



Stolen World: A Tale of Reptiles, Smugglers, and Skulduggery

Jennie Erin Smith

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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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