the lives of strange critters, and appreciate fine prose and precise natural historical observation, you will enjoy this book immensely. The author also betrays a sophisticated understanding of both the science, and mystery, of life, which he nevertheless wears lightly. The down-to-earth spirit of Nebraska and Oklahoma also shines through the deceptively simple prose style. Finally, the book is devoid of any of the man and nature, circle of life, save the whale posing that mars so many nature books. This is true, backyard natural history, not politics. If you think you might like this book, you will.

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