



Waking Up in Eden: In Pursuit of an Impassioned Life on an Imperiled Island

Lucinda Fleeson

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Like so many of us, Lucinda Fleeson wanted to escape what had become a routine life. So, she quit her big-city job, sold her suburban house, and moved halfway across the world to the island of Kauai to work at the National Tropical Botanical Garden. Imagine a one-hundred-acre garden estate nestled amid ocean cliffs, rain forests, and secluded coves. Exotic and beautiful, yes, but as Fleeson awakens to this sensual world, exploring the island's food, beaches, and history, she encounters an endangered paradise—the Hawaii we don't see in the tourist brochures.

Native plants are dying at an astonishing rate—Hawaii is called the Extinction Capital of the World—and invasive species (plants, animals, *and* humans) have imperiled this Garden of Eden. Fleeson accompanies a plant hunter into the rain forest to find the last of a dying species, descends into limestone caves with a paleontologist who deconstructs island history through fossil life, and shadows a botanical pioneer who propagates rare seeds, hoping to reclaim the landscape. Her grown-up adventure is a reminder of the value of choosing passion over security, individuality over convention, and the pressing need to protect the earth. And as she witnesses the island's plant renewal efforts, she sees her own life blossom again.

Waking Up in Eden: In Pursuit of an Impassioned Life on an Imperiled Island Details

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From Reader Review Waking Up in Eden: In Pursuit of an Impassioned Life on an Imperiled Island for online ebook

Elva says

Lucinda Fleeson's memoir "Waking Up in Eden" is no navel gazer - thank you very much - but the true adventures of a women who, nearing middle age, woke up to smell the coffee and instead of freaking out took a giant gulp of it and got on with her life.

Leaving her job at the Philadelphia Inquirer and her home with its English rose garden Fleeson moves to the Hawaiian island of Kauai and its 1000 acre tropical garden. This is a volatile and damaged isle whose natural order is fast disappearing. What is also disappearing is her youth and some of her choices. In a chatty and unselfconscious way Fleeson re-examines her heart's desire and tallies up her wins and losses, all the while packing her trekking boots. The adventure is on and soon enough it is not so much the exotic isle and its fragile flowers or even the colorful characters dedicated to saving them, but Fleeson's inherent interest in, well, everything, that makes her journey a page turner.

Officially, Fleeson job is to raise funds for the National Tropical Botanical Garden - an Eden that is in serious risk of imploding. Proposal writing and coaxing money out of rich people could sound rather dry but Fleeson is a deft writer. The people, politics and history surrounding the NTBG is intriguing enough, but its how Fleeson grabs onto her new life that swept me up. She gets her hands dirty in the island's red clay, rides horseback along its beaches, treks up mountains climbing through dense jungle, tries surfing, learns to row like hell with the Kawaikini Women's Canoe Club and before she leaves plants her own tropical garden. Along the way Fleeson introduces herself, and us, to a gaggle of interesting and passionate people and its here that we see the true depth of Ms. Fleeson's nature, her search for her authentic self reveled by her insight into others. One telling example is her description of Alan Wong, a celebrated Hawaiian chef, "...he scans your eyes, as if looking to see if the information arrived. It's a listener's trait indicative of a great teacher." And Ms. Fleeson appears to be both.

Fleeson teaches us a lot about exotic flora (which is more interesting than you might think) but she shows us that taking big risks, forcing one's passions and keeping on your big girl panties (most of the time) may not answer all of life's questions but it is the only way to live them.

From Kauai Ms. Fleeson moves on to Budapest - I can't wait for the sequel.

Elva Malone

August 20, 2009

Sara says

My newest Kindle book-liking the content so far, not so much the writing...

Mahinui Gail says

I am a sucker for Hawaii stories. This is non-fiction, with rich characters. The eden referred to is a real garden, and a garden within a garden. It is a little about the garden, more about the plants, and even more about the people. It is about discovering one's own truth.

This book reads a lot like a novel. If it did not, it is likely it would be boring. There is a lot of back story, and that makes it interesting.

Overall, most of the book rings true for me, as the saga of this woman's stay for long enough to make important life decisions, and to launch her true life voyage relatively late in life. The big message here is fulfillment is strangely enough not likely to be found in the tumult and drama of other people's big projects, be they newspapers or gardens. But as we join our lives to theirs for however long it may take, we learn much and eventually have what it takes to venture out in our own canoe.

And, cultivating a garden is a worthy pursuit. on any scale.

Anyra says

Part self-discovery and part agricultural document with a little evolutionary mystery thrown in. Who knew I could be drawn into a story about botanical history!? I bought this book on a lark, having been called by the "Memoir/Nature" genre, and I started reading just before leaving for my 5th or 6th visit to Kauai; I was immediately hooked on the richness Fleeson painted of the landscape, past and present. I only wish I'd started this a week later so I could run outside and retrace the author's steps, seeing an island I know so well through her eyes!

Kitty says

Subtitle: "In pursuit of an impassioned life on an imperiled island." This is a "surviving middle-age" memoir of a woman who leaves her east"coast journalist position to become the marketing director for the Allerton Garden on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. She weaves a fascinating story of all aspects of her life on the island intertwined with information about the National Tropical Botanical Garden, the preservation of native flora, and Hawaii's history and culture. Especially fascinating for me as a followup to seeing the Garden in May during a wonderful trip to Hawaii where I "woke up in Eden" for about a week.

Laura says

Succeeds on many levels - as a memoir, esp. for anyone facing a mid-life crisis, seeking a new direction, or wondering about the non-traditional direction their life has taken (esp. as a woman), also it is full of fascinating human and sp. some queer history, it's great for someone visiting Kauai/ the Allerton Gardens - as I was, and most interesting to me was the wealth of information about botany, natural history, and the efforts to save species from extinction. It was the perfect book to read on my trip and I was sharing tidbits left and right with my partner.

Patricia says

Two months ago, I visited the gardens at Waimea (Oahu), and was delighted with the attractive, well labeled, and informative plant collections. As well as highlighting an intriguing variety of tropical venues like the

Ogawara Islands, the gardens did include some native plants. I have also heard that Waimea sponsors hikes to educate visitors about endemic flora and fauna. Fleeson's dismissive account of the gardens and her caricature of the chief botanist were off-putting.

Caricatures thickly and irritatingly populate the book, damaging its credibility. The account of the romance with the surfer made me nostalgic for the restrained days of nineteenth-century travel writing. However, there are some genuinely moving passages on friendships, family and loss.

The book did have its redeeming features. Fleeson's courageous take on embracing uncertainty and adventure was inspiring. Even though the write up on the cover seemed to promise more botany than the story delivered, there was a fascinating little plant portrait of Brighamia insignis, and it was great fun to take a vicarious trip to the Kauai Outlaw Preserve. I hope the book does stimulate interest in the Allerton garden.

Ann Steiner says

The author quit her journalism career and moved to Hawaii to pursue her passion for plants and gardening. Taking a job at the National Tropical Botanical Garden, she reinvented herself amid the beauty of the Island of Kauai. Not simply another book about a mid-life crisis, *Waking Up in Eden* gives the reader background in Island history and the Kauai not seen by tourists. Gardeners will especially enjoy the discussion of the fragile ecosystem and the struggle to save endangered native plants. I have the proverbial black thumb but was fascinated by the explanation of the destruction done by non-native invasive plants imported through the years. Highly readable and informative this book tells a personal story within a larger context.

Andrea says

Lucinda Fleeson feels that the excitement and adventure are over in her life. Middle-aged, disillusioned with her career as a journalist, and divorced, she accepts an unexpected job offer to work as a PR person for the National Botanical Garden, in Hawaii. She finds a new botanical world, explores the local history and finds a new passion for life. Beautifully written and inspiring.

Cindy says

I was disappointed in this one. The author couldn't seem to decide on what kind of book it was and it was not very well structured or organized.

Shira Bea says

OMG, such a beautiful travel book!

First of all, I like this book because it tackles major aspect of ecology, evolution, plant systematics, and conservation. I like reading this book, and learning a lot about endemism and native species of Hawaii. I like how the writer describes the island, and it makes me feel that I was there too.

I am sad in the end that Dr. Klein died. I like him. I want to ask him all about plants.

Overall, I like this book, but better have a concept or idea about the said subjects above prior to reading this book.

Sally says

Many dream of dumping everything and going off to live on a tropical island. Lucinda Fleeson actually did it. "Waking Up in Eden" tells her story and it makes for a lively, engaging tale.

Fleeson was a top-notch, award-winning journalist who found the profession she loved undergoing massive, distressing changes as the digital age reconfigured the newspaper industry. Offered a job at the National Tropical Botanical Gardens in Kauai, she sold her house, shed years of routines and belongings and left her old life behind.

Fleeson ruminates on many personal topics, from the sudden loss of both parents to her thoughts on being a single woman confronting a future without the traditional husband and kids that she had always assumed would be there. But it's the investigative reporter in her that provides some of the most colorful moments of "Waking Up in Eden". Her description of the death-defying botanists who climb to high mountain ledges to rescue endangered plant species is an eye-opener. And her research into the wealthy, original owners of the estate which has become the National Botanical Garden reveals a colorful, jazz-age tableau of underground gay history in Chicago before the Great Depression. Fleeson also uncovers the writing of Isabella Bird, a 19th century woman writer who's adventures in Kauai both echo and inspire Fleeson's own.

Interspersed throughout the book are moments of workplace intrigue, romance, tragedy and humor (the ladies rowing team story is a delight), told with a reporter's skill and insights.

I highly recommend "Waking Up in Eden" as an interesting, entertaining and worthwhile read.

Jocinda says

Unlike other memoirs I've read about unmarried women reinventing themselves, this book incorporates an education of natural history. While it is a highly personal account of the twists and turns (and battles) in a professional woman's life, we are also allowed to learn something about the place in which she has her transformation. The writer has a strong sense of place, making the story valid and compelling. Her sensitive descriptions of the unique island characters, and their place in the world, is absorbing. She makes friends with the most unlikely of characters, and she is unapologetic in descriptions of her enemies in non-profit management.

The author writes, "The essence of grace was to live within the mysteries, accept the uncertainties, and greet whatever develops." The essence of a memoir should do the same, and this one does.

The book could have benefited from some pictures, but just as the author desired to retrace the journeys of Isabella Bird, I wanted to get to Kauai and find that cottage house, and set my own eyes on the Allerton Gardens. Inspirational!

Jan Polep says

I gave this memoir 5 stars because we toured Allerton Gardens on Kauai last February. Author worked in development office at the gardens and explains all the history...plant and island.. that was skimmed over or omitted in our visit. The Illinois connection to the story is The Farms at Monticello, IL, which Allerton bequeathed to the U of I.

Native plants are going extinct in Hawaii at a fast pace and the National Tropical Botanic Garden, of which Allerton Gardens is one part, is trying to reverse the trend.

Over and above the plant story is the search by the author for a second chance at a more satisfying life and she includes the background on many of the places we played at in Kauai. She tells it like it is...not-for-profit fundraising, island living, and the real story of a garden started by gay partners from Illinois.

I need to go back and take the more extensive tour that includes Allerton's house on the beach.

Suzanne says

I read this book as part of a Goodreads Challenge which required a book set in Hawaii. I've read a few such books, but quite honestly, there aren't many set in Hawaii which also got great reviews, so I did a bit of digging and came up with *Waking Up in Eden*. As it turned out, it was a great choice.

In this memoir, Lucinda Fleeson has found herself without a job and the owner of charming New England garden cottage in suburban Pennsylvania. She's forty-something, unmarried, and going through a mid-life crisis. Out of the blue, a job offer comes to assist with fundraising work for the National Botanical Garden in Kauai, Hawaii. She sells the cottage, puts her stuff in storage, and heads for adventure in the Pacific.

This book has a bit of everything. Her story of moving to Hawaii was interesting, including her first night in a falling down plantation cottage with brown water and rodents. I enjoyed hearing about the lifestyle on the island, it's history and it's people. And even more surprisingly, I was fascinated reading about the gardens, the science of botany and why we should care about it. Because before reading this book, I didn't really care all that much. For an author to present a subject I had little interest in and change my opinion of it is quite a feat. Kudos to Lucinda Fleeson!

In spite of her foray into the science behind her work, I was never bored by this book. Quite the opposite, in fact. It was well-written, interesting, funny at times, and gave me real sense of place. Sitting outside on warm sunny day, reading this book, I could just picture myself in Kauai. And isn't that just what you'd want out of a travel memoir?
