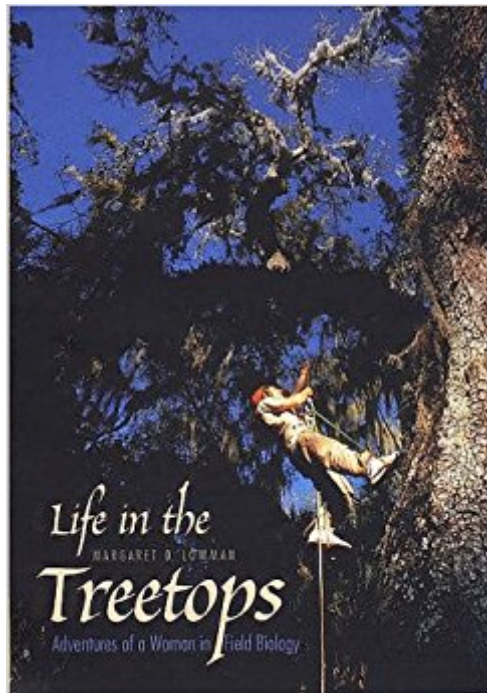




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Life In The Treetops: Adventures Of A Woman In Field Biology



Synopsis

A description of the mysteries of the treetops - their inhabitants, flowers and fruits, growth and mortality, and patterns of diversity. Margaret Lowman discusses different canopy access techniques. She also portrays the life of a field biologist from a woman's perspective.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Life in the Treetops reflects many of the difficulties faced by women scientists in all fields. Margaret Lowman, a field biologist specializing in forest-canopy research, shows how dealing with the emotional challenges is as tough as or tougher than dangling from a precarious perch counting beetles or facing down a deadly sea snake. This chronicle of her adventures (and misadventures) among the treetops encourages readers to understand both the science and the scientist. One can't help but sympathize with Lowman as she struggles to be a good researcher and a traditional rural housewife at the same time, and fails. Luckily, her kids and parents always remain supportive, taking care of the house during her long absences and accompanying her to faraway research stations when possible. Lowman studies small things--leaves and insects, mostly--and getting to them can be tricky. She chronicles the history of forest-canopy research techniques (which have grown apace with her career), starting with simple climbing gear and ending with treetop walkways and giant construction cranes. Life in the Treetops is an engaging look at one woman's struggle to find balance, whether she's high up in a tree or on the ground with her fellow humans. --Therese Littleton

The director of research and conservation at the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota, Fla., offers a rare tour of the treetops in this lively and engaging memoir. From her first climb up a coachwood tree in Australia, using a slingshot rappel and a harness hand-sewn with seat-belt webbing, Lowman knew she wanted to devote her career to studying the mysteries of forest canopies, "one of the last biotic frontiers on Earth." In straightforward prose, she writes about a variety of canopy access techniques and the scientific hypotheses she explored while using each one. She details, for instance, using a single rope to climb giant stinging trees as a graduate student in Australia; squeezing into a cherry picker while pregnant to study that continent's failing eucalyptus trees; battling temperatures of over 100 degrees while suspended from a hot air balloon above the African tropics; and broadcasting, from a swaying canopy bridge in the Belizian rain forest, live via satellite to students thousands of miles away. Often the only woman on her jungle excursions, Lowman confronted challenges on the ground as well, such as the attentive group of African Pygmies who followed her each time she headed for the shower stalls. More serious was the pressure to abandon her fieldwork after she settled down with a grazier in the Australian outback, and the cultural differences that eventually led her to return to the U.S. with her two young sons. Readers will empathize with Lowman's struggles to balance family and career, but it is her fascinating research and amusing adventures in the jungle that will keep them turning pages. 30 illustrations. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Margaret Lowman writes candidly about her life... as though we were the closest of friends. I expected her to write about her research, the difficulties of climbing into the rainforest canopies, and her globe trotting. And she did. She also writes of the professional challenges, cultural clashes, and personal problems she encounters as a woman in field biology, and that makes this book something quite special. ON THE PERSONAL SIDE: Lowman married an Australian, had two children and lived in the outback, while conducting research on the Australian rain forests. On the personal side, she was expected to be a housewife, and mother. Her new Australian husband, and in-laws, did not understand her inner drive to spend time in her work. While clearly her new family did not support her in her work, Lowman persisted and achieved. She also made a decision to accept a teaching position at Williams College back in the US. She packed up the boys, and headed for home. She exchanged her marriage, and the boy's father, for a surprisingly supportive scientific community and her own supportive parents. Lowman tells of her personal life with candor, but without bitterness. While no one could accuse her of having an ordinary life, Lowman's book is also an every woman's

story in that she chronicles the kind of day-to-day struggle of professional/career women faced (particularly in the 1970's and 1980's) in balancing career and family. ON THE PROFESSIONAL SIDE: To help understand the interdependence of the rainforests Lowman mostly studies the small things... leaves, and the insects that eat them. It sounds easier than it is. Most of the leaves to be studied are high up in the canopy of the rain forests. Early in her career, she gains access using ropes and harnesses, and even a cherry picker when she was pregnant; later she has the luxury of using a construction crane, a dirigible, and even a walkway. Lowman loves the forests, and her work. (Her book contains an illustration of her favorite tree, *ficus watkinsiana*.) Lowman ends the book telling us that it takes about the "same amount of energy to complain as it does to explain-but the results are incredibly different." Her book explains a great deal. I highly recommend it.

That's what I intend to tell Margaret Lowman if she phones me wanting to know if I'd like to go on a field trip with her. This amazing woman botanist hauls herself up by rope or other devices into the 150-foot high canopies of forest trees to study herbivory (process by which animals consume plant leaves). She spends weeks in tropical forests in Cameroon, Peru, Belize, Australia, and Panama patiently counting leaves, and insect damage to them. She works in 100-degree humid heat, covered with mud, bitten by botflies, and chewed on by chiggers. How does she describe these arduous adventures? Well, try words like exciting and exhilarating. All this should come as quite a shock to folks who imagine botanists work in nice little greenhouses developing a new breed of chartreuse rose. It is indeed amazing and difficult work, and we are fortunate to have people eager to do it. Normally I don't care for little biographies of this type because they are usually heavy on the personal life, and light on the science. *Life In The Treetops* presents a pleasant blend of the two. After receiving her Ph.D. in Sydney the author married a farmer and lived in the Australian outback. Women aren't expected to have careers there, and her story of that part of her life is fascinating. You will also learn interesting informational morsels from the world of botany. Fig trees start life as an epiphyte, their seeds germinating high in the crown of a tree. They then send tendrils down the tree, and these become roots when they touch the ground. The tree essentially grows backwards. Touch a certain Australian tree, and it stings you with venom equal to a bee sting. Some ants bring a variety of seeds to the top of the tree, and let them germinate there to form an ant garden. Ants farming? Some trees in the dark forest grow to a five inch height, and then wait for as long as 35 years for a sunny opening to develop in the canopy. Then they shoot up. Typical of most science books I read these days, this volume ends on a sad note regarding humans and the environment. Ms. Lowman wants more studies done as quickly as possible. Why? She's afraid the forests will

soon be gone. An excellent book.

As a young woman who hopes with all her heart and works with all of her passion to be a scientist one day, I recommend this novel without a doubt. Dr. Lowman attacks every issue she faces head on, candidly describing her emotion and scientific endeavors as if the reader is a personal friend. As a female, I myself can relate to her described frustration of being a woman in a primarily male field. Even my closest male friends look at me with doubt and treat my five year love affair (ongoing, of course) with science as a joke simply because I am female (as the butt of their jokes imply). It's wondrous to read of other accounts involving similar emotion. On a scientific note, Dr. Lowman makes no adjustments for fear of the reader who does not care for biology; she writes about science just as she writes about emotion. For that, I urge parents to prod their children to read this memoir, adults to read, and all others to digest.

Margaret Lowman's story, *Life in the Treetops*, is an inspiration for young women considering a life in science. She tells how she balanced a career as a field biologist, studying the forest canopy, with being a wife and mother, and eventually a single parent. Her stories of her experiences as a researcher and tree climber in such exotic locals as the Australian outback, Cameroon, Belize and Panama are intermingled with her observations about the inhabitants of these locals, the people she worked with and her sons. Her perseverance in a field dominated by men has given her an interesting perspective about science and life in general.

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