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The Oldest Living Things In The World



Synopsis

The Oldest Living Things in the World is an epic journey through time and space. Over the past decade, artist Rachel Sussman has researched, worked with biologists, and traveled the world to photograph continuously living organisms that are 2,000 years old and older. Spanning from Antarctica to Greenland, the Mojave Desert to the Australian Outback, the result is a stunning and unique visual collection of ancient organisms unlike anything that has been created in the arts or sciences before, insightfully and accessibly narrated by Sussman along the way. Her work is both timeless and timely, and spans disciplines, continents, and millennia. It is underscored by an innate environmentalism and driven by Sussman's relentless curiosity. She begins at year zero, and looks back from there, photographing the past in the present. These ancient individuals live on every continent and range from Greenlandic lichens that grow only one centimeter a century, to unique desert shrubs in Africa and South America, a predatory fungus in Oregon, Caribbean brain coral, to an 80,000-year-old colony of aspen in Utah. Sussman journeyed to Antarctica to photograph 5,500-year-old moss; Australia for stromatolites, primeval organisms tied to the oxygenation of the planet and the beginnings of life on Earth; and to Tasmania to capture a 43,600-year-old self-propagating shrub that's the last individual of its kind. Her portraits reveal the living history of our planet and what we stand to lose in the future. These ancient survivors have weathered millennia in some of the world's most extreme environments, yet climate change and human encroachment have put many of them in danger. Two of her subjects have already met with untimely deaths by human hands. Alongside the photographs, Sussman relays fascinating and sometimes harrowing tales of her global adventures tracking down her subjects and shares insights from the scientists who research them. The oldest living things in the world are a record and celebration of the past, a call to action in the present, and a barometer of our future.

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Customer Reviews

I agree with the other two reviewers who gave this book five stars, but I don't think they touched on what was so meaningful to me about the book. The photography is good, even though many of the subjects don't really lend themselves to easy framing or notable settings - try photographing a fungus if you don't believe me. The theme is engaging as well, but what really made this book for me were the stories, thoughts, ponderings that accompany each chapter. Despite writing only about living things over 2,000 years old, Sussman has made this into an intensely personal book, part story, part quest, and all heart. Please read this, you'll be better for having done so.

A tree 2000 years old, another a 13,000, and a clonal copse of trees 70,000 years old - or maybe a few hundred thousand. Bacteria somewhere around a half-million years old. Yet odder beings in the thousands to ten-thousand-plus range. If the individual organism isn't at least 2000 years old, it doesn't make the cut. This book is simply awe-inspiring - to be among beings that live such lives, where ice ages might come and go around the one individual. That time scale simply boggles the mind. Then the chill sets in: a few of these beings have died since their pictures were taken. A tree of 3000 years succumbed to fire, another of 13,000 was killed in a construction project. What lived so long can die in minutes, and you can't just plant some seeds and grow a new one, not 13,000 years old. Gone, after all that time, because of natural hazards or human carelessness. And, in the current Great Extinction, we'll lose a lot more, mostly never having known they ever lived.

Environmental threats and climate change can move faster than these living things can respond. I find it humbling, too - so few human artifacts or cultures have the power to last as long as these beings have. Although the naturalist who collected these images took care with proper identification, she's not a scientist by trade. She's an artist, a photographer. But she's a part of the scientific venture, too, making it humanly understandable, even personal, and stirring the sense of awe and respect that underlies nearly all scientific research. (I first became aware of this book through a review in Science magazine.) Really, she just proves that the dichotomy of science and art is artificial and arbitrary, more an artifact of the viewer's preconceptions than of the fields themselves.

This has my highest recommendation.-- wiredweird

I love the exploration of very old things, and there are some fantastic photos. The commentary is a little strange though, with meandering narratives that mention personal romantic dramas that are totally irrelevant to the topic.

Author/photographer Sussman is motivated by the death of the Senator tree near Orlando Florida in early January, 2012 - 3,500 years old, killed by a fire likely human caused. (There was no lightning recorded in the area during the weeks prior, and the tree had recently been provided with its own lightning rod.) Fortunately she had already photographed it in 2007 as part of her focus on living organisms 2,000 years and older. The Senator tree is not the only seemingly immortal treasure damaged/killed by man - there's a 3,000+ year-old chestnut tree near Mt. Etna in which someone tried to grill sausages inside it. Fortunately, that tree was saved and a protective fence since erected. Other such treasures are also threatened from time to time - thankfully she's well into her work. Sussman has also traveled to Greenland that grow only 1 cm. every hundred years, Tasmania to record a 43,000-year old shrub, a dense bush in Chile's Atacama Desert that is as much as 3,000 years old, etc. I was surprised to learn that creosote bushes, of which there are many in my yard, have been estimated at 12,000 years-old in the Mohave Desert. Turns out they grow-out from a center via circular expansion of roots. So, mine may also be very, very old as well. The really good news - they can survive up to two years without water. Quaking Aspen in Utah, underground forests in South Africa, and other trees/bushes spread out similarly from a very old center. Olive trees may be 3,000 years old. There's also 5,500-year-old moss on Elephant Island in Antarctica (looks deceptively like ordinary moss), and younger (2,200 year-old moss) growing atop 9,000-year-old fossilized remains of its predecessors. Oldest of all - 400,000 to 600,000 year-old Siberian bacteria (microscopic), and still alive, per the experts. Truly an awe-inspiring work.

This book, which I bought at full price last year as a birthday present for my husband, has beautiful images and is based on an interesting concept. The writing, however, is rather disappointing, but the absolutely worse thing about the book is the astonishing number of typographical errors it contains. The publisher, CHICAGO UNIVERSITY PRESS, ought to be ashamed! Something went seriously wrong with the copyediting process here.

As a botany enthusiast, I was really excited to hear about this book and really want to love it - it was

a tremendous idea for a project and a tremendous undertaking. However, the execution simply does not do justice to its amazing subjects. The essays are often poorly written and most offer far more information about the artist's experiences ("I" is far more likely to pop up than "it") than her subjects. Full essays from the experts that she briefly quotes would have been far better. The photographs are also often lacking, sometimes in technique and lighting, but also in opportunity - how, when producing a work of this magnitude, does one not plan an itinerary around catching plants in bloom, especially something as magnificent as Mojave Yuccas or as rare as Box Huckleberry? How do you not wait for/come back for better light?

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