Arts & Humanities

In the Desert With Joseph Krutch

By
Gerald Green '42CC '47JRN
|
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Our helicopter bobbed and hovered over the blackened crater of a dead volcano in the Sea of Cortez and descended into a lava cave dotted with startling yellow flowers.

The pilot, a moonlighting San Diego policeman, eased us to the rocky floor and called out, “Basement, gents. Snakes, scorpions, and Gila monsters.”

This expedition was part of an NBC documentary series on nature, conservation, and the environment. Our guide and writer was Joseph Wood Krutch, whom I had induced to try educational television. The program was based on his book Forgotten Peninsula. This was Baja California, a savage, hot, seemingly barren place that had earned his admiration. He called Baja “an example of how much bad roads can do for a country.”

Whenever we filmed a sequence—a stream, a mountain range, a canyon, a rare tree, or an elusive bird—I would challenge my former teacher to supply an appropriate literary quote. After all, Krutch had lived many lives. He had written superb books, taught appreciative students, achieved eminence as critic, biographer, philosopher, and essayist, and in these last years of his productive life he had become a lover of lizards and a confidant of coyotes.

His years on Morningside Heights behind him, he had changed appearance markedly. Now he was suntanned and leathery and relaxed, a different man. Clearly the sandy wastes of the Southwest had worked some magic on the renowned academic, who had battled colds and headaches in New York too long. Now he exhibited an energy rarely in evidence on the Columbia campus. The dusty stacks of a university library were no competition for his new life in the healing sun. And instead of writing critiques of plays and books, he extolled the courage of the

kangaroo rat, and walked for hours amid stands of giant saguaro.

The pilot tried to help him through the aircraft's narrow exit but Krutch, often afflicted with a tremor, insisted on climbing out unaided, as if to say "It's my desert and it will treat me kindly."

Our cameraman, a surly Alabaman (he had noted Krutch's Tennessee drawl and respected him), followed him around the crater floor. "This is what I do best in films," Krutch said. "I wander about sun–struck and stare at succulents." He suggested that his new occupation should be Inspector of Wildflowers. Krutch identified a barrel cactus, a dune primrose, a host of butterflies. He was at peace with the gods of the Sonora. His happiness pleased Mrs. Krutch, who watched his every move, fearful he would get too much sun. "How about an appropriate quote for your visit to Hades?" I insisted. "We can't let the audience forget that you're a literary man."

He paused. "Virgil would be suitable. You recall he went into hell with Aeneas."

The pilot smiled. "I love to hear the professor talk," he said innocently. "Even though I don't understand him."

"'Facilis descensus Avernus,'"Krutch said. We looked like a class of C-minus freshmen. He went on: "Virgil says it's easy getting into hell, but adds, "'Hoc opus labor est'—which means getting out may present a problem."

"Not with a helicopter," said the pilot. He had joined our seminar as easily as if he had just registered for an adult education class.

Krutch's wife, Marcelle, was amused by the cast of characters. She told me that now that her husband was free of classrooms, examinations, term papers, and faculty meetings, he had become outgoing, almost exuberant, one of the boys.

"I never saw such a change in Joe," Marcelle said. "He was always shy. He didn't mingle with students. He kept his distance. But out here he is forever trading stories with cowboys, desert rats, tourists, and Indians."

The word "belletrist" flitted through my head. Was Krutch our national belletrist of wildcats and cacti? Or had he simply moved his literary style to another world? Who but Krutch would enter a volcano and quote Virgil? His new colleagues—cowhands and Pueblo Indians— delighted him. But did they understand him? No matter. He

had long wearied of political cant and literary feuds. He had grown uneasy with the stubborn wrongheadedness of the Left and the unforgiving, vengeful Right, and most of all the modernist writers, who like naughty children demanded that their "private lunacies become public necessities." I could see why he preferred the company of horned toads.

Fortunately, his scholarly attainments and his astonishing memory endowed him with a wondrous talent for combining the works of nature and the humanist canon. Krutch on mountains:

"In the legends of the saints and prophets, either a desert or a mountain is pretty sure to figure. It is usually in the middle of one, or on the top of one, that the vision comes or the test is met.

"To give their message to the world they came down or came out, but it is almost invariably in a solitude either high or dry, that it is first revealed. Moses and Zoroaster climbed up. Buddha sat down. Muhammad fled."

This is vintage Krutch, a summation of great religions—terse, witty, clearly stated. Buddha sat down. Muhammad fled.

Watching him commune with manta rays rising in a cascade from the Sea of Cortez or laughing as a jackrabbit fled from our Jeep, or observing the acrobatics of a hummingbird spinning around that botanical comedian the boojum tree, I had to remind myself that this was a man who had abandoned the written word for nature's daily drama.

He still enjoyed theatrical and academic gossip, old anecdotes about his contemporaries, amusing marginalia. But these had assumed a supporting role in his cosmos. Once, while on a lunch break in the desert, he recalled being witness to a historic battle between two theatrical heavyweights. "I forget the play, but it was by Lillian Hellman," he said, "and it starred Tallulah Bankhead. George Jean Nathan and I were invited to an opening night party. The four of us took a taxi. This was the era of those comfortable cabs with jump seats. Hellman and Bankhead took the rear seats. Nathan and I sat in front of them.

"We hadn't been underway a minute when Bankhead said to Hellman, 'That's the last time I act in one of your goddamned plays.' Miss Hellman responded by slamming her purse against the actress's jaw. Bankhead took the blow stoically but

Nathan and I were made of weaker stuff. The cab stopped at a red light, and without a word he and I each seized a door and exited into the night—silent, abashed, flustered."

"And you concluded?" I asked.

"I decided that no self-respecting Gila monster would have behaved in that manner."

He told the story while we prepared our sleeping bags. Night fell on Havasupai Canyon. Marcelle, loyal wife, companion, and audience, said, "Joe makes up some of these stories."

She was gray-haired, pretty, vigorous. And she guarded his health like the nurse she had trained to be. She was a French Basque who had come to America in her youth and was a fine source of malapropism. "You go to sleep, Joe," she said, gently placing a blanket on him. "Close your eyes, and I'll put something over on you."

Literary friends back east often puzzled over his new interests. Whom did he talk to? What did the mountain lion and the chuckwalla lizard say to one another? Or to him?

"Read The Rubáiyát," he counseled. "'The Lion and the Lizard keep the Court where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep.'"

He was taunting us. Fifteen years ago, after he had moved to the desert, in an essay entitled "What Is Modernism?" he made clear why he had no heart for new literary modes.

Taking a minority position, he shocked establishment intellectuals, fashionable critics, and "in" writers with the judgment that he found modern novels "full of violence, perversity, and nihilism."

Film and theater were just as bad. He quoted Susan Sontag's review of a motion picture called Flaming Creatures. She had called it a work of "voluptuousness, sexual frenzy, romantic love, and vampirism."

This awesome modern critic went on to describe a final scene in which "the chorale of flutish shrieks and screams accompany the group rape of a bosomy woman, rape happily converting itself into an orgy."

Such claptrap revolted him, particularly the conclusion that the trashy film was “a triumphant example of an aesthetic vision of the world—and such a vision is perhaps always, at its core, epicene.”

Krutch pointed out that Sontag “does not explain why an aesthetic vision must be epicene (i.e., homosexual), a question no one else seems to have asked.”

He concluded: “In the atmosphere of the present moment, the boldest position a creative or critical writer could take would be one championing not only morality but gentility and bourgeois respectability.”

How dare he advocate decency! Those who rejected Krutch’s call for a humane society—in place of violence and nihilism—should not have been surprised. In 1929, in *The Modern Temper*, Krutch had looked at communism and found it destructive, a system whose “hopes are no hopes in which we may have any part.” Thus he had been out of step with two of the defining codes of modernism—erotica and Bolshevism. At the risk of being called an old fogey, he had rejected communism in 1929. Forty years later, he was offended by the depravity and brutality in literature. And the arbiters dismissed him. Is it any wonder that Krutch, who dared raise the banners of civilized behavior and honest discourse, would come to prefer the company of buzzards to the ways of modern man?

He posed the question: “What can any reasonable man choose to do except escape either life or literature—if he can?”

He took his own advice. The desert became his fief, a place of riotous sunsets and multicolored mountains, sudden angry storms, odd forms of life, a place of courage and beauty and intriguing scarcity.

One hot morning I saw him in conversation at the Tucson Desert Museum. That institution, of which he had become secretary, was zoo, botanical garden, research center, and the heart of the conservation movement in Arizona. He was as proud of this position as of any honorary degree or literary prize. He was talking to a dark, stocky man. Krutch and his companion both wore matching straw sombreros and were studying the man’s opened palm.

Marcelle explained, “The friend he’s talking to is Cactus John, the chief gardener. Joe spends hours with him studying desert plants.”

Krutch introduced Cactus John to us as if he were presenting a Nobel laureate. The Indian gardener showed me his calloused hand. It was dotted with minuscule black seeds—the seeds of the giant saguaro. Krutch had written:

“The disproportion of the acorn and the oak is not nearly so great. After two or three years a seedling is only a few millimeters high; after ten years, less than an inch. . . . If anyone ever planted a saguaro for the sake of future generations, he was carrying such faith and such concern to fantastic limits.”

“People said he was out of step with the modern world, that he was old-fashioned,” Marcelle said later. “But he was an honest westerner. He liked Indians. He loved the Havasupai. They live next to a beautiful waterfall in a canyon. Once Joe asked the Havasupai chief if they still did war dances.”

“What did the chief say?” I asked.

“He said they didn’t do much dancing, but they might if Joe and his friends tied a white man to a stake.”

We laughed. The story could be told without worries about political correctness. The Indians knew he was a friend, whose love included the Native Americans—the people of Crazy Horse, Chief Joseph, and Geronimo. He appreciated their bonds with the burning land. Like Krutch, they were not ashamed of the pathetic fallacy. Yes, Badger was brave. Coyote was cunning. Raven, a thief.

He summed up his affection for the desert as grounded in “the acute awareness of a natural phenomenon of the living world . . . the thing most likely to open the door to that joy we cannot analyze.”

He was not an emotional or demonstrative man. But I recall the end of a tiring day, when after a six-hour search, we came upon the rare caterpillar cactus (or creeping devil), a forest of spiny horizontal trunks suggesting Martian reptiles, each twisting log sending out a single pink flower. He had opened his arms gratefully as if seeking to embrace this corner of God’s private garden.

He was no preacher or missionary. But he made an eloquent case for the preservation of the natural world. And his voice was heard.

Krutch wrote, “The sense that nature is the most beautiful of all spectacles and something of which man is a part; that she is a source of health and joy which

inevitably dries up when man is alienated from her; these are the ultimate reasons why it seems desperately important that the works of nature should not disappear to be replaced by the works of man alone."

As was his custom, he reached into the world of literature to emphasize his feelings:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream....

He said rather sadly, "When the moment of happiness passed, it was not because the glory had faded, but only because Wordsworth's own sight had grown dim."

Krutch's own mind never dimmed. The biographer of Poe, Thoreau, and Samuel Johnson had assuredly lived many lives. He was a humane and eloquent voice who could evoke poets and playwrights, then effortlessly present us with nature writing that is still quoted by conservationists and anyone who has been thrilled by a soaring eagle or the ingenuity of a cactus wren. The desert, he told us, was part of man's world, and deserved preservation. As he once whispered to the first frogs of spring, We're in this together.

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