

# Thinking and walking with *The Sonoran Desert: A literary field guide*

## Louise Boscacci

### About the author

Louise is an Australian writer, researcher and teacher in the ecological humanities. She is an author and co-editor of the creative non-fiction book, *100 Atmospheres: Studies in Scale and Wonder* (Open Humanities Press, 2018).

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### About the book

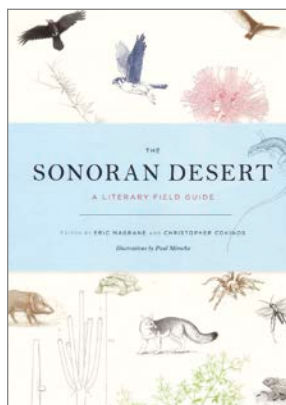
Editors: **Magrane E and Cokinos C**

Illustrator: **Mirocha P**

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Consider the White-lined Sphinx Moth of the arid lands of southwest North America. TC Tolbert does, but begins with, “Relationshapes: When we notice our breathing, we quiet it” (p 70). Read on. We are led into a vignette of prose that takes flight as would the moth pollinating evening primrose or sacred datura in the Sonoran Desert at twilight. A hover here; a dart away again there. Why are we reading about a museum exhibit on life and death, a woman in pearls, a campground full of big RVs, hummingbirds, Freud and the uncanny? These, in a field guide? “I like to think that spaces ask people to turn them into a room,” Tolbert writes. So, the sphinx moth, *Hyles lineata*, and its caterpillar are brought into focus as part of this larger desert imaginary, one that also leaves the reader with a teasing insight from the philosopher of relationscapes, Erin Manning: in order to stand still, you have to move.

“We need biodiversity of thought [...] the empiricism of science, the imaginative and cognitive leaps of poetry, the close observation of both,” Eric Magrane and Christopher Cokinos write in introducing this literary field guide (p xvi). Their bigger matter of concern is the accelerating loss of biodiversity in the contemporary Anthropocene bound, as it is, to the Earth-wide transformations of fossil-fuelled climate change. But, this book is a situated and particular composition that wants to celebrate and mark the rich more-than-human life and relations of the lands, skies and ephemeral waters of the Sonoran. Its writers recognise that a warming climate portends drought and increased wildfire activity. They know that the current ecological make-up of the bioregion will change.

The guide, as Magrane and Cokinos observe, was imagined as a form of literary biomimicry. First, because it followed on from the mode of the ‘bioblitz’ in which citizen scientists and other community participants gather and work with ecologists and biologists to collectively inventory the plants and animals on shared conservation lands. But, equally important, the project took direct impetus from a Poetic Inventory of the Saguaro National Park in the region: an inventory of poems composed by a group of 80 poets and writers to address many on the local co-species list. Here, in this wider anthology, a biodiverse mix of poets and prose writers have written poems and short fiction pieces for a cast of 64 plants, insects, birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians that inhabit and create the Sonoran ecosystems and relationscapes. Each entry is headlined by the plant or animal’s locally known name, and subtitled with the binomial nomenclature of genus and species. The desert globemallow (a flowering plant), Arizona walkingstick (an insect), the elf owl, javelina (collared peccary) and the Gila monster (fat-tailed lizard) are a sample of representative denizens.

Biomimicry also refers to the varied approaches to writing and literary form found in the collection. A one-line poem evokes the vivid flash of a broad-billed hummingbird, a tiny bird just four inches long. A two-page micro-story follows a roaming coyote. Each entry spans two or three pages and is accompanied, not by a high-resolution colour photograph, but by a soft black and white pencil drawing by illustrator Paul Mirocha. Mirocha was artist-in-residence at the Research Library of desert ecology at Tumamoc Hill, Tucson, where the two editors also wrote for the book.

Underneath each poem or prose piece, in smaller typescript and often threatening to steal the spotlight from the main text, are the editors' crisp, ludic descriptions that riff on the more familiar field guide format of the natural sciences. These complementary micro-narratives arranged under subsections of 'Habitat', 'Description', and 'Life History' skilfully transcend any claim to a singular authoritative 'knowledge', but do so without sacrificing factual accuracy. They interpret and extract from the rich scientific lode found in existing flora and fauna almanacs to compose lively, playful accounts that may include giving soft directions to the reader: "If you wish to be terrified, locate a group of hibernating bark scorpions during winter." Or, in an eloquent mattering across scales of the individual and local to the planetary, a description cuts straight to the heart of climate and action: "As the Sonoran Desert faces increasing drought due to human-induced climate change, the [Merriam's] kangaroo rat might be an inspiration for those who are working on water conservation and policy."

Here, it is worth knowing that scientific reviewers and area naturalists were invited to read and 'fact-check' these descriptions. But those hands are invisible, and the light-touch of this clever collaboration has created a powerful model for creative interdisciplinary thinking and writing. These vignettes are truly pleasurable to read as contemporary natureculture

writing, as creative non-fiction, and as communiqués of wonder.

Wonder. I am mindful that wonder, politics and ethics are inextricably coupled in the present age of critical climate change. Magrane and Cokinos simply ask: "In a hundred years, will we look at some of the pieces [...] as elegies for species past? What will have persisted, what will have arrived?" (p xvi). Yet, and even in response to this reality, exercising the easily jaded faculty of wonder is at the *heart* of this project, the editors also intimate. Does it – this heart – work?

In order to move, you need to stand still. The literary field guide is a subtle material offering that I have returned to over a passage of months, randomly dipped into, slowly read full entries from, or picked up briefly to let a new plant or animal come into focus as a page flicked over. But, here now, inside out of the rain on an unpredictably cold midsummer day in eastern Australia, I am drawn once more to the front cover array of drawings of unfamiliar raptors, a hirsute peccary, a solid tortoise, an advancing tarantula, the giant saguaro cactus and the flower head of a fairy duster. First, I have been learning this new language of another, unfamiliar bios. But, now I want to walk that open desert field and meet them all. I would walk with this little literary guide close to hand, pause to read a passage en route, annotate sightings and soundings in the wide margins and free spaces of its pages, jot down new questions, and let new wanderings in. ■

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