



PROJECT MUSE®

Seven Summers: A Naturalist Homesteads in the Modern West by Julia Corbett (review)

Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy

Western American Literature, Volume 50, Number 1, Spring 2015,
pp. 93-94 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: [10.1353/wal.2015.0018](https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.2015.0018)



➔ For additional information about this article
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/wal/summary/v050/50.1.mccarthy.html>

being struck by lightning, pinned under a boulder, or caught in a slot canyon. Echoing the editor's goal of effecting personal transformations, Wayne Ranney gives voice to the profound satisfaction he derives from being a Grand Canyon guide, decidedly proud of the reluctant novice transformed through the difficulties of the hike.

Linda Helstern
North Dakota State University

Julia Corbett, *Seven Summers: A Naturalist Homesteads in the Modern West*. Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 2013. 275 pp. Paper, \$19.95; e-book, \$16.

Seven Summers is a story the West needs to hear. Julia Corbett breaks the pattern of tales we tell about the West and offers a gracious reinterpretation of the familiar themes of settlement, escape, belonging, and change. Most of all, she makes gender matter. At the heart of American environmental literature is one archetypal story: A man goes into the wilds and in that simple, natural setting finds clarity and insight. So while the pastoral impulse recurs across your *Norton Anthology*, it's almost always a man wearing the spurs and riding off to wrangle his demons. In *Seven Summers* a woman builds her cabin in the Wyoming wild and balances between the New West of urban, professional accomplishment and the Old West of clearing, trapping, and dreaming.

To me the most important part of this narrative is the way it models strong women doing hard things in wild places. Corbett interweaves the stories of pioneer women from Wyoming into her own self-deprecating tale to establish an overlooked heritage. Her anecdotes of hired help and dubious neighbors betray the preconceptions that make cabin-building or wild exploration appear appropriate for only one gender. She raises the specter of "Thoreau's sister" and asks what role models exist for a woman building her own cabin. Indeed, the book explores just what possibilities emerge when, like Virginia Woolf's invention of Shakespeare's Sister back in 1929, a modern woman finds the literal and figurative space for a cabin of her own.

Seven Summers enacts the insights of feminist nature criticism.

The ecofeminist Stacy Alaimo titled one of her books *Undomesticated Ground* in reference to the dual role of wild landscape for women writers. In short, the troubles and challenges of the unsettled space are balanced against the freedom from prescribed domestic roles these same spaces offer the women settling them. Here, in Alaimo's terms, is a space where "women could be untamed, unruly, and unregenerate" (16). This ecofeminist promise is active across *Seven Summers* where historical stories of women in the West are embedded into the surface tale of the author's own affair with place.

And that surface tale is well worth reading for its wit and for its vigor. A strength of *Seven Summers* is its investigation of the so-called New West. That's a familiar enough phrase, but Corbett makes it live by exploring the characters in her slice of Wyoming against the backdrop of regional history, engaged naturalism, and her own peregrinations from urban to rural life. Corbett gives us a naturalist's view of wild places under acute pressure while nonetheless delighting the page with sandhill cranes, moose, wildflowers, owls, and pets. The result is a lively contemplation of western identity and a worthy addition to influential (and masculine) treatments of the evolving West like James Galvin's *The Meadow*, Stephen Trimble's *Bargaining for Eden*, and Brooke Williams's *Halflives*. The style is lively and accessible, a memoirist's subtle touch founded on a professor's rigorous study.

This is a fine book for anyone who has ever dreamed the American dream of a small cabin in a wild place. In one sense Corbett's is an old-fashioned story of romantic nature where a person leaves the city to be rejuvenated and redeemed. In another sense, we leave Wordsworth and Abbey far behind for a probing consideration of the twenty-first-century landscape around us peopled by oil workers, summer visitors, and thoughtful tyros learning from the West they want to call home.

Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy
Westminster College