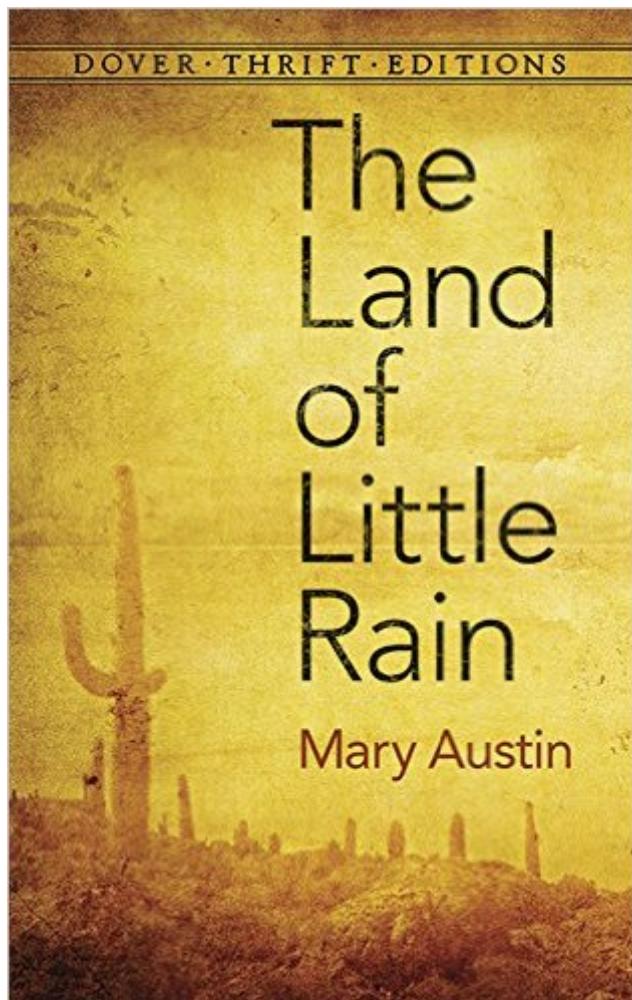


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The Land Of Little Rain (Dover Thrift Editions)



Synopsis

The enduring appeal of the desert is strikingly portrayed in this poetic study, which has become a classic of the American Southwest. First published in 1903, it is the work of Mary Austin (1868-1934), a prolific novelist, poet, critic, and playwright, who was also an ardent early feminist and champion of Indians and Spanish-Americans. She is best known today for this enchanting paean to the vast, arid, yet remarkably beautiful lands that lie east of the Sierra Nevadas, stretching south from Yosemite through Death Valley to the Mojave Desert. Comprising fourteen sketches, the book describes plants, animals, mountains, birds, skies, Indians, prospectors, towns, and other aspects of the desert in serene, beautifully modulated prose that conveys the timeless cycles of life and death in a harsh land. Readers will never again think of the desert as a lifeless, barren environment but rather as a place of rare, austere beauty, rich in plant and animal life, weaving a lasting spell over its human inhabitants.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I chose this book as it describes Death Valley and surrounds in the US and as I had been there thought it might provide a little more in depth information about the area. She writes delightfully about flora, fauna and nature's way, however, I got a little bogged down two thirds of the way in with almost unlimited descriptions of flora - perhaps someone with this background would find it fascinating - anyhow I soldiered on and found the remainder of the book very good, particularly the native Indian tribe's customs and ways. Recommended....

Austin lived in the Owens Valley during a turbulent period at the turn of the century, and she observes the people and wild things dwelling there with a novelist's eye. But what sets this gem above all the rest is simply her writing, the plain beauty of her voice and phrasing. She achieves a tone that is somehow at once wistful and tinged with levity, very gently ironic yet always loving. Her words caress their subjects like -- well, like the pen and ink drawings that graced the original publication in 19-ought-whatever. They evoke all the richness of the place, its austerity, its pathos, its beauty, with a gentle affection that is sweet but never cloying, sometimes sad but never downcast. It has a kind of Zen translucency, filtered through the gently humorous, sensitive lens of a literary genius.

The famous American-West landscape photographer, Ansel Adams and friend of M.H.A., said of *The Land of Little Rain*: "The sharp beauty of *The Land of Little Rain* is finely etched in the distinguished prose of Mary Austin. Many books and articles have probed the factual aspects of this amazing land, but no writing to my knowledge conveys so much of the spirit of earth and sky, of plants and people, of storm and the desolation of majestic wastes, of tender, intimate beauty, as does *The Land of Little Rain*." (Re: "A Note on the Land and on the Photographs", from "*The Land of Little Rain*"- Houghton-Mifflin Co. 1950).Indeed, M.H.A. displayed an uncanny sensitivity and understanding of the desert lands in the Owens Valley, California. Death Valley is, indeed, harsh and unforgiving, but to the astute observer who has learned how to live within the limits of sparse resources, it is an unequaled Paradise. She writes so eloquently and poetically of how the desert people and flora/fauna survive. The interaction of desert botany, biology, hydrology, geography, meteorology, and ecology come across vividly and often humorously with such lines as: "Once at Red Rock, in a year of green pasture (a wet year), which is a bad time for the scavengers, we saw two buzzards, five ravens, and a coyote feeding on the same carrion, and only the coyote seemed ashamed of the company". (chapter 3- "The Scavengers")M.H.A. studied the land, the flora/fauna, the weather (her "2" basic desert seasons- summer and winter) and she learned from her neighbors the Shoshone and Paiute Indians (she preferred to call the American Indians "Amerinds") , the Mexicans, the white settlers, and many colorful desert loners such as the "Pocket Hunter" (for seeker of pockets of gold)- her name for an old prospector friend. She learned much wisdom and practical knowledge from her Indian friends like "The Basket Maker", Seyavi, whose life story is so eloquently told. The Indians shared with her their survival knowledge of how to find water from signs displayed by plants, how to read the activities of animals for food, how to "know" which plants are

medicinal and/or edible and which plants to stay away from:"Live long enough with an Indian, and he or the wild things will show you a use for everything that grows in these borders". (Chapter- "Shoshone Land")This beautiful little book finishes with: "Come away, you who are obsessed with your own importance in the scheme of things, and have got nothing you did not sweat for, come away by the brown valleys and full-bosomed hills to the even-breathing days, to the kindness, earthliness, ease of Pueblo de Las Uvas."According to Ansel Adam's notes, Las Uvas is Grape Canyon or Creek and is part of the Tejon area south of Bakersfield, Ca.After reading this fine book, one will come to understand why so many people have referred to M.H.A. as the "Henry David Thoreau of the American West". Thoreau is the author of the renown classic, "Walden".There are many different publications of The Land of Little Rain and many have variations from the original format, ie., different introductions, preface, illustrations, etc. The text is all that really matters, of course, but I have checked-out a few of the different copies from regional libraries so I could copy the intros by such notables as "Cactus Ed" (Edward Abbey- "The Monkey Wrench Gang", et al.). Abbey's Forward is in the 1988 Penguin Books edition. My copy is a reproduction of the original 1903 edition complete with line drawings by E. Boyd Smith who knew M.H.A. and the regions she wrote about.Ansel Adams teamed-up with Houghton-Mifflin Co. in 1950 to give tribute to this outstanding classic by publishing a version her book with 48 of his photos taken in the Owens Valley, California region where the book was written and M.H.A. lived for sometime.In describing the various areas and geographical locations in her book, M.H.A. cloaked many of the popular modern regional names with original Indian or old nicknames known only to a few to protect the privacy of those she wrote about. Adams and the editors used several resources to decipher the pseudonyms so he could match them to his photographs with the current regional names for accurate descriptions. They published an interesting glossary of all the names that could be deciphered in this 1950 edition.More information including photographs of M.H.A. and her life can be seen at the Owens Valley Historical Society website:[...]

It's pretty easy to write a book that makes people want to go somewhere that already looks appealing to them--Manhattan, Yellowstone, other places where tourists flock to--but to write a book that makes one of the most desolate, bleak, inhospitable places on the entire planet seem like somewhere you have to see for yourself as soon as possible...well, that takes some skill.That's what Mary Austin has done however, in "The Land of Little Rain." This book examines the wildlife, plants, terrain, weather, and people of Death Valley and the surrounding area, and it does so with the eye and the pen of a true poet.Mary Austin lavishes her words on this area in sparse, measured prose,

and distills the essence of this harsh California desert into sentences and paragraphs. She finds a handful of words that perfectly suit this terrain and the life it supports--words like white, slant, tilt, sessile, and winey--and bends and twists these words every way possible to serve her every purpose. As a result, the land she describes comes across vividly. She writes of how the desert and the wilderness "uncramps our souls," of "the days too hot and white," of slant-winged scavengers," of wandering hopelessly through the desert trodding on vultures' shadows, of "the westering sun," "the late slant light," of "a stream that knows its purpose and reflects the sky," and of the sun dancing up the slope of a mountain. Her prose is KILLER. She also tells firsthand accounts of Death Valley's craziest miners, of little towns that could (kind of, sometimes), and of such sad sights as a cougar lamenting the destruction of its lair and family that had been destroyed by a torrential rainstorm, "crying a very human woe." In another such rainstorm she talks of "a bobcat mother mouthing her drowned kittens in the ruined lair built in the wash...." I highly recommend this book. It's very brief, and is plotless, but the insights and descriptions are invaluable. I've never been to Death Valley, but I'm already planning on going there. If the book has faults though, it's in some of the generalizations it makes about the area's people (All Spanish people dance and sing every evening? Really?), and in how abruptly it ends. It's a bit like taking a long, beautiful scenic drive and then ending up in a parking lot. "This is so great, look at that--oh. Oh, we're there."

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