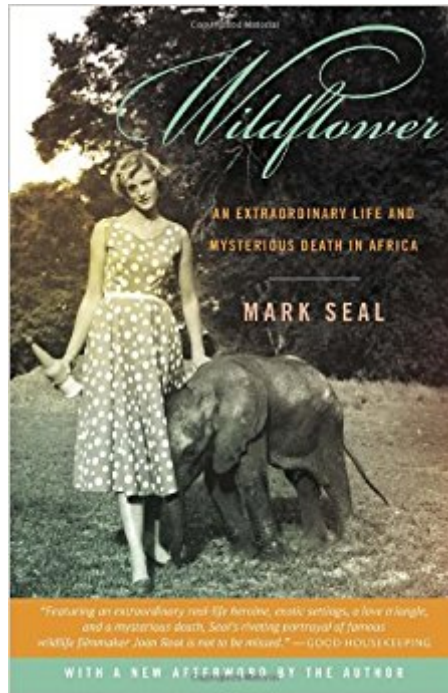




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Wildflower: An Extraordinary Life And Mysterious Death In Africa



Synopsis

With compassion and an unswerving regard for the truth, veteran journalist Mark Seal lays bare the deeply moving, inspirational story of Joan Root, a dedicated environmentalist and Oscar-nominated wildlife filmmaker. He covers her early days in Kenya as a shy young woman with an almost uncanny ability to connect to animals; her whirlwind courtship with the dashing Alan Root, their marriage, and the twenty years of nonstop adventure and passionate romance that followed, both in Africa and around the world; the shattering disintegration of the marriage and partnership; and Joan's triumphant struggle to reinvent herself as the protector of her lakeshore community's fragile ecosystem—a struggle that would lead to her tragic death in January 2006. Joan Root dreamed of a bright future for Kenya, a country blessed with unmatched beauty but scarred by decades of colonization and a culture of corruption. She spent her life fighting to make that dream a reality. Her life ended too soon, but thanks to Seal's meticulous re-creation, her extraordinary life lives on. (People, four-star review)

Book Information

Paperback: 234 pages

Publisher: Random House Trade Paperbacks (July 13, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0812979095

ISBN-13: 978-0812979091

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.6 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 61 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #71,293 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #59 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Environmentalists & Naturalists #81 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Social Activists #933 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Specific Groups > Women

Customer Reviews

Book Description For readers of the bestselling *White Mischief* and *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*--Vanity Fair contributing editor Mark Seal tells the mesmerizing story of the captivating life and shocking death of world-renowned naturalist Joan Root. From her passion for animals to her storybook love affair to her hard-fought crusade to save Kenya's beautiful Lake Naivasha, Wildflower is naturalist, filmmaker, and lifelong conservationist Joan Root's gripping life

story--a stunning and moving tale featuring a remarkable modern-day heroine. After twenty years of spectacular, unparalleled wildlife filmmaking together, Joan and Alan Root divorced and a fascinating woman found her own voice. Renowned journalist Mark Seal offers this breathtaking, culturally relevant portrait of a strong woman discovering herself and fighting for her beliefs before her mysterious and brutal murder. With a cast of characters as wild, wondrous, and unpredictable as Africa itself, *Wildflower* is a real-life adventure tale set in the world's fast-disappearing wilderness. Rife with personal revelation, intrigue, corruption, and murder, readers will remember Joan Root's extraordinary journey long after they turn the last page of this utterly compelling book.

Mark Seal on *Wildflower* The report was chillingly brief: Conservationist Killed Joan Root, animal lover and conservationist who collaborated with her husband, Alan, on wildlife documentaries in the 1970s, was killed on Jan. 13 in Naivasha, Kenya. Root was shot to death by assailants who invaded her farmhouse, the police said. Two men were arrested, officials said. One of the couple's films, *Mysterious Castles of Clay*, narrated by Orson Welles, showed the inner workings of a termite mound. It was nominated for an Oscar in 1978. As a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair* magazine, I am always in search of great stories, and this one seemed to have plenty of the right ingredients: conservationist and wildlife filmmaker, nominated for an Oscar for a film narrated by the legendary Orson Welles, murdered for unknown reasons in Africa. As soon as I began to research her, I quickly realized that Joan Root wasn't just another wildlife filmmaker. She and her husband, Alan Root, were, for a time in the 1970s and 1980s, the world's greatest wildlife filmmakers, mythical figures to nature lovers of all ages. You didn't merely watch Joan and Alan on television and on flickering classroom screens across Africa and Great Britain, you traveled with them, whether they were sporting with ferocious crocodiles and hippos in exotic lakes, sailing over Mount Kilimanjaro in a hot air balloon, or being chased, mauled, bitten, gored, and stung by every conceivable creature as they drove, flew, ran, and swam across Africa, determined to capture the continent and its wonders on film before this wild world was lost forever. They were pioneers, filming animal behavior without human interference decades before films such as *Winged Migration* and *March of the Penguins* were made. Their movies were often narrated by top movie stars, including David Niven, James Mason, and Ian Holm, and in 1967 one of their films had a royal premiere in London, where the couple was presented to the Queen. They introduced the American zoologist Dian Fossey to the gorillas she would later die trying to save, took Jacqueline Kennedy up in their hot air balloon, and covered much of Africa in their single-engine Cessna and their amphibious car. Then, for reasons the public never really knew, they suddenly vanished from the screen as mysteriously as some of the endangered species

they had documented. They separated and later divorced. Alan, the more outspoken of the couple, went on to become a wildlife-filmmaking icon, winner of awards, tributes, and accolades. Meanwhile, blonde, bronzed, beautiful Joan, who was intensely shy and always in the background, both as her husband's capable backup and the unheralded producer of their films, dropped out of filmmaking altogether, retreating to live alone on 88 acres in Naivasha, Kenya, where she devoted herself to saving the ecologically imperiled lake on which her land stood. It was there, in her bedroom at 1:30 A.M. on January 13, 2006, that she was brutally murdered by assailants with an AK-47 automatic rifle. Screaming in Swahili that they would fill her with so many holes she "look like a sieve," they pumped bullets through the glass and the bars of her bedroom windows until Joan--who, at 69, had become one of the most indomitable conservationists in the world--lay dead in a pool of her own blood. Within a week of reading the paragraph in the Times Digest, I had an assignment to write an article about Joan Root for Vanity Fair. After landing in Nairobi, I drove 55 miles west to Joan Root's home on Lake Naivasha for her memorial service. Thus began a three-year journey into the incredible life--and brutal murder--of Joan Root, a sweet and gentle woman, who rarely spoke above a whisper and had spent decades passionately helping the desperately poor and needy of Kenya. Some, including the police, were convinced that her murder was the result of a simple robbery attempt. But if robbery was the motive, others asked, why was nothing stolen from her house? And why the barrage of bullets, when the threat of one would have persuaded most people in crime-ridden Naivasha or nearby Nairobi (which is known familiarly these days as "Nairobbery") to surrender their cash? The likely explanation, many of her friends felt, was that Joan had been the target of a contract killing--easily arranged in Kenya for about \$100 a hit--because of her conservation activities around the lake. The article I wrote, which was published in the August 2006 issue of Vanity Fair, was just one more dispatch in the deepening mystery of a fascinating woman. Yet, like the chilling paragraph that had galvanized me in the beginning, the article seemed to make a visceral connection with readers. People would stop me on the street to discuss this indomitable individual. A dozen feature filmmakers expressed interest in obtaining rights to the article. Several publishers urged me to expand it into a book. Most magazine stories tend to come and go, but this one wouldn't die after the next issue hit the stands. It seemed to have a life of its own. Working Title Films optioned the rights to the article for a feature film, with Julia Roberts set to co-produce and star as Joan Root, all of which was announced to great fanfare at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, making international headlines. Still, I thought the story was over, at least for me. Joan Root was dead, and because she had rarely expressed her feelings, much less verbalized them,

even to her closest friends, most of her personal story was presumably buried with her. Then something incredible happened. Joan Root began speaking, through hundreds of letters she had written to her mother, and a meticulously kept diary, in which she recorded her activities over the years. With these documents as my source materials, as well as interviews with those who knew, loved and worked with Joan Root, I was able to assemble the incredible story of not only her life, but also the cause she died for, trying to save the land and the animals that she so loved. *Wildflower: An Extraordinary Life and An Untimely Death in Africa* is a book I couldn't have imagined in the beginning of my research: the story of a brave and fearless woman who stood up for what she believed in at whatever cost that stand entailed. --Mark Seal *A Look Inside Wildflower* Click on thumbnails for larger images

Joan Root Joan with a baby elephant Joan with an antelope

(Photo © Alan Root) --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Vanity Fair contributing editor Seal expands on his August 2006 article for the magazine in this sweeping and atmospheric biography of the conservationist and wildlife filmmaker Joan Root, who was brutally murdered in her home on Lake Naivasha, Kenya, a region she was trying to save from poachers and environmental ruin. Intrigued by Root's suspicious death and cinematic life with husband and nature documentarian Alan Root, Seal mines Joan's diaries and writings to offer a lush love story set in the heyday of British colonialism in Nairobi, where amid the decadence and dilettantism, Alan fell in love with the lovely Joan Thorpe, an Ingrid Bergman lookalike and daughter of an English adventurer. Their partnership produced award-winning documentaries (their 1978 film on termite mounds, *Mysterious Castles of Clay*, was narrated by Orson Welles and nominated for an Oscar) and television specials. Their inability to have children was a source of constant sorrow for the couple, and despite the romance of their joint pursuits, their marriage unraveled. Seal's effort is a seamless story redolent with adventure, passion and heartbreak; its beauty nearly eclipses the tragedy of Root's untimely and unsolved death in 2006. Photos. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

... to her storybook love affair, to her hard-fought crusade to save Kenya's beautiful Lake Naivasha, *WILDFLOWER* is naturalist, filmmaker and lifelong conservationist Joan Root's gripping life story - a stunning and moving love story featuring a remarkable modern-day heroine. After 20 years of spectacular, unparalleled wildlife filmmaking together Joan and Alan Root divorced and a fascinating woman found her own voice. Renowned journalist Mark Seal offers this breathtaking,

culturally relevant portrait of a strong woman discovering herself and fighting for her beliefs before her mysterious and brutal murder. With a cast as wild, wondrous and unpredictable as Africa itself, WILDFLOWER is a real-life adventure tale set in the world's disappearing wilderness. Rife with personal revelation, intrigue, corruption and murder, readers will remember Joan Root's extraordinary journey long after they turn the last page of this utterly compelling book.

The book was a page turner even though I was acquainted with the story of the Roots from reading about them in various magazine articles. Joan Root's struggles to preserve her lake made me think quite a bit of *The Cherry Orchard* and the book raises questions, sometimes unanswerable, about the causes and solutions of African economic, political and ecological problems. While reading of the description of the crowded slums where the Kenyan flower workers lived it did make me question why a woman living alone needed 80 some acres, and some of her neighbors even more. Why proper sewage can't be provided to a community when so much money is coming in from the flower industry. Why a worker on one of the farms would never be able to afford a bouquet of roses. The author of the book in his description of the growth of the Kenyan flower industry and its effect on the ecology of the lake area where Mrs. Root lived describes a scene straight out of Dr. Seuss's book about the character who "spoke for the trees." It was possibly not the author's intention to raise these questions, and they are not popular issues. On the most recent list of countries in danger of becoming failed states Kenya has moved a little closer to the top of the list. The author of *Wildflowers* make you aware of the problems of sustainability and income raising industry. It would seem that some difficult and unpopular measures possibly need to be taken to reverse the slide into "failed state" danger. This book would be of interest to people who have an interest in adventure tales and to those who are just "green". I probably won't buy another rose from a florist and will just add them to the list of the diamonds that I can't afford, fast food hamburgers, veal, caged chickens, pork chops, bottled water etc. etc. etc.

This is a great book about the life of an amazing woman. She lived a life that I could only dream of living. Her murder is very saddening and its hard to believe that this still goes on, even in the present day. She was strong and she knew that she had to do something to save the lake. It is sad because she was fighting for a cause that no one seemed to share but now, in 2010, the Lake is in big trouble and is drying up. It baffles me how it took this long to see what is going on, they write this article as if this is new news. I love the title "Flower Farms may be killing Kenya's lake Naivasha"...MAY BE????? Isn't that what Joan said years and years ago?[...]It is a shame that Joan

was murdered and that her killers are still roaming this world and it is even worse that the cause she fought for and she died for is still not recognized as a major problem until it is too late. You would think in this day and age that something could be done to save this lake. Regardless, it is a great book and I highly recommend it. Julia Roberts is starring in the movie that is still in production but I look forward to seeing it...

This is a touching book of Africa and Joan Root, but weaved into the story are some vital items about Africa's history and a peek at the animals the movies are made about. One particularly interesting story is about the baby elephant pictured on the cover. Since other reviewers have outlined the story I will only add that the descriptions of the way Alan and Joan Root made the movies was a bonus to the book. The information in the latter half of the book about Joan's life along the lake gleaned from her letters was also fascinating. The details about her death are haunting. This is a book that will be read again in my household and I will also use the book as a guide to finding some of the movies made by the pair. I would have given the book five stars, but it did leave me with a feeling that I wanted to know more. I would have liked to have more quotes out of Joan's own writing to get more of a feel for her voice. Not that I was disappointed in the work the author did, but rather I felt the book could have been longer.

This is an interesting, though disturbing book. The first half of the book covering the adventures of Joan and Alan Root is the most readable. What they accomplished as film makers is amazing. I wish those films were available today. After Joan and Alan split up and she's living alone, I found the realities of life in Africa. Too many people and not enough resources and jobs to sustain them. It's a terrible situation.

A wonderfully written story of a most fascinating and wonderful woman who devoted herself to the preservation of wildlife and land. Without knowing this person, I grew to admire and respect her as I read of her life. How ironic for her life to end as it did as she worked tirelessly against poaching and harming the wildlife she was so passionate about. The author succeeded in portraying to the reader the unique individual she truly was. She sought neither fame nor fortune, but simply the satisfaction she received in the causes she so passionately pursued. I highly recommended this book to any reader as it is simply too interesting to pass up.

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