



Desert Cabal: A New Season in the Wilderness

Amy Irvine

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Reviewed by Zak Podmore

My mother-in-law often borrows a phrase from Kurt Vonnegut to describe the south Denver suburbs where she lives. “The neighborhood of broad yards and narrow minds,” she calls it. Seen from above, the winding streets lined with thousands of single-family homes contain a few strips of green beyond the front lawns — a canal, a public golf course, and a few small parks. But mostly for dozens of miles in every direction there are only tangles of interstate ramps, rows of box stores, and streams of endless traffic flowing down asphalt riverbeds. Needless to say, it’s hardly a wilderness. Even so, every month or two someone from the ritzy neighborhood a zipcode over from my in-laws will take their pomeranian out for a morning walk, and as they’re passing a hedge lining the yard of yet another McMansion, they’ll hear a yip and feel the tug on the leash behind them. By the time they turn around, all that is left of Fluffy is an empty collar. Another pooch has become coyote meat.

Edward Abbey would have reveled in such tales, I think. He thrilled at the idea of the wild and self-willed animal world creeping back into our overly civilized lives, and no American author burned through more typewriter ribbon imagining the return of the carnivore. He once said that if he owned a ranch he would rid it of cows and stock it instead with mountain lion, grizzly, wolf, and (in the ponds) alligator. Abbey maintained that it was the “right and privilege of any free American” to head off into the woods and risk being “eaten by bears.” And it didn’t stop with living species. “I would give ten years off the beginning of my life,” he wrote, “to see, only once, Tyrannosaurus rex come rearing up from the elms of Central Park, a Morgan police horse screaming in its jaws.”

Yet in the 29 years since Abbey’s death, we’ve begun to tame his memory and pave over his rough edges. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Desert Solitaire*, written at time when Abbey was still seen as enough of a subversive to warrant the FBI keeping a sizeable file on his doings. But now people often treat Abbey’s essays like a hike down the well-maintained foot trails of Arches National Park: pretty but also pretty safe.

So given all of this, it was with great admiration that I read Amy Irvine’s new celebration of and challenge to Abbey’s legacy in her book-length essay *Desert Cabal: A New Season in the Wilderness*. Irvine, a sixth-generation Utahn, rereads *Desert Solitaire* in the Trump era, giving Abbey credit as one of her literary inspirations while not pulling any punches when she sees him erring.

It is almost obligatory for those writing about Abbey today to offer the usual critical bromides about his failings — that he complained about oil extraction but drove a gas-guzzling pick-up, or that he raged against overpopulation and immigration yet had five children. And how about those

beer cans he tossed out the window? “[I always] hated that Abbey promoted littering,” scolded Sean Prentiss a couple years ago in his book *Finding Abbey*, which chronicles Prentiss’ search for Abbey’s hidden desert grave.

In *Desert Cabal*, Irvine immediately dispenses with all of those contradictions that Abbey himself held out as bait. Instead, Irvine’s book opens with sunrise in the Sonoran Desert. She is not searching for Abbey’s final resting place; she is already there, heating water for coffee in full view of his hand-chiseled gravestone. “You can toss the cans if you want,” she writes, “right now the least of the desert’s worries is a few aluminum cylinders getting caught in the pickleweed.”

The pages that follow read less like an Abbey commentary and more like an Abbey book — spirited, fast-paced, passionate, at once humorous and provocative, and all rendered in gorgeous prose. The 82-page narrative unfolds in a single day, which sees Irvine cracking Coors for Abbey’s ghost and setting them on the camp table next to her rye whiskey and Glock 9mm.

Irvine acknowledges Abbey’s devotion to the landscapes of the desert Southwest, including his role in advocating for their protection. “Despite what seems like increasingly dark times for the planet,” Irvine writes, “these wild places persist. Places that exfoliate our neuroses. That refuse to coddle our compulsions. That remind us, in these times of profound greed, what we really need.”

But Abbey himself was never one to compliment another writer for too long, and Irvine follows his example. She points out that for much of the time Abbey was writing *Desert Solitaire*, he was living with a wife and children. Their presence was included in Abbey’s early manuscript but cleanly excised from the final draft of the book. And while Irvine grants that this is an effective literary device, she believes male-dominated nature writing that emphasizes self-reliance needs to be balanced by another perspective, one that’s always been there but that’s been repressed as of late. Irvine has a hard time understanding how Abbey could have spent so much time paying homage to the scorpion and juniper tree while keeping out references to the people he loved. By contrast, *Desert Cabal*, as Irvine’s title suggests, is a book rich with stories of her daughter, her relationships, and her community, both human and nonhuman. “Perhaps this is the way of women,” Irvine says, “we seek not so much solitude as solidarity, intimacy more than privacy. But it’s the way of the wilderness too — in a thriving ecosystem, integration matters far more than independence.”

Desert Cabal is a celebration of public lands and a heartfelt work of resistance to what Irvine sees as a politics that pillage wildernesses along with women’s bodies. “This latest president loves pussy grabs as much as land grabs and so do many of the people who put him in power,” she writes. A foreword from environmentalist and chef Blake Spalding, who has worked tirelessly to defend Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument from Trump’s reductions in 2017, and an afterword from Ute Mountain Ute activist Regina Lopez-Whiteskunk, who advocated for the creation of Bears Ears National Monument in 2016, round out the plea to remember our place in the desert community of land, life, and women.

“Go solo, into the desert,” Irvine concludes near the book’s end. “But then come back. Come fall in with the cabal that has joined together to save what we know and love. It will take multitudes to slow the avalanche of apathy. And it will take a lot of devotion.”

Which brings me back to the coyotes living in suburban Denver. Both Irvine and Abbey are, at their best, like the coyotes surviving in our nation’s

groomed hedgerows. Their writing reminds us that to be in the presence of the wild, to be fully alive, is to be slightly on edge.

But there is an important difference between the two desert writers: They diverge in the moment following Fluffy's sudden abduction. How do we imagine the coyote in the scene? My first instinct, which I'd guess I share with many Abbey fans, is to picture the coyote like an action movie hero — savvy, individualistic, doing whatever it takes to survive, and no doubt, male. For Irvine, our tendency to see the natural world in this way is in no small part due to the myth of the rugged individual perpetuated by writers like Abbey. After reading *Cabal*, I'm reminded that it's just as likely the coyote in the stories is female, a mother, and she's dragging Fluffy back to the den to feed her pups.



