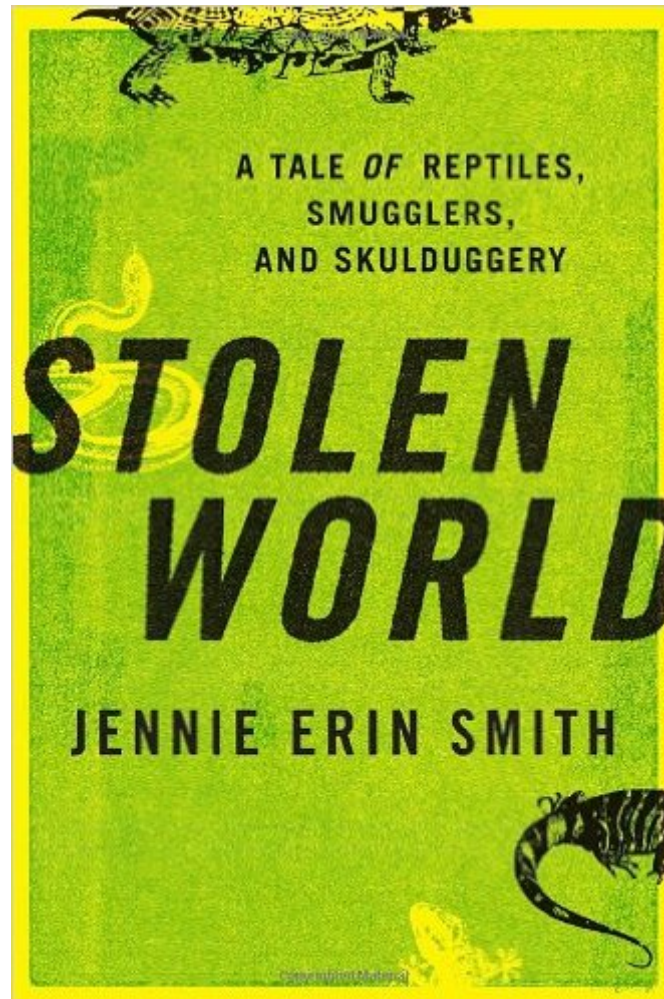


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Stolen World: A Tale Of Reptiles, Smugglers, And Skulduggery



Synopsis

Tortoises disappear from a Madagascar reserve and reappear in the Bronx Zoo. A dead iguana floats in a jar, awaiting its unveiling in a Florida court. A viper causes mayhem from Ethiopia to Virginia. In *Stolen World*, Jennie Erin Smith takes the reader on an unforgettable journey, a dark adventure over five decades and six continents. In 1965, Hank Molt, a young cheese salesman from Philadelphia, reinvented himself as a specialist dealer in rare fauna, traveling the world to collect exquisite reptiles for zoos and museums. By the end of the decade that followed, new endangered species laws had turned Molt into a convicted smuggler, and an unrepentant one, who went on to provide many of the same rare reptiles to many of the same institutions, covertly. But Molt soon found a rival in Tommy Crutchfield, a Florida carpet salesman with every intention of usurping Molt as the most accomplished reptile smuggler in the country. Like Molt, Crutchfield had modeled himself after an earlier generation of natural-history collectors celebrated for their service to science, an ideal that, for Molt and Crutchfield, eclipsed the realities of the new wildlife-protection laws. Zoo curators, caught between a desire for rare animals and the conservation-minded focus of their institutions, became the smugglers' antagonists in court but also their best customers, sometimes simultaneously. Crutchfield forged ties with a criminally inclined Malaysian wildlife trader and emerged a millionaire, beloved by some of the finest zoos in the world. Molt, following a string of inventive but disastrous smuggling schemes in New Guinea, was reduced to hanging around Crutchfield's Florida compound, plotting Crutchfield's demise. The fallout from their feud would result in a major federal investigation with tentacles in Germany, Madagascar, Holland, and Malaysia. And yet even after prison, personal ruin, and the depredations of age, Molt and Crutchfield never stopped scheming, never stopped longing for the snake or lizard that would earn each his rightful place in a world that had forgotten them—or rather, had never recognized them to begin with.

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Customer Reviews

When you consider collecting as a hobby, say stamp collecting, you expect for some collectors to be informal about their collections and others to be obsessive, and you expect some collectors to be in it for love and others for money. Collecting and dealing in reptiles, however, seems to bring out the most reprehensible, venal, and (shall we say) cold-blooded traits of the participants. Those are the sorts of guys described in *Stolen World: A Tale of Reptiles, Smugglers, and Skulduggery* (Crown Publishers) by Jennie Erin Smith. Among reptile enthusiasts, there may be some who share the attitude expressed by one character here, "I just want to play with my snakes," but such innocents are not Smith's subject. She is a freelance science reporter, and has befriended some of these smugglers, thus entering a dark world of scales, money, foolhardiness, and betrayal. She researched some of these stories for ten years, and delivers them with a deadpan humor that is just right for a bizarre and twisted subject. There are two main characters that weave through the chapters of the book, although the supporting cast of snake geeks is colorful and distressingly antisocial. Hank Molt (what a name for a snake collector!) grew up reading tales of adventure and animal capture. Molt's usual modus operandi was to convince a gullible young snake fan (such as he himself had been, without the gullibility) to accompany him to distant lands. They would go on expeditions to, say, Madagascar or New Guinea, and hunt up specimens themselves or pay others to do so. The specimens went into crates with false bottoms, perhaps crates that otherwise contained legal imports; some specimens were put into socks or other hiding places.

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