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Picture Books

Desert Song
Tony Johnston
Gibbs Smith
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Experience the desert at night. “Day is done.

Twilight comes. The sun goes down and streaks the clouds with flame.” As the heat of the day fades and the sky darkens, the reader meets the inhabitants of the nighttime desert-the bats, insects, owls, coyotes, and snakes. Searching for food in the dark and cool desert air, these creatures work through the night until the sky lightens and day breaks again.

Written as a poem, Johnston’s love of both the desert and bats shines through. She is the author of more than 100 books for young people. The illustrations, done by Ed Young, a 1990 Caldecott Medal recipient, are the perfect complement to the poem. This is a Sierra Club Books for Children title.

As the sky fades from red to darkness, the reader sees the desert with new eyes. How many travelers have the opportunity to hear the whirring of the insects or catch glimpses of bats hunting? Johnston writes, “suddenly with a rush of wings bats spill from a cave in a hill. They have been sleeping all day long. Now they pour into the night like dry leaves blowing, like shadows on the wing. They soar. They race across the silent sweep of sand, their small mouse faces thrust into the wind.” The howling wolf is shown, bathed in moonlight. Young illustrates the text perfectly with a variety of textures. Broad cactus leaves are made of fabric, and a large lizard is made of woven matting. Illustrations have real depth, and are multi-layered. As the night fades, the scenes lighten up, ending with a family of quail silhouetted in the peach-colored morning sky.

This would be a wonderful addition to any collection, and could be used with children in a story-hour setting, or as a quiet bedtime story. In a classroom this would work well in a desert unit or as a piece of poetry. Johnston has written a book that tells about the desert in a way that most people never see, and Young’s illustrations show it.

Tracy Fitzwater