

The West, when women are telling the story

By Emily Wortman-Wunder, High Country News

For years, starry-eyed initiates to the West's backcountry have packed along classics like John Muir's "My First Summer in the Sierra," Edward Abbey's "Desert Solitaire," and the journals of Lewis and Clark. These writers inspire us, open our eyes to the beauty and the fragility of the rugged West, and give this landscape a mythic resonance.

However, much of that myth has been written by men. "Here, in the wilderness, a man could be a real man, the rugged individual he was meant to be before civilization sapped his energy and threatened his masculinity," writes environmental historian William Cronon, describing the ethos that's shaped, and misshaped, our understanding of what wilderness is. Even the women writing in this tradition – Mary Austin, Terry Tempest Williams, Leslie Marmon Silko – often write about the struggle to make their way in a world dominated by men.

Recently, though, women have been storming the barricades. From Cheryl Strayed's best-selling memoir of hiking the Pacific Crest Trail to Claire Vaye Watkins' myth-busting fable of a waterless California, many of the exciting new names in the literature of the West are women. If the traditional vision of nature is one of struggle and conquest, of man testing himself against solitude and the elements, what does this shift mean for our collective vision of the wide-open spaces of the West?

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