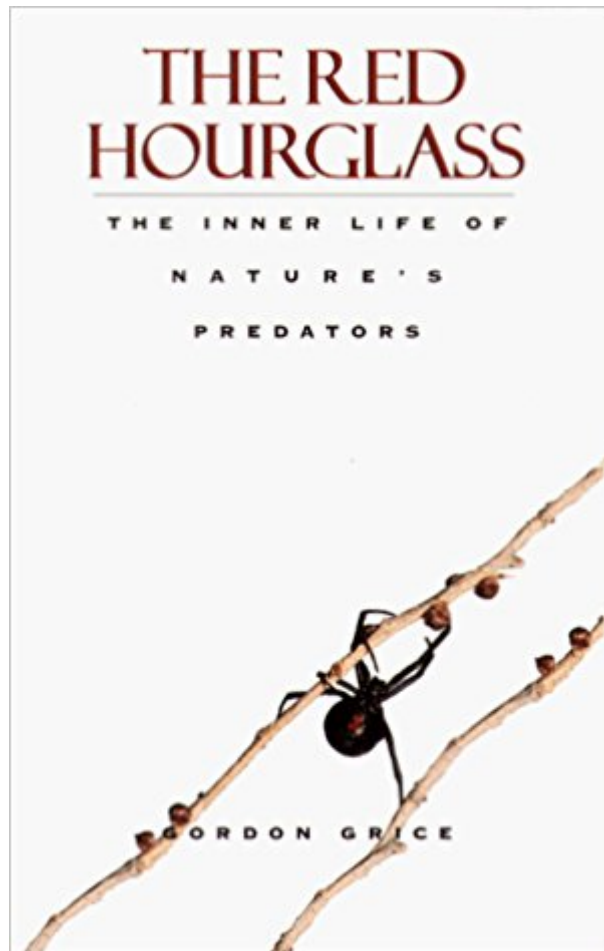




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The Red Hourglass: Lives Of The Predators



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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Gordon Grice, a young essayist from rural western Oklahoma, writes winningly of insects in all their glory, basing his narrative on lifelong observations of creatures such as the black widow, praying

mantis, brown recluse--and the occasional human being. For the black widow spider he professes an affectionate fascination, dangerous though the spider may be; for the brown recluse, a more dangerous creature still, he exhibits a healthy respect; for all the creatures who fall under his survey, he has many sympathies. Grice writes with good humor, even when he's writing of matters that are not for the squeamish, as when he describes the rather gruesome ways in which female mantises dispose of inconvenient mates or humans dispose of each other.

Readers seeking evidence of "Nature red in tooth and claw" will find it in this first-rate popular science book. Grice, who teaches humanities and English at Seward County Community College, examines in feisty, felicitous prose the life and lore of some lesser predators?spiders, mantids, tarantulas, rattlesnakes, pigs and canids. He notes that the praying mantis is the only insect that can turn its head?the better for the female to decapitate her mate as they copulate. Grice attends a rattlesnake roundup, visits a pig factory and talks with wolf-dog breeders. He discusses similarities between pigs and humans, wolves and humans. He describes, in gruesome detail, the effects of spider and snake toxins on the human body. While not for the queasy, the book captures attention, and not least in its philosophic leaps. The bite of the black widow (red hourglass) spider, Grice explains, is lethal far beyond what is necessary to kill insects, its normal prey; it can slay mice, frogs, snakes, cats, dogs and humans. And so in that spider, Grice writes, "the analytical mind finds an irreducible mystery, a motiveless evil in nature." Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This book came to my attention when someone on an online mailing list devoted to arachnids mentioned that she had started reading the book and found it upsetting, perhaps because she is "just too tender-hearted where arachnids are concerned." Even before reading the book, I found another warning, this one prominent on the dust jacket "I was originally disturbed by some of the killing he depicts, but his descriptions are so compelling that I had to read on." I think both aspects of this assessment are accurate. "The Red Hourglass: Lives of the Predators" consists of seven sections, each dealing with a different predator. The list includes black widows, mantids (like the praying mantis), rattlesnakes, pigs, canids (wolves and dogs), tarantulas, and brown recluses. Grice writes with a curious mixture of someone who admires his subjects and someone who seems to enjoy pitting them against each other. He describes in great detail the act of killing, in particular the results of his own handiwork. He frequently puts insects or arachnids together just to see what will happen. (For example, he puts two tarantulas in a small enclosure not for breeding purposes but to see whether they are territorial. They are.) A great deal of the book consists of descriptions of such

incidents, and when it comes to snakes and the mammalian subjects, those who love such animals might want to think twice before reading too much of those sections. I'm also not entirely sure whether the section on widows is all that helpful. (I live in widow country, can find as many as a dozen with a few minutes of searching, and have no fear of them since they keep to themselves and have never posed a threat, but I know that there is a great fear of widows.)At the same time, there is a great deal of information here, some of it fascinating (as in the descriptions of the effects of a widow bite, effects that I would much rather read about than experience) and some of it speculative as Grice waxes philosophical. Grice is, I think, an excellent writer, and so the book is worthwhile reading in general, though the section on tarantulas offers little that I, a relative neophyte to tarantulas, did not know.

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tarantulas, did not know.

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.

I enjoyed the information and anecdotes on all the various predatory species!

This collection uses the scary, the monsters big or small, to peak into our humanity and show us things about ourselves. Cleverly written, the essays seem to come together with each successive passage. Grice has crafted a great and eerie read.

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