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Book Review
The Woman in the Dunes
by [Kobo Abe](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer
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Toward the beginning of Italo Calvino's marvelous metanovel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler...*, the narrator lists some of the many varieties of books one hasn't read yet: Books You Need To Go With Other Books On Your Shelves, Books You Could Put Aside To Maybe Read This

Summer, Books You've Been Hunting For Years Without Success, and Books You've Been Planning To Read For Ages.

For me, *The Woman in the Dunes* is one of those Books You've Been Planning To Read For Ages. I have been meaning to read it for more than twenty-five years, and it's hard to explain why I haven't until now. It's not very long. It's not hard to read. And I was pretty sure I would like it.

Loyalty to Kafka may have something to do with my long delay. I read nearly everything by Kafka during an extended binge in college, including several volumes of Kafka's diaries and letters, and when I heard that Kobo Abe was a kind of Japanese Kafka my interest was probably countered by a desire not to expose myself to something less than the real thing.

I'm sorry I waited. *The Woman in the Dunes* suggests Kafka in some ways, but it is a strong and original story that in some ways — such as the sexual element — explores realms where Kafka didn't go. A young man goes to the seashore on his vacation: not for the usual reasons but to pursue his interest in insects that live among the sand dunes. He finds a village clinging to the shifting sands, the houses half-buried or situated at the bottom of deep pits. When he misses the last bus home, the man is offered a bed for the night at the home of a young widow — a house that can only be reached by climbing down a rope ladder. The woman spends most of her time keeping her house clear of the sand, and the man reluctantly offers his help.

From this simple situation, Kobo Abe creates a parable about love, fate, dependence, and even slavery. His language, even in translation, is pure and striking. "His fatigue spread out into a sluggish circle, like India ink dropped in water." And sometimes it is as concise and troubling as one of Kafka's aphorisms: "They might as well lick each other's wounds. But they would lick forever, and the wounds would never heal, and in the end their tongues would be worn away."

About the Reviewer

Geoff Wisner is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at www.geoffwisner.com.