

Coyote At Large: Humor in American Nature Writing

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“Coyote’s ubiquitous presence in myth attests to the uncanny resemblance that people have found between the human psyche and Coyote’s character,” writes Peiffer. The coyote has been a powerful figure in Native-American folklore, and she identifies it as a symbol for comedy in nature writing. The coyote is a trickster, a figure comfortable among humans, and animals. His duality, like humor itself, provides a method to view the natural world.

Nature writers offer writing that, like Coyote, plays with the intersection between nonhumans and humans. *Coyote At Large* critiques the humorous and comic visions of nature writers Wendell Berry, Edward Abbey, Louise Erdrich, and Rachel Carson. Each of these writers employs humor as a way to look beyond individual egos and to gain nature’s perspective.

Radical Edward Abbey relished his role as trickster, writing outrageous things that challenged the idea that humans have a special place in the universe. His statement that bears have the right to eat trespassers, or that there is no moral difference between shooting a snake and a person, shock because of the matter-of-fact delivery. Abbey’s humor keeps the reader off balance, provoking one into questioning the assumed domination of humans over nature. Books like *Desert Solitaire* confront humans with their connection to nature, inciting them to act responsibly.

Louise Erdrich’s fiction encompasses both the wildness in nature and the wildness within human beings. These mysterious forces surround and interact (and interfere) with individual lives and are ultimately unknowable. In the children’s book, *Grandmother’s Pigeon*, a stuffed bird seems to have laid the eggs that will hatch into Passenger Pigeons. Erdrich uses such humorous absurdities to show that a mystery—like the wildness of nature itself—cannot be explained but must nonetheless be accepted. She suggests that by embracing nature, human beings can be the beneficiaries of the surprises it has to offer.

Coyote At Large is a literary critique of humor in nature writing with a moral undercurrent. “The transport between the human and nonhuman realms must be mutual in order for us all to survive,” Peiffer writes. These writers, she suggests, have something to teach about the balance between the human and nonhuman worlds. They teach not only greater respect for the wildness of nature, but also greater respect for the unknown forces within each person. *Coyote At Large* offers a good foundation for understanding the voices and visions of contemporary nature writing.

RONALD D. LANKFORD, JR. (September / October 2000)

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