
Crossing Gender Boundaries in the Wilderness: Women in the Fire Lookout Towers of the American West

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Abstract

The American West has a long tradition of lookout literature, by men who went outback and up top looking for solitude, adventure, and a contemplative life. While writers such as Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac took to the high country lookouts in the 1950s, establishing a literary tradition of a man's world, women "manned" lookout towers in the west throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. My examination of the few published texts, such as Jeanne Kellar Beaty's 1953 *Lookout Wife*, published oral histories, and lookout logbooks from the 1940s to the 1960s reveals that women had a profound influence on both logbook discourse and the culture of lookout life. By the time Edward Abbey's 1975 stay at the Numa Ridge Lookout in Glacier National Park with his wife Renée, women's rhetorical strategies and discourse had become normative and Abbey's work reflects these changes. In his essay, "Fire Lookout: Numa Ridge," Abbey borrows heavily from past logbooks and much of his essay owes its observational details to the precedents set by earlier women lookouts, many of whom kept the logbooks. My talk, the result of archival research, critical readings of the "classic" texts by men, and the underappreciated texts by and about women shows the ways women's presence complicates, even negates many assumptions about men's solo experiences in the wilds of western North America. In so doing, I argue that women's observations and their recording of them change the way lookout experience is rendered, the logbook or lookout narrative as a textual genre, and both complicates and disrupts the way literary critics and wilderness advocates have used the texts by men."

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