



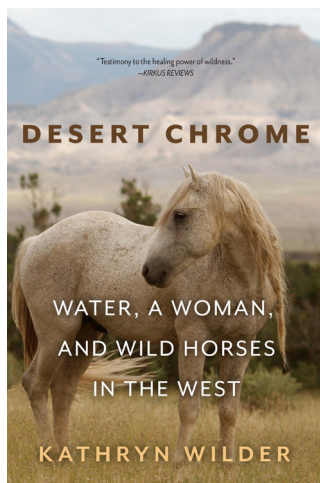
VOICES FOR THE LAND
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Reading Group Guide

DESERT CHROME

WATER, A WOMAN, AND WILD HORSES IN THE WEST

BY KATHRYN WILDER



INTRODUCTION

Kathryn Wilder's personal story of grief, motherhood, and return to the desert entwines with the story of America's mustangs as Wilder makes a home on the Colorado Plateau, her property bordering a mustang herd. *Desert Chrome* illuminates these controversial creatures—their complex history in the Americas, their powerful presence on the landscape, and ways to help both horses and habitats stay wild in the arid West—and celebrates the animal nature in us all.

“A raw and honest journey of addiction, love, trauma, and redemption—grounded in a deep love of place and all things mustang. The best memoirs reveal the deeply personal in order to see the larger world with renewed clarity and insight—this is one such book. As Wilder moves from heroin to horses, we see a substantive journey of recovery and strength—and ultimately, of resilience.”

—LAURA PRITCHETT, author of *Stars Go Blue*

“Testimony to the healing power of wildness . . . a candid memoir that interweaves a trajectory of loss, pain, and hard-won serenity with a paean to wild horses.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS

“Lyrical and vivid . . . an homage to the wildness and beauty of the West. *Desert Chrome* will especially appeal to those readers who love horses, dogs, ranching, and the ever-changing and at-risk earth we all inhabit. Wilder has written an unforgettable book.” —DURANGO HERALD

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Writing keeps me afloat in times of distress or despair, and when three key people in my life died so close together, I had to write or go under. At first I didn't know I was writing a book—I was simply journaling and writing essays—but when I happened upon mustangs and started observing their behavior, recognizing them as individuals, and learning the history of wild horses in the West, I was compelled by their story, which became my story.



Kathryn Wilder's work, cited in *Best American Essays* and nominated for the Pushcart Prize, has appeared in such publications as *High Desert Journal*, *River Teeth*, *Fourth Genre*, *Sierra*, and many anthologies and Hawai'i magazines. A past finalist for the Ellen Meloy Fund Desert Writers Award and the Waterston Desert Writing Prize, Wilder holds an MA from Northern Arizona University and an MFA from the Institute of American Indian Arts. She lives among mustangs in southwestern Colorado.

Learn more at wilderhorses.live.

Wilder is available to discuss *Desert Chrome* with reading groups in person or virtually. For more information, email anne@torreyhouse.com.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Toward the end of the book, Wilder writes, “some of us are wild horses” (p. 294). What sort of person is that, according to the author and according to you? What characteristics or life experiences do they have?
2. Themes of motherhood run throughout *Desert Chrome*. The mother archetype is nurturing, persistent, and self-sacrificing. In what ways does Wilder fit this archetype? In what ways does she fight against it?
3. Water becomes a sort of character in *Desert Chrome*. Its presence is notable and life-giving; its absence leads to grief, worry, and death. What other nonhuman characters do we encounter in the book?
4. Wilder describes Rebecca as before, her father and Ed as the ridge, and the mustangs as after (p. 296). This seems to align with her journey of drug addiction. How else might you divide her life into periods? Are there people, animals, or places in your life that similarly demarcate life periods?
5. Throughout *Desert Chrome*, the author includes italicized sections labeled *Detritus*. What do these sections add to the story? Why do you think she chose to set them apart in such a way?
6. The book ends with the image of a wild stallion mounting a mare. What do you think Wilder means by “that is as simple as it gets” (p. 298)? How might this compare or contrast with the theme of sexual violence prevalent throughout the book?
7. The author has “lived a life of leavings” (p. 13). From Utah to Hawaii to Wyoming and more, how do these leavings change the author’s life?
8. *Desert Chrome* includes background on the science and history of mustangs in the West. Mustangs also play a symbolic role in the narrative. What do you think the horses represent to the author? To the West?
9. When Wilder happens upon a wildcat (p. 38), she sticks around and investigates to see what the cat had been doing before her presence interrupted it. In a way, she’s risking her life. In what other ways does she take risks? What things do you think are worth the risk of a life?
10. The author writes about experiencing sexual abuse as a young girl. In what ways does that abuse affect her? Make her weaker? Make her stronger? Do you feel that by the end of the book she has overcome that abuse?
11. What can *Desert Chrome* teach us about addiction? About recovery?
12. Wilder includes two quotes at the beginning of *Desert Chrome*: one by Terry Tempest Williams and one by Craig Childs. Why do you think she included these? What do they add to the book?
13. The cover of the book is a photo of the mustang Chrome, for whom the book is named. The picture was taken by the author’s friend, TJ Holmes. How does the photo compare to how the author describes the horse? Are her standards of beauty different from yours?



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Torrey House Press publishes books at the intersection of the literary arts and environmental advocacy. THP authors explore the diversity of human experiences with place and engage community in conversations about landscape, literature, and the future of our ever-changing planet, inspiring action toward a more just world. We believe that lively, contemporary literature is at the cutting edge of social change. We seek to inform, expand, and reshape the dialogue on environmental justice and stewardship for the natural world by elevating literary excellence from diverse voices.

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