

Book Review of *The Coyote:
Defiant Songdog of the West* by
Francois Leydet

Paul T. Bryant

1978

The Coyote: Defiant Songdog of the West. By Francois Leydet. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1977. 222 pages, \$7.95.)

Of all the native wild animals of the West, perhaps the most “western” are the plains buffalo and the coyote. The buffalo — big, powerful, foul tempered, stupid — survives in zoos, reserves, and private herds. The coyote — small, adaptable, humorous, smart — still prospers in the wild. Anyone in the West away from the cities can see coyotes and hear them sing the same songs heard by mountain men, early explorers, and settlers, giving us continuity with the old, unsettled land.

The Coyote, unlike Leydet’s earlier books, *Time and the River Flowing: Grand Canyon*, and *The Last Redwoods*, is not a “picture” book. In the others, published by the Sierra Club, Leydet’s text is accompanied by numerous excellent photographs. *The Coyote* contains drawings by Lewis E. Jones, but they supplement and illustrate the text. They never overwhelm it as photographs often do in Sierra Club editions.

This is a loosely constructed book of appreciation, interpretation, advocacy. Although well written, it does not have the unity of effect one might expect from Krutch or Eiseley. Nevertheless, it offers information, folklore, modern western attitudes, and personal experiences concerning the coyote in relation to that other predator, man. At the outset Leydet deromanticizes the coyote by acknowledging that he is a killer whose victims suffer and die. Although the coyote often kills swiftly, he is sometimes clumsy and unintentionally cruel. Even this Leydet puts into perspective, reminding us that “a predator is any animal that kills another for food, and the ladybug is as lethal a killer as the leopard.”

Leydet gives us a series of viewpoints, beginning with the coyote itself. After presenting two generations of a mythical coyote family history, Leydet takes us on his search for information. He shows us the coyote through the eyes of American Indians, wildlife biologists, government trappers, cattlemen, sheepmen, government bureaucrats, sporting varmint hunters, and finally Western American Literature himself, a conservationist seeking an ethical but realistic relationship with nature that recognizes human needs but acknowledges rights for other creatures.

The result is a book concerned with more than the coyote. It is about our need for a sense of stewardship of the earth, a sense that recognizes the complexity of ecological systems, lest we destroy ourselves in unthinking determination to destroy competitors. The coyote, he concludes, may be a much less endangered species than we are.

Thus this book is many things. Presenting information both about the coyote and about various groups of people in their relationship with the coyote, it includes myth, legend, religion, biological facts, tall tales, and, in the process, an overview of writings about the coyote, from Twain through Dobie to contemporary biologists.

No one can know the western landscape without knowing the coyote. For the greenhorn just making that acquaintance, this book can speed the process and deepen experience with understanding. For the westerner already a friend — or enemy — of the coyote, this book provides fresh insights into our relationship with the “defiant songdog of the West.”

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The Ted K Archive

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Quoting Ted: “When I was in California, nearly 2 years ago, I saw a letter in the paper by one Francois Leydet who said he was writing a book on predators and asked readers to send him any interesting personal experiences with predators ... Anyway, he says that ... ‘I mention your recipe for Coyote stew on Page 86 ...’ ... Probably the only reason he acknowledged all those letters was so he could pull in more sales for his book and make money off the suckers.” — Ted Kaczynski’s

Correspondence with his Parents — Ted to Parents — 11/30/1976

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