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Coyote in the Mountains by John Rember (review)

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Western
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1991-04 25
Frederick Moten's *The Golden Rule*
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Edwin, Albinus, and "Woolly" in
"Dustbin Lane" Paul F. Baker
Recent Bibliography of Studies
"Western American Literature" Philip R. Althouse
Research in Western American Literature
1991-92 Jim Roper
Index
Reviews
The Western Literature Association
Index to Volume XXV
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Coyote in the Mountains. By John Rember. (Boise: Limberlost Press, 1989. 102 pages, \$9.95.)

The stories of John Rember's *Coyote* cycle first appeared in occasional issues of the *Idaho Mountain Express*, a weekly news tabloid in Ketchum, Idaho, some years back. Reading them then, I was struck most by the pure banality of Rember's interpretation of the character. Little of the wild native surrealism and scatological humor of the contemporary Coyotes of Peter Blue Cloud, Simon Ortiz or even Barry Lopez's retellings had found a way into Rember's version. His was a curiously deflated, carefully-mannered, almost whitewashed Coyote moving through a landscape as familiar as the corner convenience store. At times, it seemed a somewhat cheap fictional device.

This initial reaction received quite a spin after reading the stories collected under one cover. Certainly the revisions that accompany first publication now make the prose shine and snap more crisply, and a greater sense of artistic intent becomes more obvious as well. The modern world is a tough, often vicious and soul-crunching place to live. Of course the Coyote, the Trickster Survivor, that could maintain independence in such a world would be an altered and diluted descendant of his mythic forefathers.

The mundane settings for these stories become, in large part, their whole point. Coyote isn't dead in the Brave New World, not yet anyway, but the magic is leaking out very quickly. Rember pulls off a neat trick here, in that the mythological archetypes of his characters (Coyote hangs out with folks like Bear, a high-powered Big City attorney, and Rabbit, a former flower child who now works for a major defense contractor) provide a deep counterpoint to any convention of current minimalist fiction technique he may care to exploit. Even the most familiar plot scenario takes on an amplified resonance in the memory, without being restricted by anyone's rules. Coyote himself might have written this book.

Whimsical with some very dark edges (like Richard Brautigan at his best), *Coyote in the Mountains* nevertheless insists that Coyote is going to make the transition to modern times, even if he has to wash dishes and drive the same late-model beat-to-hell sedan the rest of his life. It's an encouraging thought, and is what finally allows this collection admittance to the small-but-growing pantheon of significant reapproaches to Coyote. As Gary Snyder points out in "The Incredible Survival of Coyote," we no longer can know Coyote in the ancient Native sense, but the reemergence of his presence in our present situation may be a key to our own survival on this land.

Ketchum artist Julie Scott has collaborated with the text to the extent of providing pictographic postage-stamp-sized illustrations to lead off each story, a merging of visual and written art that adds a rare successful enhancement to these tales. It's fine to see a project this entirely self-generated emerging from the central Idaho mountains.

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