

Cate Cabot

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By Elysia Connor

Cate Cabot knew she and her two friends shouldn't be out on a Nevada highway thumbing a ride, not that day.

A feeling of foreboding had settled in once they'd reached San Francisco on their hitchhiking adventure, and it grew as they made their return trip back home to Casper, Wyo. It was October of 1971, when she was 19.

An early winter storm started rolling in, and a white van pulled over.

"It turns out we [had] been picked up by a psychotic," Cabot said. "It was a hellish, hellish nightmare experience."

Cabot stopped the story there in an interview with the Casper Journal. But she tells of ordeal they endured at the hands of the kidnapper, how she narrowly survived and about coping with the trauma in her book, "Uncharted: A Journey Along the Edge of Time and Survival." She'll read and sign copies at the Natrona County Public Library Feb. 18.

The creative nonfiction work covers her major life experiences from childhood to present, but it's really about the patterns she found repeating as she struggled to steer her life instead of simply reacting [to it], she said.

"Certainly I'm portraying the patterns of my life to purpose, but it brings the readers into a kind of clear focus on [the] patterns of their own lives — what serves, what doesn't, how we shift patterns, how we dance with them, how we make sense of them," Cabot said. "There are patterns that lead to the choices we make. Everything that happened to me in childhood directly relates to how I happened to be out on that highway hitchhiking at 19 years old."

Cabot hears her book is riveting.

“I say that with great humor, because for me as a writer, it’s a very different experience,” she said. She started the book more than a decade ago with no plans to complete it.

“I tried to leave it behind, but it refused,” she said. “It would not rest, and I finally just surrendered to it.”

The book begins with her family moving from Casper to Mexico for a hotel venture when she was [5], thrusting her into a different way of life and culture. She describes early experiences, like seeking calm in a horse ride after seeing a pig slaughtered only to be equally overwhelmed by awe of the vastness and danger in the desert landscape.

“So a lot of these shocks were coming in at the same time that I was getting a lot of wonder and amazement and a sense of mystery about the world,” she said. The family moved back to Casper two years later, and she was devastated to have been held back in first grade.

Still, her experiences were nothing out of the ordinary until her mother’s second marriage to an abusive and dangerous man, Cabot said. She moved out on her own while still in high school to get out of the situation. [That was about the time she fell in love for the first time at an environmental awareness program in Montana.] But her boyfriend was killed hitchhiking two years before her fateful journey.

Several readers have been judgmental about her decision to hitchhike across the county with her friends, Cabot said. But at the time it was common for young people to hitchhike, and they thought they would be safe since there were three of them and one was a young man, Cabot said. Readers also will discover the patterns in her life that led to her taking the opportunity when it arose, she said.

Exploring and coming to terms with her past was as dangerous as some of the turmoil she's survived, and her book chronicles her journey to cope with the traumas without allowing them to [consume] her, she said.

"We carry a wilderness within us, just as there is wildness out in the world," Cabot said. Tracking her dreams was one tool she used to guide her in the process of [what] she calls "unlocking one's psyche," she said.

Cabot's book is the story of one of the most interesting people to come out of Casper, say longtime friends. Her variety of experiences includes numerous jobs such as waitress, band sound-tech, fiber artist, ranch hand, nanny, cook, costume designer, performance artist, program director, life coach, [aviation] attendant, various management positions. The Casper native now lives near Jackson Hole and writes between her work developing education programs that combine art and science. She's also led many writing workshops.

Retired architect George Vlastos remembers Cabot when she was a fiber artist and avid runner and bicyclist in Casper in the 1970s. Even in their circle of young artists, she was one of the most fascinating and free-spirited, he said.

"I thought it was interesting she could become so unique growing up in a town out in the middle of nowhere, where it was unusual to connect with people who were interested in the arts," Vlastos said.

Sandy Leotta and Cabot grew up on the same block with some 30 other children who grew up together from birth, she said. One day, Leotta's mother came home to find her and a friend wrapped in sheets she was supposed to be ironing, looking petrified by a story Cabot was telling, Leotta said.

"She's staring at us with [those] green eyes of hers telling us some horrible, scary story," Leotta said. "I vividly remember that because she could tell some great stories even as a kid."

The two drifted apart in high school but reconnected about 20 years later. Leotta read Cabot's book and enjoyed the unique writing style she describes as more poetry than prose.

"You can't believe the worlds she puts together, and it paints such a fascinating picture about her inner life, and it encourages you to evaluate your own inner life," Leotta said. "She has always been very much connected to arts and an inner world — a spiritual, thoughtful, deep world."

Cabot has been busy in recent months with the publishing of her first book and promoting it on a [7 week-long] tour of Colorado and Wyoming. There hasn't been much time to think about other writing projects, but she knows they'll come along as surely as the last.

"Another couple of books are percolating in my mind," she said.