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THE LESBIAN AND GAY NEWS MAGAZINE NO. 53

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Books

Desert Heart

Coyote by Peter Gadol. Crown. \$18.95 cl. 311 pp.

by Max Cavitch

I'm puzzled by the habit of printing the seemingly benign phrase "a novel" on the covers of books. Is it an affectation, or does it serve a purpose? Is it a warning? A promise? A clue? What would be the risk of turning loose a book immediately announcing the generic category it wants to belong to? If Peter Gadol's *Coyote* didn't come in a package that boldly announced its species—"this is a novel"—would we read it differently or, perhaps, mistakenly?

In the end, labeling something a novel tells us very little about it. For precision's sake, *Coyote* could conceivably be called "a Southwestern novel" or "a coming-of-age novel" or "an adventure novel," but even if it doesn't fit neatly into any of those categories, *Coyote* is still great fun to read. It has a quirky plot, a cheerful tone and a happy ending. It may not be what Virginia Woolf would have called "a grown-up novel," but one would have to be awfully old not to find something refreshing in *Coyote*.

Coyote Gato's idea of refreshment is a mixture of beer and lemonade. The French call it *une bière panachée*, but Coyote has never been to France. He has spent his whole orphaned life in the arid Southwest, living in a trailer on the fringes of a small town named Frescura. After ripping down all the street signs, he establishes himself as the unofficial guide for newcomers to the town—most of them passing through on their way to the nearby ashram. As he directs them down the unmarked streets and endless desert highways, Coyote tells the strangers stories about regional history and, most frequently, about himself.

These stories are often fictions or half-truths; Coyote loves to lie. The reader—a stranger on Coyote's turf—is quickly made aware that there may be more fantasy than truth in what Coyote says. But the point is not to believe or disbelieve that Coyote can turn himself into a cat or that the Great Tree that grows in the desert has prophetic power. The book's mystical world of gurus, myths and auguries is full of changeable, rather than rigid and oppressive, symbols. About the Great Tree, Coyote says that while it "fit into a new religious iconography, it lasted as an empty symbol, one that accepted the meanings you imposed upon it: hope or last resort, genesis or the end of the world."

Or, more likely, something in between. For most of the book, this in-between place is the ashram that Coyote visits with his new friend, Madeline, a world-class investigative journalist doing an exposé of the desert cult. The ashram seems at first to be what Coyote (and all the rest of us, in one way or another) are looking for: a place where work, love, sex and holistic health are perfectly integrated. But as the relationship between the progressive cultists and the reactionary Frescurans becomes strained and as factions develop within the ashram itself, this Shangri-La comes to resemble just one more failed utopian experiment. And when the ashram does come crashing down, the ruins of a much older city are revealed beneath it. The lesson seems to be that you can't count on cities to last.

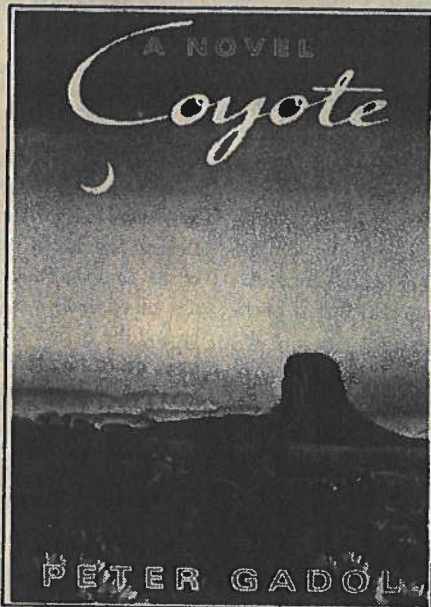
The desert symbolizes all that Coyote takes most seriously: home and loneliness, beauty and deceit—a place to linger in, to leave and to return to. Coyote does finally leave the desert, but this is not the story of a small-town boy setting out for the bright lights of Metropolis. In *Coyote*, coming of age (for once) doesn't mean going to New York. Gadol doesn't fetishize the urban-scape; cities in *Coyote* (like the ashram dystopia and the Lost City on which it's built) are dispensable, remote. For Coyote Gato, people (like his lover Matthew), not points on a map, are the places to discover and dwell in. Whatever Coyote's destination may be as he drives across and beyond the desert at the book's end, we can be sure

it's not the East Village.

I wish I could be sure—or at least give up the idea that it matters—what kind of novel *Coyote* is. (Not that it can't be more than one kind.) In fact, it tries hard to be read as comedy, as romance, as myth and as mystery all at once, but, more to the point, what it tries very hard *not* to be read as is a "gay" novel, which may at first seem to be to its credit. Like other contemporary gay authors, most notably David Leavitt, Peter Gadol seeks to normalize gay experience by making gayness itself a rather unremarkable feature of his novel. But unlike Leavitt, who never loses sight of the various tensions that characterize any attempt to synthesize gay and nongay experiences, Gadol ignores the unique aspects of gay sensibility. If Coyote were a nongay character, very little would change in this book except the names of some of his sexual partners.

One of Coyote's early sexual experiences—at the hands of "a siren named Yvonne"—establishes his sense of his own sexuality as "an all-embracing understanding of humanity." Though

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AUDIO HATE from page 61

stunned" at the content. "I met them at a party and said, 'What were you thinking?' They said, 'We can explain it.'" But can they explain lyrics advocating violence, when there have been over 200 reported cases of anti-gay and anti-lesbian attacks, a number of them homicides, in New York City already this year? Can Ms. Doe explain her position as a promoter of hatred to her "many gay and lesbian friends"? Doug Morris, the president of Atlantic Records, had "no comment," according to his secretary.

What do others in the music industry think? Don Brody, who manages TVT Records, an independent label that distributes groups like Nine Inch Nails and the Jack Rubies offered this simple comment: "Atlantic should know better."

Ironically, Audio Two performed at Refuse and Resist in Concert last year, an event which was organized to fight oppression, as the ads put it, "in all its insidious forms." Audio Two obviously missed the point: In addition to their anti-gay stance, the boys in the group wear more South African-mined gold than many uptown society women.

In a conference call with Loren Lewis, the group's manager, and Audio Two's 19-year-old Milk, Loren spent a good deal of time explaining Milk's point of view.

"It was just somethin' that I felt, um, and I just said it," Milk replied in a faint and delicate tone.

"It's not a hatred type of issue," Lewis translated.

"I said what I would do or what I feel, not what everybody else should do," said Milk.

"His lyrics are just lyrics on his album," Lewis explained. When asked if he had heard any of Mayor Dinkins' speech condemning violence against all people, including gays and lesbians, Milk replied that "the bottom line is, that's what I wanted to say. That's just it. I don't have to defend myself."

"He is not advocating anything," Lewis clarified. "Do I feel that anytime somebody says 'nigger this' or 'nigger that,' walking down the street, that it is hatred? No." While Mr. Lewis obviously has a hard time identifying racism on the street, our readers may more easily identify homophobia when they hear it.

Ahmet Ertegun, chair of the board

of Atlantic, told his secretary, Maureen, that he "doesn't care to comment." Maureen offered that "we distribute it, and we're not even aware of the music. We don't listen to it....We are not responsible for what's being put out." This is kind of like saying, "I'm just the drug runner, I don't make the crack." She then accused this writer of having a "militant attitude."

For those who prefer the direct approach, call, write and fax all of these people, each of whom is responsible for producing anti-gay and anti-lesbian hatred.

- Atlantic Records, 75 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, NY 10019, (212) 484-6000. Doug Morris, President: (212) 484-6408, FAX (212) 484-8212. Ahmet Ertegun, Chair of the Board: (212) 484-8133.

- First Priority Music, Nat Robinson, President, 824 St. Johns Place, Brooklyn, NY 11216, (718) 363-8900, FAX (718) 363-2682.

- Mo Austin, Chair of the Board, Warner Bros. (WEA), 3300 Warner Blvd., Burbank, CA 91505, (818) 953-3201, FAX (818) 953-3276.

- Write to Milk and Gizmo c/o their fan club: P.O. Box 004-537, Staten Island, NY 10304.

Express how you feel about a 19-year-old advocating punching faggots in the face. Ask Atlantic president Doug Morris if he ever thinks about the millions of queers that buy his records. Demand a recall of this recording. Demand an apology. Demand that Atlantic Records and First Priority donate \$100,000 to the Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project.

Fight homophobia, in the words of Malcolm X, "by any means necessary." Make this your first priority. ▼

LIZA from page 61

her limbs, she treated us to her innovative disco version of "Losing My Mind." This song, Liza's first hit single, is now playing in all the major clubs; to see her perform it live is sensational. Finally she pulled Richie Havens (her opening act) out of the wings, and they improvised a soulful duet of "God Bless the Child."

Despite the success of her new album, history was not lost on Liza. After dedicating a love song to her father, she shined her way through an array of old favorites, encoring with a

rousing "The Southland Gave Birth to the Blues," a loving tribute to Sammy Davis, Jr. "If we just keep talking about him," she warmly explained, "in a way he'll always be with us."

While touring with Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis, Jr., Minnelli recorded the rock album *Results*. In it, she blends a Charles Aznavour-style pathos with the manic synthesized sound of the Pet Shop Boys. Fans can also find her in the video *Visible Results*, where her distinctive acting and musical talents have found a new vehicle. One moment she's Liza the superstar, the next she's Pookie Adams. And the results are in: America has given her the Grammy's Living Legend Award. ▼

YIDDISH QUEERS from page 60

"only two years later." A hint of the craze they anticipate came when Svigals joined with an all-women (albeit straight) klezmer band last summer at the Michigan's Womyn's Music Festival. "We had a hora line of women, topless with bouncing breasts, all with yamulkes on," she gleefully recalls. The fad they envision in the near future: a Yiddish equivalent to the lambada. ▼

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worried that he might just be "hiding in versatility," he is proud of being able to have sex with anyone. Coyote should be grateful to his author for placing him on a desert planet where versatility seems to carry no social or psychological costs whatsoever, where coming out to oneself and to others is an unnecessary ritual, where being gay is, in short, just another empty symbol.

Perhaps we've reached the point where a "gay" novel (if that's what *Coyote* is) can afford to dispense with the notion that gay sexuality "matters." There's a difference, though, between making gay concerns unremarkable and rendering them illegible. Versatility helps to defy categorization, and that sort of defiance is always welcome. But versatility—whether sexual or literary—can also be an excuse for failing to recognize that categories do matter, even as they change. As a "novel," *Coyote* is a cool summer treat, like a frothy *bière panachée* on a sweltering day. But as a taste of the specificity of gay experience, it leaves the reader dry. ▼