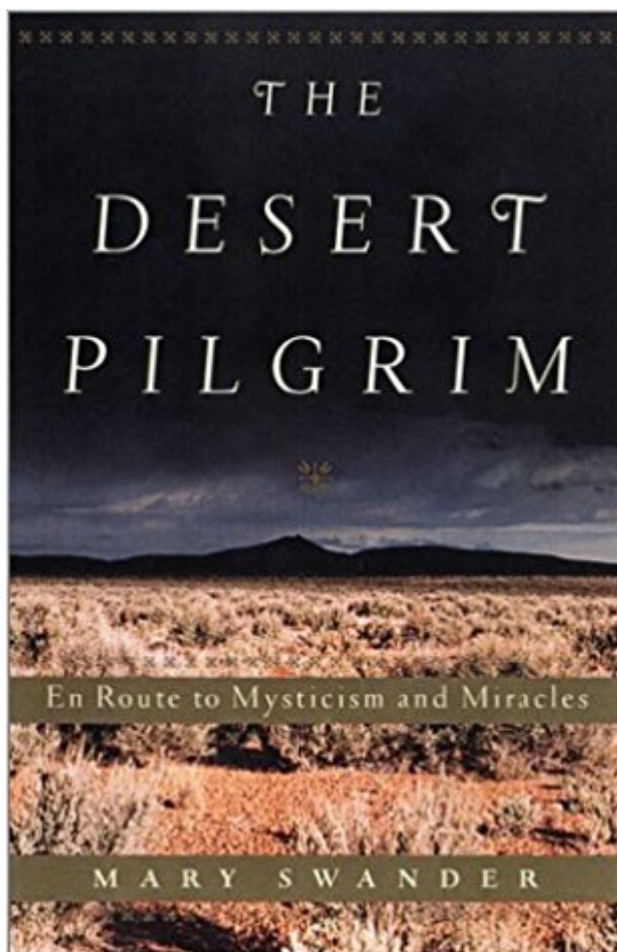


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# The Desert Pilgrim: En Route To Mysticism And Miracles



## Synopsis

Mary Swander was a lapsed Catholic content with the solitude and tenuous spirituality of a life tied to the Iowa prairie and its seasons. But when a car accident left her paralyzed and in chronic pain with no medical cure in sight, she was forced to look inside herself for strength and for meaning. In *The Desert Pilgrim* she chronicles her miraculous physical recovery and her even more astonishing restoration of faith in the modern world. It is when she arrives to teach at the University of New Mexico that Mary's journey begins in earnest. In Albuquerque she encounters Father Sergei, a Russian Orthodox monk whose barrio church is hidden away on the once-proud Route 66, now the terrain of crack dealers and the homeless. She meets a curandera, "Lu," an herbal healer whose little pharmacy's first owner rode with Pancho Villa. Together these two will lead her to confront her growing distrust of medical and spiritual authority, and her own dark night of the soul. Evocatively and reflectively written, *The Desert Pilgrim* weaves together history, herbal medicine, physical healing, and what it means-in this modern age-to believe

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This nonfiction memoir of a chronically ill poet who rediscovers her Catholic faith and perceives its healing power reads like a cross between Kathleen Norris and Carlos Castaneda. Swander, an Iowa poet who developed a paralyzing neurological condition when her car was hit by a drunk driver, weaves family history and an introduction to historic Catholic mystics into a tale of her recovery from illness when she journeys from snowbound Iowa to the desert of New Mexico as a

visiting professor. She meets two "everyday mystics"-a Russian Orthodox priest named Father Sergei, whose theology has a discernible Buddhist accent, and a Hispanic herbal healer named Lu. Both tend to her body and soul as they help her to recover. The author writes movingly and keenly about the death of her mother from cancer, and her details of landscape and situation are lively in their particularity: a yapping pack of Chihuahuas, the lusty zucchini growing in Father Sergei's garden. Swander's language of faith is more hesitant as she searches for its embodiment in her lived experience. The timeless Christian allegory of pilgrimage to belief is freshly rendered. This poet-pilgrim joins a literary tradition of others before her who journeyed through the dark nights of doubt to the convinced light of faith. This is a beautifully written book. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Beautifully written... a cross between Kathleen Norris and Carlos Castaneda. -- Publishers Weekly  
--This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I've read this book about four or five times and wanted my own copy. Very uplifting.

It was a pleasure to witness Mary Swander's learning and spiritual evolution in *The Desert Pilgrim*. The author grounds her experience in the everyday world, which helps keep the reader with her on her path. When she finds answers to her questions, we find solace, too.

There should be a great story here, but there isn't. The one star is for the description of the author's chronic and difficult illness. The lack of stars is for the poor descriptive writing and the number of inaccuracies which led me to doubt her research and even her authenticity. Perhaps reading some source material would have helped. (She refers to Thomas a Kempis' book as 'My Imitation of Christ' instead of *The Imitation of Christ* and it seems apparent she has never read it.) Her poor generalization of the Catholic faith could be cleared up by a reading of that churches' catechism.

Swander does some important legwork for everyone who has suffered chronic illness and/or pain and wondered why, why, why, and how can I be healed?! She describes her journey to New Mexico and her hopes for finding healing there, but she discovers so much more than healing. She shares with us the wisdom of a Catholic monk, a woman with a gift for prescribing herbal remedies, and mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen, St. John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and St. Francis. The book also touches on other topics such as the medical establishment, meditation, the history of

women healers, and relevant episodes of the author's family life. This book is a wonderful treat stuffed full of inspirational messages, information and ideas that most of us can relate to.

In *The Desert Pilgrim*, Iowan Mary Swander shares her journey from debilitating illness to physical and spiritual healing with the help of an Orthodox monk and an herbal healer in an Albuquerque barrio. Swander doesn't exaggerate the extent of her recovery or the power of her regained faith, yet there is no doubt she has been transformed by this experience and by the wisdom and generosity of Lu and Father Sergei. Swander's writing is clear and accessible, and her story is an inspiration.

As a New Mexico resident and a lover of the desert, I had high hopes for this book when I plucked it off a shelf and bought it based on the description on back. Clearly the author's story is poignant and inspiring, but that really gets lost in barely mediocre writing. Swander grossly minimizes details related to New Mexico and its cultures, and she does the same with her descriptions of mystical figures and religion, and these sort of bald descriptions & generalizations really weaken the power of the story and her credibility as a writer. This propensity also makes the story feel unfocused and unguided. The book just doesn't read very authentically. I wish I had a different experience reading it, but I didn't.

this is a heartfelt, truthful work. mary swander is an inspiration and her writing is comforting and honest.

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