



Summary

David Grann meets Susan Orlean in this page-turning true story of an underground operation into the mysterious world of alligator poaching and its larger than life Floridian characters

To catch a Florida Man, you have to become one, and that's what Officer Jeff Babauta did. As his ponytailed, whiskey-soaked alter ego, he established Sunshine Alligator Farm. His goal? Infiltrate the shady world of illegal poachers in the Florida Everglades in order to protect the natural world.

A head-spinning adventure soon unfolds. Jeff deals with glow-in-the-dark alligators and high-speed airboat rides, but quickly learns that not all poachers are villains. They're simply people trying to survive, fighting against the poverty and greed holding them down. Jeff wants to solve the mystery of alligator poachers, and in doing so he must venture deeper into a strange ecosystem where right is wrong, and justice comes at the cost of those who've welcomed him into their world.

Gator Country is the twisting true story of the impossible choices individuals must make to stay afloat in this world. Through its wholly unique blend of reporting, nature writing, and personal narrative, this book transports readers to vibrant and dangerous Florida landscapes and offers intimate portraits of those who call the region home. Broad in scope and vivid in detail, *Gator Country* is a fast paced tale of the risks people will take to survive in one of the world's most beautiful yet formidable landscapes and the undercover investigation that threatens to topple the whole scheme.



About the Author

Rebecca Renner is a contributor to National Geographic, and her writing has appeared in The New York Times, Outside Magazine, Tin House, The Paris Review, The Guardian, The Washington Post, The Atlantic, and other publications. She holds an MFA from Stetson University. *Gator Country* is her debut.

Courtesy of the publisher

Discussion Questions

1. How does the setting of this book, particularly the Everglades, influence the events and characters involved? How does the landscape shape the story's tone and atmosphere?
2. The relationship between humans and nature is a central theme in the book. How do the different characters' attitudes toward the alligators reflect their broader views on life, survival, and control? Do you think these attitudes contribute to their eventual downfall or success?
3. The author explores a variety of motivations behind the illegal activities in the book. What do you think drives the characters involved in the poaching and black-market trade of alligators? How do their actions reflect broader societal or personal issues?
4. Throughout book, law enforcement plays a large role in trying to control illegal alligator hunting. How does the depiction of these officials affect your perception of law enforcement in environmental crime cases? Were there any moments that surprised you about the way the investigations are handled?
5. The book raises ethical questions about conservation and the exploitation of wildlife. After reading the book, where do you stand on the balance between economic survival and environmental protection? Did any of the characters' actions make you reconsider your stance on these issues?
6. The book features a variety of colorful characters involved in the alligator black market. Which character's story did you find the most compelling or tragic, and why? How did their choices impact your overall understanding of the true crime elements in the book?
7. Rebecca Renner often shifts between the perspectives of the criminals and the authorities. How did this narrative choice affect your engagement with the story? Did it create a sense of tension or sympathy for either side?
8. How does the illegal alligator trade in Gator Country reflect larger issues within the environmental conservation movement? Did the book raise any questions for you about how we handle endangered species and their habitats?

Reviews

Mixing stranger-than-fiction true crime with regional history and flashes of memoir, this fascinating debut from science journalist and Florida native Renner follows two men on opposite sides of the law. Jeff Babauta was a clean-cut and conscientious Florida Fish and Wildlife officer nearing retirement when he was recruited to investigate poaching in the mid-2010s. Under a new identity—the long-haired, freewheeling Curtis Blackledge—he began running an alligator farm in Arcadia, Fla., to gather information about poachers and curb their operations. On a parallel track, Renner tells the story of 20th-century alligator poaching legend Peg Brown and his exploits on the Ten Thousand Islands of Everglades National Park, “a many-faceted archipelago of tangled mangroves... with evocative names like Lostmans River.” In an attempt to separate man from myth, Renner visited the islands herself and researched how outsiders, from Spanish conquistadors to oil drillers, have negatively impacted them. As she and Babauta eventually learned, the official establishment of Everglades Park in the 1940s “pushed whole communities into crime” by reclassifying multigenerational families of hunters as poachers. Renner teases out the moral ambiguities with a grace and rigor reminiscent of Susan Orlean’s *The Orchid Thief*. Beautifully evoking the “sawgrass plains and wild strands of jungle” of its author’s home state, this tale of power, politics, and tradition is a triumph. (Publishers Weekly)

National Geographic contributor Renner takes us into the Everglades in an attempt to challenge preconceptions about the area. Growing up in central Florida, “one of the most biodiverse places in the country,” she was only 7 when she saw her first wild alligator. However, to her friends outside the South, her fascination with these majestic creatures and the landscape in which they live seemed unusual. “Outsiders only see the death, the decay, the unruly rawness of this wild country,” writes the author, “without seeing the beauty in it, much to our harm and the detriment of this world.” Combining her skills for investigative reporting, nature writing, and personal anecdotes, Renner explores local folklore and legends, shares her personal experiences and observations, and details Operation Alligator Thief, which fights poaching. The primary character is Jeff Babauta, a wildlife officer who assumed the identity of Curtis Blackledge and built Sunshine Alligator Farm in order to infiltrate the poaching community. Throughout, Renner chronicles the constant physical and mental strain that Babauta was under during his operation to save the alligators, as well as his biggest fear: “that nobody would care.” The author also relates the internal conflict that Babauta felt when he faced a man who was poaching in order to feed his family. Renner’s passion for her home state, compassion for those less fortunate, and gift of storytelling make this book difficult to put down. (Kirkus Reviews)