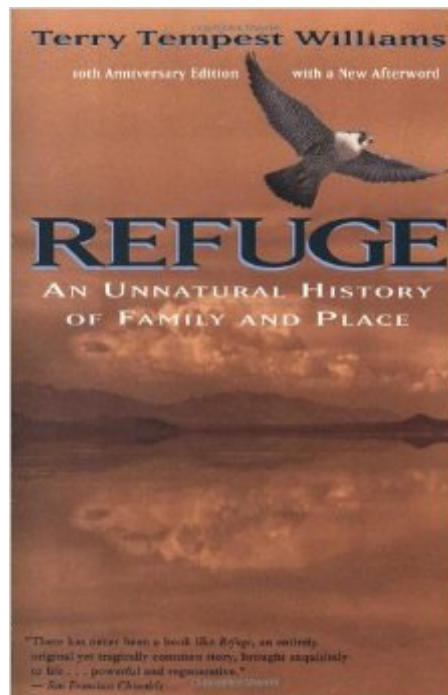


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# Refuge: An Unnatural History Of Family And Place



## Synopsis

In the spring of 1983 Terry Tempest Williams learned that her mother was dying of cancer. That same season, The Great Salt Lake began to rise to record heights, threatening the herons, owls, and snowy egrets that Williams, a poet and naturalist, had come to gauge her life by. One event was nature at its most random, the other a by-product of rogue technology: Terry's mother, and Terry herself, had been exposed to the fallout of atomic bomb tests in the 1950s. As it interweaves these narratives of dying and accommodation, *Refuge* transforms tragedy into a document of renewal and spiritual grace, resulting in a work that has become a classic.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is so powerful and so moving, it brought me to tears in more than one place. This is an amazing story of place, family, love, and the desert. Last winter I had to read one of Williams' books for a course and have become addicted to her writings. Williams is a Mormon naturalist who pushes the boundaries of both, and her unique insights bring a freshness to both faith and preservation. I have tracked down and read all of her books that are currently in print, and this is the most powerful of them. Terry states in another book, "The great silences of the desert are not void of sound, but void of distractions." This book is about the silences and the distractions of death, the death of her mother and of the bird refuge that she loved and that was her solace. The chapter headings are unique, written as a journal, but not by date but by lake height. As the Great Salt Lake rose to record heights in the mid-1980's, Terry's mother was dying of cancer, and the Salt Lake's rising was

flooding the Bear River Migratory Bird refuge. The refuge was sacred to Terry as a place she and her grandmother would visit together, and as a place to get alone outside of the city to reflect, meditate and believe. Terry begins the prologue with "Everything about the Great Salt Lake is exaggerated - the heat, the cold, the salt, and the brine. It is a landscape so surreal one can never know what it is for certain. ... Most of the women in my family are dead. Cancer. At thirty-four, I became the matriarch of my family." pg.3. This book chronicles one woman's love of the desert, of the bird refuge and of her family. It tells the story of cancer clusters in the desert where the US Government tested thousands of nuclear devices from the 1940's to the 60's.

This is a unique book worth owning, reading, and pondering more than once. I am very grateful to Terry Williams for having had the courage to write it and have it published. I have had it added to our patient library. As a medical and radiation oncologist with nearly a quarter century of experience, as a man whose parents died of unusual malignancies, and as the parent of a child with cancer, grief is a part of the experience of life with which I am well acquainted. This book is probably the most honest and eloquent expression of grief and the struggle of an extraordinarily sensitive woman with spirituality and loss as I have ever read. It is not without its faults, but even these are very revealing about the way human beings deal with a world in which change and loss are inevitable. Faults? There are only two that come to mind. One is the title. There is nothing in this book that is unnatural in any way. Loss and sorrow are as natural as any other human experience. The second is the trap so many of us fall into of searching for cause and effect, a way to assuage grief by assigning blame that becomes evident in the final chapter. However, Mrs. Williams can be forgiven for that. She has left us with an insightful and lyrical account of her mother's illness and the comfort the beauty of the natural world brought to a daughter left alone. This is one woman with a sensitive and honest heart who is not afraid to let the rest of us look inside. There is much to be learned from what Mrs. Williams has written and *Refuge* is highly recommended. By the way, Terry, one of your mother's doctors, Gary Johnson, delivered my son who was fortunate enough to survive his own battle with cancer 18 years later. It was a pleasure to see his name mentioned.

From the refuge of pain and loss in her Great Salt Lake desert world, Terry Tempest Williams weaves a beautiful and lyrical journal from the intricate fabric of landscape. A landscape that is both ravished by natural and perhaps man made destruction. The history of this land is the history of Williams' family and she serves the reader well as journalist, historian and naturalist. In the spring of 1983 a significant rise in the Great Salt Lake began to flood her beloved Bear River Migratory Bird

Refuge and at the same time cancer cells began to flood her mother's body. As owls, avocets and egrets struggle to survive the rising waters, Williams' mother struggles to find peace and comfort in dying. Where mother nature is damaged, mother Tempest is too. Williams has a truly poetic ability to tie the spirit of land and of family into one beautiful image. "I am reminded that what I adore, admire and draw from Mother is inherent in the Earth. My mother's spirit can be recalled simply by placing my hands on the black humus of mountains or the lean sands of desert. Her love, warmth, and her breath, even her arms around me-are the waves, the wind, sunlight, and water.", she writes. In the process of dealing with so much pain and loss Williams shifts from a casual observer of life's folly to passionate activist. Ultimately she puts the pieces of puzzle together to see a picture of generations of cancer certainly tied to exposure to the on-going nuclear testing by the American government in the Utah desert. William's chilling awakening to the manipulation of the environment by man in the name of progress should serve as our own wake-up call to the capacity of destruction that we have tolerated. Landscape becomes refuge and offers hope of healing.

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