

FIRST DRAFT

Seeing things differently

Author Craig Childs helps readers explore desert landscapes

Craig Childs sees things, like anyone wandering in the deserts of the Colorado Plateau. But he takes note of them in more profound ways than most of us.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

Juniper trees, for example: "Junipers are intent on something, more so than any other plant. They stretch and writhe, reaching for something just out of their grasps. I can nearly hear their century long groans as I study their contorted features."

That's from his first book "Stone Desert: A Naturalist's

Exploration of Canyonlands National Park," originally published in 1995.

"Stone Desert" is also Childs' most recent book, republished a few months ago by Torrey House Press of Salt Lake City and Back of Beyond Books of Moab. The new edition includes field notes and drawings that Childs made in his early Canyonlands journeys, the material that provided the foundation for the original book.

Between the two versions of "Stone Desert," Childs has written and published more than a dozen books, primarily about the Southwest. Last year, in addition to "Stone Desert," he published "Tracing Time: Seasons of Rock Art on the Colorado Plateau." He is currently at work on a book about mountain lions.

Over more than a quarter century of writing books, magazine and newspaper articles Childs said his writing has definitely improved, become more nuanced and more carefully crafted.

"Stone Desert," he said, "represents something more raw" than his more recent books. He was writing preliminary sections for the book even as he was hiking in Canyonlands.

Even so, Childs' careful observation and insightful commentary on the natural world remain at the heart of his writing.

"I want to find a way of expressing what we experience. My intention is to say what we feel," he said. "I have to work at it, but in some ways it comes naturally."

In last year's "Tracing Time," he described a large rock-art panel he observed in Utah, which includes more than 200 human figures walking toward a large circle pecked into the sandstone.

"Gravity emanates from that panel," he wrote. "You can't help walking toward it, feeling the momentum of people going somewhere."

From a ridge just above that panel, "the desert opens like a map. The view encompasses 50 or 60 miles of mesas and ridges in all four states," he wrote. A few sentences later he added, "This is where the people came, I think, the center of the circle, a cultural heart of the ancestral Pueblo world."

Whether he is discussing rock art, the multitude of colors in desert stone, or something as ordinary as magpies, Childs strives to make the reader share what he has experienced.

"I try to write about what I see that we often ignore," he told me. Magpies, for example, are often disregarded because they are so common here.

In "Stone Desert" he wrote: "A magpie dipped between knolls. Its flamboyantly wedged tail fanned as it dropped so that air pressed beneath it and bounced it up like a spring ... The magpie flew southeast, into the sun. Each time its wings expanded, I saw a white flash of feathers and its tail fanned open like a deck of cards displayed by a conniving dealer."

Childs, who lives in southwestern Colorado, was born and raised in Arizona. He frequently hiked in the deserts there with his father. So, to some extent, he said, his love of desert environments began when he was a youngster. But it developed into a great obsession when he was a young adult, working as a rafting and canoeing guide and exploring on his own or with friends.

He received a degree in journalism, and worked for a time for a Colorado weekly newspaper. Later, he obtained a master's degree in desert studies, a program he developed himself.

Among the writers that influenced him, Childs said, were Edward Abbey and Terry Tempest Williams, David Lavender, Barry Lopez and poet Mary Oliver.

Nearly three decades after "Stone Desert" was first published, Childs hasn't stopped exploring the land he loves. In fact, our telephone interview last month had to wait until he completed his most recent trip into the Canyonlands with two of the people who joined him on his "Stone Desert" adventures.

"Most of the people who were with me in "Stone Desert" I'm still involved with," he said. "We've remained friends and we still enjoy getting out together."

Their travels together today are leavened by the shared experiences of so many years past, he added.

Additionally, things he experienced early on in his



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to The Daily Sentinel

Craig Childs speaks at Lithic Bookstore in Fruita late last year. The author of "Stone Desert," above right, Childs has a unique way of expressing the things he sees when he wanders the deserts of the Colorado Plateau.

backcountry travels continue to be valuable for him today.

In "Stone Desert" he wrote about bighorn sheep and told of one day's trip through numerous canyons. "Most of our haphazard routes hit dead ends, so we followed the trails of bighorns," he said.

"If bighorn tracks enter a canyon, there will be a way out," he added. "If any creature is entirely literate with the lay of the land, it is the bighorn."

In what looked like a dead-end canyon, he and his companions found a way out by following the bighorns, albeit a difficult path that required the members of the group to remove backpacks and hand them across different levels.

When we spoke, Childs said, "I was just using the bighorn thing last week," to find his way through rarely traveled canyons. "A lot of what I write is fundamental: 'What clues can I use to move through this landscape?' They're the same clues I've been using for 30 years."

In addition to "Tracing Time," Childs also wrote a chapter about rock art in "Stone Desert." I asked him if he ever felt voyeuristic or uncomfortable, as I sometimes do, on viewing these centuries-old messages on the rocks.

"That's a very common feeling," he said. "There should be a degree of discomfort" when modern visitors view rock art because "you're an outsider." But that discomfort is also a positive response to a very personal form of ancient communication, he said.

"I think rock art is very intimate compared to any other form of archaeology," he added.

Archaeological artifacts such as baskets, tools, even bones, are important, but inert, he wrote in "Tracing Time." "Rock art holds the animation. You see hair bobs, chest adornment, fending sticks, snakes in hand, atlatls mid-air."

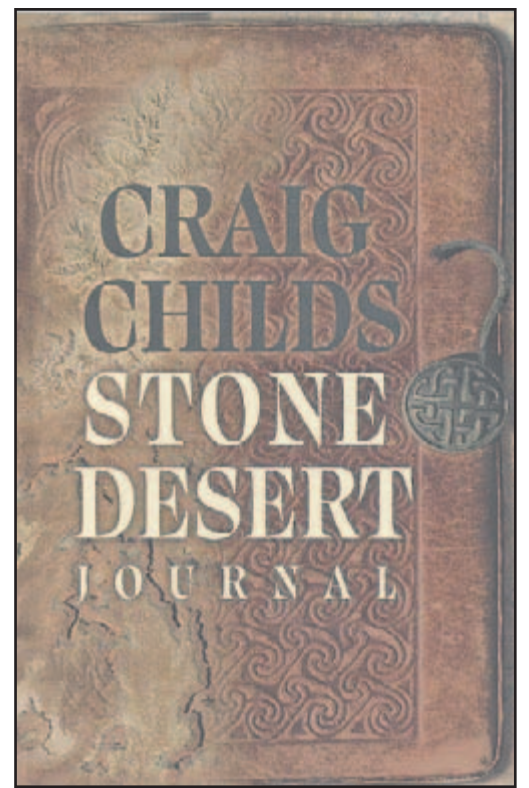
The idea to release a new edition of "Stone Desert," complete with Childs' field notes and drawings, came from Andy Nettell, former owner of Back of Beyond Books in Moab, Utah.

"Andy saw this as a document of a time and a place, Canyonlands through the eyes of a wet-behind-the-ears naturalist," Childs wrote in the introduction to the new edition. But Childs was at first hesitant to include the notes. Some of the entries were too private and embarrassing. And there were a few errors in his initial perceptions of the wild environment.

But eventually he acquiesced, and "Stone Desert" was republished late last year. It is available in Grand Junction at Grand Valley Books and Out West Books, at Lithic Bookstore in Fruita, Back of Beyond Books in Moab and Paonia Books in Paonia.

Sources: Author interview with Craig Childs, March 24, 2023; "Stone Desert," by Craig Childs; "Tracing Time," by Craig Childs.

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