

Liminal Zones

Where Lakes End and Rivers Begin

by Kim Trevathan

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Reviewed by Jacque E. Day

Liminal Zones—Kim Trevathan’s chronicle of a series of solitary upriver voyages in search of places where still water and rivers meet—came into our house at just the right time. Dogg, our ailing and elderly boxer, was dying. An intrepid soul even later in life, Dogg toughed it out through a series of moves that brought us to New England, and his last winter was the coldest in long memory. Until old age began to claim him, he had still proven strong enough to pull me down our ice-covered driveway. It was in the wake of Dogg’s death that I returned to the first sentence of the introduction of *Liminal Zones*:

I began a journey alone the summer after my traveling companion Jasper died. A German shepherd/lab mix who tilted his head back and forth when you talked to him, Jasper canoed with me thousands of miles, including 652 down the length of the Tennessee River—

Through Trevathan’s journey, I began to understand my own grief. And isn’t grief always a solitary journey?

Trevathan writes that *liminal* comes from the Latin *limen*, meaning “threshold.” In plain terms, it means the *space between*. Trevathan set out on his journey in 2007, and over the next four years, he would paddle America’s rivers upstream in search of their *liminal zones*, the transition points “where lakes end and rivers begin.” His quest would take him by kayak up New England’s Connecticut River, the James River of Virginia and Indiana’s Tippecanoe, the Dolores and Conejos tributaries of the Colorado River, the Edisto of North Carolina. He would also revisit the familiar waterways of his western Kentucky

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youth. What most grips me about Trevathan's book is his seemingly boundless fascination with transition points, where water, people, stories intersect.

So it came as no surprise when I learned that Trevathan counts Edward Abbey among his greatest influences. A former Wallace Stegner Fellow and author of more than twenty books, Abbey lived his life as "a voice in the wilderness," decrying, until his 1989 death, the development of America's natural landscapes. Twenty-five years after first reading Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, I am still haunted by the final phrases of the introduction: "This is not a travel guide but an elegy. A memorial. You're holding a tombstone in your hands." Trevathan might be pleasantly surprised to learn (and he may know already) that his life intersects with Abbey's in a more literal, spatial sense. Both were born and raised roughly fifty-five miles east of the two ends of the Ohio River: Abbey in rural western Pennsylvania, and Trevathan in rural western Kentucky. (In my own small way, I can triangulate the connection. I have lived and studied in both their hometowns: Abbey's Indiana, Pennsylvania, where I completed my undergraduate degree, and Trevathan's Murray, where I did my graduate work.)

The shadows of Abbey's influence emerge again and again in *Liminal Zones*. In his chapter titled "Fear, Delusion, and Peace on the Edisto," Trevathan delivers a harrowing scene—his passage through alligator-infested waters—in patient, elegant prose: "The gators were moving across the river like a squadron. I hugged the right bank and paddled past them at what seemed a healthy distance of twenty or thirty yards, though who knew how fast they could swim with those powerful tails, those thick legs with the long claws—" His tone suppresses panic, instead projecting a kind of careful reverence of the beautiful danger of nature that reminded me of a scene in "The Serpents of Paradise" chapter of *Desert Solitaire*, in which a young Abbey discovers a rattlesnake "between my bare feet, only a couple of inches to the rear of my heels" as he sits drinking his morning coffee, watching the sun come up over Arches National Park.

In the summer of 2011, Trevathan, "formulating cosmic questions and seeking answers that went beyond science and empiricism,"

embarked on a series of nighttime over-water journeys that became the subject of a later section of *Liminal Zones*, “Night Paddling.” Here, too, I can feel him drawing down the voice of Edward Abbey, who preferred not to use a flashlight in the dark: “Leaving the flashlight in my pocket where it belongs, I remain part of the environment I walk through and my vision though limited has no sharp or definite boundary.” In “Night Paddling” Trevathan also reflects on the value of *not* seeing a clear path ahead. “To an extent all these excursions toward the liminal have been a form of night paddling, groping forward for something that’s as abstract as fog, more difficult to grasp than a rock or a fish or an antler.”

In this age of global warming, with experts telling us we have only another ten years to change our ecologically unsound ways before we reach a point of no return, Kim Trevathan’s voice is an essential one. *Liminal Zone* poses provocative and critical questions: Why are some parts of nature preserved and protected while others aren’t? What are the long-term ramifications of damming our rivers? Through his journey, Trevathan has given us a sweeping view of America’s waterways and their current complexities, and his account of their sublimity can inspire us to do the hard work of environmental activism that lies ahead.

Liminal Zones is just the latest of Kim Trevathan’s books about his travels on American rivers, and I wonder what this Maryville College professor has planned next. Whatever the adventure, I envision that one day, on a remote wilderness trail, he may encounter Edward Abbey, whom he will discover has not died at all. (True—Abbey’s gravesite remains a mystery to all but a few living people.) And maybe they’ll share a beer at their meeting point, their liminal zone.