

## Desert Creatures

### Kay Chronister

Erewhon Books (Nov 8, 2022)

Hardcover \$26.95 (352pp)

978-1-64566-052-1

In Kay Chronister's dystopian novel *Desert Creatures*, a hardened young girl finds hope where she least expects it.

Magdala was born with a clubfoot. After being banished from her home, she and her father travel across a punishing landscape whose environment is harsh and whose resources are scarce. They search for a place to settle, but contend with challenges, including corrupt religious leaders in a distorted version of Las Vegas wherein false saints peddle false promises and the fact that, in many of the places they stop, a Wild West mentality rules, bringing out the worst in everyone.

In Magdala's time, people commit horrific acts in order to survive. Their desperation following the breakdown of society is made manifest in the "desert sickness," whereby the desert gets inside of you. Once infected, people become mad; they morph into desert creatures, a mishmash of human, prickly pear, javelina, and coyote parts.

Magdala endures heartbreaking losses and hardships in the course of her three-part story. Each portion of the book represents a crucial point in her development: she is at first innocent and dependent on those around her; she becomes a wayward youth, hoping to find her way; she winds up as a criminal-turned-hero. Those whom she meets help her, including an excommunicated priest whose perspective gives insight into the ways in which religion has been used to betray travelers into believing in miracles from false saints. He also offers a complicated look into how Magdala's struggle to be "good" is compromised by the less-than-good things that she thinks she has to do to get what she wants. Later, Magdala protects a small girl whose story mirrors her own.

In the dystopian novel *Desert Creatures*, a rejected girl takes a wretched journey whose inward dimensions hold the potential for healing.

JENNA JAUREGUY (November / December 2022)

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