



Cactus Country: A Boyhood Memoir

Zoë Bossiere

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Zoë Bossiere's *Cactus Country* is a sensitive, searching memoir about gender fluidity.

Cactus Country is the Tucson trailer park where Bossiere lived as a child, all year round, in a harsh desert environment that taught them hardiness and initiative. Bossiere mucked out stables and walked neighbors' dogs for money. In depicting the poverty and hopelessness they observed, the text is frank and compassionate.

A short haircut and baggy clothing were sufficient to pass as one of the gang of boys who played basketball, carried pocketknives, and climbed the paloverde trees—until puberty hit. During high school, Bossiere sought queer role models and fended off boys' attention by cultivating an androgynous appearance. Via education, they awoke to injustices including racism and bullying and, at college mentors' suggestion, attended graduate school; it was a chance to escape Arizona and bad roommate situations.

Bossiere's responses to wild and domestic animals are imbued with strong metaphorical meaning throughout; in observing them, they link violence to anger and learn to value tenderness over façades of toughness. The javelina pig, first an object of fear, became their totem of courage; as an adult, Bossiere bought a stuffed head to hang on their wall.

Bossiere's trajectory is atypical, marked by descriptions of presenting as a boy, androgynous, and a girl at different points in their life. Their childhood awareness that "the body I had didn't match what I knew in my heart to be true" lingered, leading them to label theirs as a trans story. "Uncertainty was its own kind of adventure," they write. For their parents as well, the search was always for "the freedom to live life on our own terms."

Cactus Country is a trans writer's subtle, atmospheric, and resolute memoir about developing as a writer and coming into one's own.

REBECCA FOSTER (May / June 2024)

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