

THE OPTIMISTIC DECADE

Something Wrong: An Essay by Heather Abel

Optimism and the Colorado High Desert:
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SOMETHING WRONG

An Essay by Heather Abel

“CLASS OF '36, I guess we did something wrong.”

I was in college when I first read that sentence, and its author—my grandmother—had just died. She'd been charismatic and uncompromising, equally critical of capitalism and sentimentality. In her life as a Westchester housewife/radical leftist, she'd planned protests, played tennis, and published mystery novels. When her children were grown, she moved to Manhattan, waking every morning at five to walk briskly around Central Park (mugged only a few times), spending the rest of the day writing and tending the ivy she'd planted to beautify the trees along her block. Every Saturday she organized against US atrocities in Central America.

Days before she died in 1992, she dictated the final paragraph of her eighteenth book to my mother while attached to an IV, a blood transfusion, and oxygen. The book was, she explained, the first in a new series she planned to write. At her memorial, a week later, held in a classroom at Barnard College, her five children yelled and laughed and interrupted one another. She'd taught them to rebel against society's mawkish ceremonies, like memorial services, as well as its unjust institutions. Her children all inherited her radical politics, and they raised us, her twelve grandchildren, in the same mode. You can be anything, they joked, as long as it's a public defender. Interpreting this broadly, we complied.

A month after the memorial, I received in the mail a thick, spiral-bound book of my grandmother's unpublished writing, compiled by my aunt. I'm looking at it now. While most of the pages are filled with witty poems that my grandmother composed for celebrations, there is also a photocopy from her Barnard College fiftieth-reunion book, one of those alumni books to which you're invited to send in a list of your degrees and progeny along with a brief life update. My grandmother's entry is preceded by a Barbara Graham Junge, who has "arrived at a point in which the whole world has opened up for me" and followed by a Marion Wright Knapp, who doesn't "have much to say for or about myself other than that I'm enjoying life enormously and have given up that nonsense about being of any great value in my world."

Between Barbara and Marion sits Miriam Borgenicht Klein, offering not an update, but a condemnation in five sentences. "Anyone our age has to stand abashed at the state of the world," she begins. "For thirty or so years after we graduated, we felt, we may have been entitled to feel, vaguely self-congratulatory: if we preoccupied ourselves with such matters at all, we could assign to our efforts a small but perceptible effect; things were getting better. That comfortable illusion no longer seems to me possible. Put a finger anyplace on the globe today, and there is warfare, harassment, piles of dreadful weapons, appalling gaps between rich and poor." She finishes with her biting summation, the first-person plural opening its arms to include every alumna: "Class of '36, I guess we did something wrong."

How did I feel when I first read this? Well, proud. Mine wasn't your average grandma. And like her, I wanted to rail against the apathy of my college classmates. Dutifully rebellious, I'd started a chapter of the Children's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament when I was ten. At seventeen I'd brought busloads of other students to the Nevada desert to protest the nuclear test site.

But I was also frightened. That despair in her words? I knew it well. As a family of atheist Jews, our only god was cynicism. I'd been told my whole

life: Work hard to change the world, but guess what? Despite your efforts, the world will grow increasingly fucked.

Her words reminded me, more than anything, of a picture book I'd read as a child about an old, witchy woman who tried to rid the world of nighttime. Since I associated night with dread—of kidnappers and loneliness and nuclear war—I fully supported her attempt. With her broom, she swept frantically at the sky all night, resting victoriously when morning broke, only to be devastated when darkness fell again. I was horrified by the book's metaphoric implications. It was my earliest introduction to futility.

After college, I tried peripatetically and desultorily to do something right, first by teaching gardening in housing projects in San Francisco, then by writing for an environmental newspaper in Colorado, while all around me night continued to fall; things were getting worse. Finally, conceding that I wouldn't be doing anything right for the world, because I wanted to write a novel, I moved to Manhattan, not far from my grandmother's block, where the ivy no longer grew.

My book began, as so many first novels must, out of a sort of rage. I wanted to write about being my grandmother's granddaughter, about inheriting an idealism laced with disillusionment. I wanted to explain how it felt to grow up with a feverish love for Woody Guthrie's anti-fascism and Cesar Chavez's hunger strikes and for linking arms at a protest, for singing "We Shall Overcome," and for that love to be tarnished, as if under dark clouds that spelled out the words DOOM and NOT GOING TO HELP.

The book began out of rage and, I'll admit, hubris—a youthful idealism. I remember a professor telling me that no novel could be written in less than two years. I nodded and inwardly disagreed, confident that I'd finish in a year, eighteen months tops, after which I'd finally go to school to become, in the narrowest sense, a public defender.

In fact, it took me fifteen years to finish this book. I wrote other things during that decade and a half. I taught classes, raised babies. But still,

intermittently for fifteen years I worked on draft after draft, each one somehow *wrong*.

A strange thing happened to me during this time of failure. I'd begun the book furious about the end of idealism, but as the years passed, I began to understand that when idealism ends, well, that's when things get interesting. After all, you don't need to simply desist when disillusioned. No, you can show up for work anyway, not with earnestness or sentimentality (my grandmother would shudder at that), but with a buoyant sense of the absurd. It's absurd to write another draft of a book that isn't working. But there's beauty in this absurdity and plenty of humor, too.

How did I finally learn this? From my characters. I saw how each of them, while really trying to do something right, kept doing something wrong. Their egos got in their way, as did their lust and pride and greed, yet I was full of love for them anyway. I could forgive them more easily than I could forgive the rest of us, the wide first-person plural. I forgave Caleb, who wanted to create a back-to-nature utopia for kids, but who lied out of fear and bravado. I forgave Donnie, who, in his desire to reclaim the ranch he sold to Caleb, regurgitated the xenophobic propaganda of the mining industry. I forgave Ira, a radical journalist who shut down an entire newspaper when he stopped believing that his work was influential. And I forgave Rebecca, Ira's daughter, who wanted so badly to rebel in a dutiful way but couldn't figure out how to do it without being told.

You'll have to read to find out which one of these characters gets to say my grandmother's reproof to the class of '36. It's somewhere in the book, albeit in an altered form.

But her five sentences no longer frighten me as they once did. Back then, I was angry at myself and everyone else for not figuring out a way to do something unequivocally *right*. Now I'm beginning to understand what it means to live with an idealism conjoined with despair, with cynicism (and I have a feeling I couldn't finish my novel until I figured this out). It means you work *despite* futility. You go to a protest, shout alongside

strangers, and come home to read the terrible news. You plot out your new series of mystery novels while dying in a hospital bed. It's easy, I see now, to write five lines of condemnation. We do it on Twitter every day. It's harder to live absurdly, as my grandmother did, to drag the folding table down to Greenwich Village to collect signatures on petitions that will most certainly not remove US death squads from El Salvador, to water the ivy even though one day it, too, will die. We fail and fail. We stand abashed. We are doing something wrong, but look how beautiful we are as we keep sweeping the darkness back each night to allow one more day to arrive.

OPTIMISM AND THE COLORADO HIGH DESERT

A Conversation with Heather Abel

This interview was originally conducted by Corey Farrenkopf for *The Coil Magazine*.

Set in the high desert of Colorado, Heather Abel's debut novel, *The Optimistic Decade*, dissects the issues dividing Left from Right, positioned against the backdrop of a back-to-the-land commune-esque summer camp called Llamalo. It sounds like a comical setup, but Abel's characters are never satirical or lampoonish. Abel doesn't ridicule one side or the other, allowing the sad realities of individuals' lives to speak for themselves, eliciting sympathy from readers where they'd be surprised to find any. Beyond the timeliness of her novel, Abel explores the various forms of love, the awkwardness of teenage years, and everyone's eternal search to belong. The plot follows teenagers Rebecca and David as they navigate a tense summer at Llamalo, both trying to figure out where they fit into a divided world. The novel's true humor arises from their socially awkward relations and angst-ridden missteps. Alongside her fully realized characters, Abel's depiction of the high desert is exacting. Her mesas and scrublands, ranches and depression-wracked towns are painted with vibrant clarity. I was lucky enough to speak to Heather after she did a reading at Sturgis Library. The following encompasses some of the highlights of that conversation.

Corey Farrenkopf: In a particularly politically charged time, your book navigates both sides of the political spectrum, while never overly condemning or lampooning either. Caleb and Donnie are perfect representatives of the polar extremes of Left and Right. Could you speak to the challenges of writing sympathetic characters, even when their worldview doesn't align with your own?

Heather Abel: When I worked for a newspaper in Colorado, I would spend time with men like Donnie, miners and ranchers who had lost their jobs, whose lives were not turning out as they'd believed they would. I'm always interested in dashed dreams. As a reporter, you're out to get a quote, but I wanted to do more, to follow these men home (in a non-creepy way), to see how their anger and sadness expressed itself in dailiness. How did they spend their days? What did they eat for lunch? How did they treat their children? I actually loved writing of Donnie's humanity, even as I didn't shy away from some of his abhorrent politics. I wrote a bunch of his scenes just after the 2016 election. I was aware that Donnie would have voted for Trump. I was aware that I believed that I hated everyone who voted for Trump. And I was aware that I loved Donnie. More of a challenge for me were Ira and Caleb, the men on the left. My politics are as left as you can get, but I am painfully aware of the faults of many of us who hang out on this end of the political spectrum—our self-righteousness, our narcissism, our ego, our provincialism. I wanted to write these men with all their contradictions laid bare, but I didn't want to lampoon them. This was delicate, and I'm so glad you found it successful.

CF: Some critics have compared the main struggle in your novel, the ranchers versus the campers, to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Was that intentional on your part? If so, could you speak to how you threaded such narrative through the book and how it influenced your decisions? If not, what are your thoughts on such a reading?

HA: First off, I was honored to get such a thoughtful review in the *New York Times*, which came with the online headline “In the Colorado Desert, a Debut Novelist Finds a Metaphor for Israel and Palestine.” Books operate on many levels, of course, and on the main level—the level of plot and character—I meant this as a book about the American West. Donnie and Caleb are influenced by and reacting to a very particular Western mythology and masculinity. And the camp, Llamalo, has a very American history. It belonged to the Ute Indians until they were forced off. Under the Homestead Act, the government gave it to Donnie’s great-grandfather, a white pioneer. Exxon’s disastrous oil shale project bankrupted Donnie, forcing him to sell the land to Caleb. This is such an American story of power, conquest, resources, and succession. Llamalo’s story is not the story of Israel and Palestine.

At the same time, books always swim in the ocean of metaphor, and I was consciously working with the metaphor of the Promised Land. I was thinking explicitly about how we ask particular swaths of land to create community and to transform us. In service of this, we create borders; we keep people out. I was also thinking about the Jewish idea of mitzvot, actions we do to get close to God. Early on in my writing of this book, I read *Sabbath* by Abraham Joshua Heschel, in which Heschel explains that the holiest place for Jews is not a place at all, not even a synagogue. It’s a day, a period of time—the Sabbath, a mitzvah. I was so interested in the idea that actions are holy instead of places, especially since I was writing about the myth of place. Of course, I did think about Israel when I read that. I decided that I wanted the spiritual development of my book to reflect this understanding. All that is to say, yes, the metaphor was there, but it was super low level. How cool, then, that the reviewer picked it out.

CF: Auto-fiction has been big in recent works of realist fiction. How much of *The Optimistic Decade* is pulled from real life versus your imagination? Where does Rebecca fit into all of it?

HA: So much of writing is sitting in a chair reaching for objects that we can't see, all the tangible stuff our characters touch as they go through their lives. When I wrote Rebecca, these objects were easy for me to find. She grew up in Santa Monica, like I did. Her parents were journalists, and I'd worked as a journalist. Like me, she spent her childhood going to protests and meetings and potlucks with other LA leftists. It was fun for me to reach for her objects: the spiral-bound reporter's notebook, the beer poured into apple juice bottles for a picnic, the sand in the bottom of the beach bag, the pin on the Christmas tree that says *Wearing Buttons Is Not Enough*. (In this way, David's objects were easy, as well.) Auto-fiction implies, I think, a cohesion between the author and the character's internal states as well as fluency with the external objects. There's definitely some distance between Rebecca and me emotionally, and often I feel closer toward Suze or Caleb or Georgia. But I was trying to say something in this book about masculinity, which I navigated through Rebecca and her growing understanding of men and their power and privilege. I still feel really emotionally close to that part of the story, and I hope it's speaking to young women. (And men!)

CF: Llamalo is a kind-of-commune, back-to-the-land summer camp utopia. Where did you get the idea for that setting? Why the high desert of Colorado? Any interesting firsthand accounts of commune life or the search for a supposed utopia?

HA: When I was nine or ten, I was home from school with the flu, and I found a book about the kibbutz in my dad's office. I was enthralled. People didn't always live in nuclear families? How fantastic! I studied intentional communities and communes in college, and I read pretty much everything I could about them. My own personal experience is not with a commune but with a back-to-the-land summer camp in northern California. I worked there for six years. It's not as rugged or ramshackle as Llamalo, but it definitely taught me that camps can be myths come to life.

CF: I know you said it took several years and many rounds of edits to create *The Optimistic Decade* as it is now. I get hung on the time it takes me to finish my own works of fiction. Could you fill us in on the publishing process that went into bringing your novel into being? What would you say to other writers who struggle with the fear of writing too slowly?

HA: *The Optimistic Decade* had a comically long gestation process. I started it in graduate school, but when an agent asked to represent me based on some short stories a professor had sent her, I stopped writing. (Oh, naïve youth, what I wouldn't do to get those years back!) I was thrilled, but clearly overwhelmed. I put the novel aside for some years to make money, and when I finished a draft, my agent said it wasn't quite right. I was nine months pregnant at the time. After my baby started daycare, I scrapped that version of the book and wrote it anew. When I had another draft, I sent it to a friend's agent who offered me representation. He spent over a year doing a very belabored line edit, and then he gave up agenting. By that time, I felt distant from that version of the novel, so I wrote much of it new again. I sent this to the fantastic Doug Stewart at Sterling Lord, because I loved a book he represented—*Bobcat* by Rebecca Lee (read it!). Two weeks later—and about a decade after I started the book—Doug sold it to Kathy Pories at Algonquin. I had a wonderful experience with Kathy, who is such an astute and kind editor, and the plot of the book changed drastically once again.

There is so much about publishing that is out of our control. Agents leave. Editors might work slowly. The market slogs along. Capitalism is not our friend. The only thing we control is how truthfully we write our stories. Sometimes it takes a long time for this truth to come out. We get sick, have babies and jobs and crises.

That said, I now see the purpose of pushing myself to write quicker. One of my teachers told me I should finish the book before my first baby was born, because the experience of motherhood would change me, and I

wouldn't be able to keep writing the same book. I didn't listen to her, but she was right. I had to rewrite my book. When my second baby was born, I was changed once again; so once again I changed the book.

For this next novel, I'm trying to challenge myself to write quicker, to get a draft done before I change or the world changes. The world is morphing so quickly now that I wonder if our stories—even if they're set in the past or the future—won't seem as relevant to us if we take a decade to write them like I did. But I can do this (or at least try to) because my kids are older, my chronic illness is under control, and I'm in an entirely different place financially. I want to give everyone permission to love their slowness. I know that I love reading the books written by authors who took years and years. I appreciate the complexity and richness that comes from a snail's pace.

CF: Rebecca and David are very authentic teenagers. The fluctuation of their emotions is spot-on, along with their social anxieties and desires. How did you get in the headspace to write from their perspectives? Any advice to writers struggling to nail down that authentic, angst-ridden teenage voice?

HA: Do we ever really leave our teenage selves behind? I found it perhaps too easy to write from the teenage perspective. It's such a hyper-aware time, a time when we fluctuate so quickly from self-aggrandizement to self-flagellation. Two things did help me, though. First, I played music from my teenage years, because music is a failsafe vehicle for time travel; put on "I Melt with You" and I'm gone, back to the Lincoln Junior High gym, watching Nick dance with Wonnie and wondering if I might conflagrate from jealousy. Second, I became friends with my embarrassment. Adolescence is constant humiliation, and we find ways to contort ourselves in adulthood to avoid some of these feelings. When I shoved myself back into teenage-size to write David and Rebecca, the constant embarrassment

returned. Rather than push it away, I grew fond of it. How vulnerable we all are! How odd and soft and searching.

CF: In a lot of ways, *The Optimistic Decade* can be read as multiple variations on the traditional love story. There's the standard narrative of romantic love, but then you complicate that with the love of ideas and the love of a place. Can you talk about balancing all three throughout the narrative? Did you find one more challenging than the others?

HA: Oh, I'm thrilled that you call it "multiple variations on the traditional love story." That's exactly what I was hoping someone would take from the book. I actually found the love of place hardest by far. My love for the West is so primal and deep; it too easily relies on the language of cliché. The wide-open spaces! The grandeur! Romantic love is societally sanctioned—it keeps society chugging along—and love of ideas is honored in my family, but not everyone goes through life strung out on a place. I can feel myself becoming a little defensive of this love, a little too insistent. Many of the novel's false starts were because I didn't know how to express this love. Finally, I just gave it to a cadre of characters—Donnie, Don, Caleb, David, Suze, Rebecca—and let them all enact it in their idiosyncratic ways.

CF: I really enjoyed what you said in your audience discussion about setting, how you anchored your fiction in places from your past that you missed. Could you speak to the idea of visiting old stomping grounds through fiction?

HA: I fell in love with Colorado's stories and landscape when I moved there at 23. Five years later, I left Colorado for New York to get an MFA in fiction. At one of the first parties I attended, I told a guy that I'd be moving back as soon as I finished my degree. This guy became my boyfriend,

then my husband, and his job took us to Massachusetts, where the mountains look like anthills and all my neighbors vote just like me. I began *The Optimistic Decade* in mourning for Colorado but soon realized that by writing it, I could live in Colorado again. Every day I would travel to the high desert, walk between sage and rabbitbrush, climb up into the pinyon-juniper forest, visit with the ranchers and miners and hippies who had been my neighbors.

CF: What are you working on now? Any work coming out in the near future you'd like to talk about?

HA: I can barely speak about my current project for fear that it will evaporate. But I can say that my new work is set in Northampton, where I live. As I alluded to above, for many years I hated living here. I couldn't see it as a place of story. I felt uninspired, turned off by the landscape and the lives of the people I met. Finally, I realized that to fully exist here, to open myself to the place, I needed to write about it, to learn its history and think about its future. It's worked! This is the first autumn that I've been fascinated by New England, especially by the way seasons rule over people here. Now I find Northampton to be both a much more haunted place and a much more real place. It's no longer the site of my dislike but the site of my curiosity.

CF: Any final *Optimistic* advice to readers and writers living in our not-so-optimistic decade?

HA: Ever since I decided to leave journalism to write fiction, I've been doubting myself. Through the Bush years and the Obama years, I would fret: What is the point? How is this helping anyone? Should I do something else with my life? Part of this is because I was raised in an activist, academic family. I remember my mom giving me a bumper sticker that

said Art Saves Lives. She said, *I thought you would like it, but I'm not sure it's true*. Sure, I agreed. How did art actually save lives? Can art perform surgery? Can art give everyone health insurance? Can art reunite a child with her parents?

Oddly, it's been the disaster of Trump that has quieted my doubts. They seem like indulgences from a more naïve time. We need immigration lawyers, definitely. We need journalists. We need social workers and teachers and domestic abuse counselors, and we need people to run for Congress. But we need art, too. We need storytellers. We need our world reflected, analyzed, altered. I think we feel this need every twisted day, every day spent on the internet watching horror, watching a man try to become a dictator. So my advice to other writers is really just gratitude. Thank you, all of you, for the stories you're telling, for doing this hard work, for moving at a snail's pace in this fast world, for saving my life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Ira and Caleb offer two very different ways to respond to a messed-up world. Ira has spent his life engaging with societal problems, writing about them and protesting them. Caleb has decided to retreat, to form his own utopian community where he introduces kids to a different way of living: “with kindness and love, without buying shit, without watching shit.” Do you identify with either of these approaches?
2. Did you have an optimistic decade—those years (not necessarily ten) when, as Ira says, “the world feels malleable and the self strong?” When was yours? Do you think you need to be young to have one?
3. Many of these characters have a passion for the landscape of the West. Is there a landscape that speaks to you, where you feel you belong?
4. Caleb believes that kids need to be separated from their nuclear families in order to fully flourish. He considers the nuclear family a place of sadness (“There’s been pain . . . There’s been love withheld”). Why might he think this?
5. What is Suze’s role in the book? Why do you think the author had her come back to Llamalo on the hottest day of the summer?
6. Like many teenagers, Rebecca responds very differently to her mother and father. How does her relationship with Georgia change throughout the book? What events or realizations brought about these changes?

7. David uses the Jewish idea of mitzvot to think about the camp's rules and rituals. What are the mitzvot of Rebecca's family? In what ways is the mitzvah of protest similar to a religious mitzvah? Can you think of any mitzvot of your life?

8. *The Optimistic Decade* is crowded with fathers. How have Ira, Robbie, Joe, and Don Sr. tried to shape their children in their image? Which of their children rebelled and which went along with their fathers? Donnie is the newest dad in the book. What did you think about his relationship with Kayla?

9. When Caleb first arrives in Escadom in 1982, he is excited to become friends with Donnie, a friendship he ultimately ruins. Do you have friends who are different from you in terms of class and culture and politics?

10. In the book's opening scene we watch Rebecca convince herself that she wants what her father wants for her. When does she start thinking for herself? What precipitates her independence? How does it prepare her to stand up against Caleb near the end of the book?

11. Caleb and Ira are morally ambiguous characters. They do good work in the world, but they can treat those around them poorly. What was it like for you to read sections from the perspective of someone you might have disagreed with? How do you feel when you don't like a character in a book?

12. When Rebecca is disillusioned with Ira and Caleb, she gives up on politics altogether. At their last meeting, David tells her that even knowing what he knows about Caleb's flaws, he would go back to Llamalo if he could. Do you react more like Rebecca or David when leaders disappoint you?

13. Don and Donnie were raised to embody a certain stereotypical masculinity associated with the American West. In what ways does Caleb imitate them? What about David?

14. Why does Caleb lie to Donnie at the auction? How might their friendship have evolved if he hadn't lied? Why does he lie about David's accident? What would have been different if he had told the truth to the counselors? At one point Caleb says, "Sure he hadn't told the truth this morning, but the myth stood in for the truth, which was all anyone wanted anyway." Do you agree with him that the camp needed this myth?

15. Historically, people have come to the American West, seen its beauty, and wanted to control and alter the landscape. *The Optimistic Decade* tells this story through the ownership of a particular swath of high desert. Who does the land really belong to? What would you like to have happen to this land?

16. Don Sr. is one of the few characters who doesn't seem to have a strong ideological position. What do you make of the relationship between him and Caleb at the end of the book?

17. Early in the book, Rebecca's parents worry about how she'll react when she hears that the newspaper will close. What does the newspaper represent to her? How does she change after learning of its closing?

18. The tension between Llamalo and Escadom is one that occurs all over this country when impoverished neighborhoods or cities begin to be gentrified. Does Caleb help Escadom? Will the real estate boom that Anders is a part of help the town?

19. If you were to start your own utopian community, what would it look like? Who would you want to join you? What would be some of the rules, rituals, or mitzvot?