
Desert Solitaire

by Edward Abbey

Also known as: Edward Paul Abbey, Cactus Ed
Birth: January 29, 1927 in Home, Pennsylvania
Death: July 4, 1989 in Oracle, Arizona
Nationality: American
Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2006.
Entry updated: 06/22/2006

Sidelights

Edward Abbey was best known for his hard-hitting, frequently bitter, and usually irreverent defense of the world's wilderness areas. Anarchistic and outspoken, he was called everything from America's crankiest citizen to the godfather of modern environmental activism. Abbey himself strenuously resisted any attempt to classify him as a naturalist, environmentalist, or anything else. "If a label is required," Burt A. Folkart quoted him as saying in the *Los Angeles Times*, "say that I am one who loves the unfenced country." His favorite places were the deserts and mountains of the American West, and the few people who won his respect were those who knew how to live on that land without spoiling it. The many targets of his venom ranged from government agencies and gigantic corporations responsible for the rape of the wild country, to cattle ranchers grazing their herds on public lands, to simple-minded tourists who, according to Abbey, defile the solitude with their very presence.

Born on a small farm in Appalachia, Abbey hitchhiked west in 1946, following one year of service in the U.S. Army. Captivated by the wide-open spaces of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, he stayed there, studying philosophy and English at the University of New Mexico. His first novel, *Jonathan Troy*, shows the influence of the philosophical works he was reading in college, including the writings of William Godwin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Karl Marx, and Michael Bakunin. Published in 1954, *Jonathan Troy* is the story of a self-involved young man who yearns to escape his Pennsylvania home for the open spaces of the West. He finally realizes his dream, but not without overcoming many problems first. The greatest difficulty is the loss of his anarchist father, Nat, who is wrongly killed by a rookie policeman. Jonathan's dreams are also imperiled by a shallow young woman who tries to trap him into marriage. He is threatened by his friendship with his English teacher, who reinforces in him his father's radical politics. Ultimately, Jonathan sees that life in the East has become impossible for him, and the story ends with him heading West, lured by the promise of a new way of life there. The novel is notable for its depiction of the conflict between wilderness and civilization, a theme that would always be central to Abbey's work. It is also distinguished by "Abbey's descriptions of an industrial wreckage visited on the Pennsylvania coal country," remarked an essayist for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. "These descriptions are important because they mark the first expressions of Abbey's environmental awareness. The dialogue is the weak element of the novel, particularly Jonathan's ponderous interior monologues."

Abbey's next novel, *The Brave Cowboy*, enjoyed somewhat greater success than *Jonathan Troy* --particularly after it was adapted into the film *Lonely Are the Brave*. The novel features Jack Burns, a nineteenth-century-style cowboy whose rugged individualism has become anachronistic in modern New Mexico. Burns rides his horse into modern Duke City, intent on helping his friend Paul Bondi, a draft resister

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servicing a jail term. Burns undertakes this rescue by getting arrested so that he will be imprisoned with Bondi. The plot twists when Bondi will not follow Burns into the night and to freedom. Burns then runs for Mexico, pursued by the authorities, in a compelling chase story that includes his bringing down a helicopter with a small-caliber rifle. In a similar story, *Fire on the Mountain*, Abbey explores the struggles of John Vogelin as he attempts to prevent the White Sands Missile Range from encroaching on his ranch land in southern New Mexico.

Desert Solitaire, published in 1968, is drawn from Abbey's experiences as a forest ranger and fire lookout. His first nonfiction work was also one of his greatest successes. *Desert Solitaire* opens with a truculent preface, in which the author expresses his hope that serious critics, librarians, and professors will intensely dislike his book. In the body of the book, which compresses many of Abbey's experiences with the Park Service and Forest Service into the framework of one cycle of the seasons, readers find both harsh criticism and poetic description, all related to the landscape of the West and what mankind is doing to it. Freeman Tilden, reviewing *Desert Solitaire* in *National Parks*, recommended the book, "vehemence, egotism, bad taste and all. Partly because we need angry young men to remind us that there is plenty we should be angry about. . . . Partly because Abbey is an artist with words. There are pages and pages of delicious prose, sometimes almost magical in their evocation of the desert scene. . . . How this man can write! But he can do more than write. His prehension of the natural environment--of raw nature--is so ingenuous, so implicit, that we wonder if the pre-Columbian aborigines didn't see their environment just that way."

In a review of *Desert Solitaire* for the *New York Times Book Review*, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Edwin Way Teale noted that Abbey's work as a park ranger brought him to the wilderness before the invasion of "the parked trailers, their windows blue tinged at night while the inmates, instead of watching the desert stars, watch TV and listen to the canned laughter of Hollywood." Calling the book "a voice crying in the wilderness, for the wilderness," Teale warned that it is also "rough, tough and combative. The author is a rebel, an eloquent loner. In his introduction, he gives fair warning that the reader may find his pages 'coarse, rude, bad-tempered, violently prejudiced.' But if they are all these, they are many things besides. His is a passionately felt, deeply poetic book. It has philosophy. It has humor. It has sincerity and conviction. It has its share of nerve tingling adventure in what he describes as a land of surprises, some of them terrible." Teale concluded: "Abbey writes with a deep undercurrent of bitterness. But as is not infrequently the case, the bitter man may be the one who cares enough to be bitter and he often is the one who says things that need to be said. In *Desert Solitaire* those things are set down in lean, racing prose, in a close-knit style of power and beauty. Rather than a balanced book, judicially examining in turn all sides, it is a forceful presentation of one side. And that side needs presenting. It is a side too rarely presented. There will always be others to voice the other side, the side of pressure and power and profit."

While it never made the best-seller lists, *Desert Solitaire* is credited as being a key source of inspiration for the environmental movement that was growing in the late 1960s. Abbey's no-holds-barred book awakened many readers to just how much damage was being done by government and business interests to so-called "public" lands, as did the many other essay collections he published throughout his

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career. But an even greater influence may have come from his 1975 novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Receiving virtually no promotion, it nonetheless became an underground classic, selling half a million copies. Within the comic story, which follows the misadventures of four environmentalist terrorists, is a serious message: peaceful protest is inadequate; the ecology movement must become radicalized. The ultimate goal of the *Monkey Wrench Gang*--blowing up the immense Glen Canyon Dam on the Colorado River--is one Abbey seemed to endorse, and his book provides fairly explicit instructions to anyone daring enough to carry it out. The novel is said to have inspired the formation of the real-life environmental group *Earth First!*, which impedes the progress of developers and loggers by tactics such as sabotaging bulldozers and booby-trapping trees with chainsaw-destroying spikes. Their term for such tactics: monkeywrenching.

National Observer reviewer Sheldon Frank called *The Monkey Wrench Gang* a "sad, hilarious, exuberant, vulgar fairy tale filled with long chase sequences and careful conspiratorial scheming. As in all fairy tales, the characters are pure cardboard, unbelievable in every respect. But they are delightful." A contributor to the *London Times* observed that the book is "less a work of fiction . . . than an incitement to environmentalists to take the law into their own hands, often by means of vandalizing whatever they considered to be themselves examples of vandalism and overkill."

The Monkey Wrench Gang is possibly Abbey's best-known work, but the author's personal favorite of his more than twenty books was the bulky, largely autobiographical novel *The Fool's Progress*. "From the outset of this cross-country story it seems almost impossible to separate Edward Abbey from his narrator," observed Howard Coale in the *New York Times Book Review*. "The harsh, humorous, damn-it-all voice of Henry Lightcap is identical to the voice in the author's many essays." In Coale's opinion, the book was too "self-involved" to be a really successful work of fiction, although it contained some excellent descriptive passages. Other commentators agreed that the book was flawed. John Skow wrote in *Time*, "Abbey . . . is feeling sorry for his hero and probably for himself too. What saves the book is that he is skilled enough to pull sympathetic readers into his own mood of regret." "Abbey is not for everybody," summarized Kerry Luft in his *Chicago Tribune* assessment. "He's about as subtle as a wrecking ball. Some might call him sexist or downright misogynistic and point out that his female characters tend to be shallow stereotypes. I can only agree. But for those readers with the gumption and the stomach to stay with him, Abbey is a delight."

Abbey's last act contributed to his legend as a rugged individualist. When he realized he was terminally ill, he left the care of his doctors and checked himself out of the hospital. Following instructions he had set down years earlier in his journal, his wife and friends took him into the desert so that he could die under the stars. After one night went by and he was still alive, Abbey was taken back to his cabin home until the end came. Then his body was taken back into the desert and buried illegally there in a secret location.

Shortly before his death, Abbey had completed a sequel to *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, titled *Hayduke Lives!* Published posthumously, *Hayduke Lives!* finds most of the cast of the earlier novel settled comfortably into middle-class lives, only to be galvanized into action again by the reappearance of their

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leader, thought to be long dead. Critical assessment of the sequel varied widely. Grace Lichtenstein, reviewing it in the Washington Post Book World, found “the entire theme of ecotage” to be “shopworn,” while Chicago Tribune editor David E. Jones stated that “the fun-loving bawdiness [of the original] is still there, and the camaraderie and dedication,” along with “an unexpected darker side.”

Excerpts from Abbey’s journals and a collection of his essays were also published posthumously. *Confessions of a Barbarian: Selections from the Journals of Edward Abbey, 1951-1989* includes 368 pages from the writer’s copious journals. His acid pen ranges over subjects such as aging, suicide, music, and literature. Assessing the book in *Backpacker*, Peter Lewis observed that Abbey proves his ability to “inspire and infuriate. . . . It’s spirited stuff. Some of the highlights center around his closely observed, tack-sharp sketches of places he knew and loved. Abbey was as nimble as they come when summoning emotions surrounding a landscape, and the desert Southwest has had few who could better sing its praises.” Roland Wulbert concurred in *Booklist* that Abbey is “both compelling and infuriating,” and added, “His journals show that he didn’t so much find a voice as mature the one he always had.”

The Serpents of Paradise: A Reader is a collection of essays, travel pieces, and works of fiction by Abbey, organized to parallel events in Abbey’s own life. His fiction is represented by excerpts from *The Brave Cowboy*, *The Fool’s Progress*, and *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, while the nonfiction is drawn from *Desert Solitaire* and numerous other sources. The pieces here reveal Abbey as “a true independent, a self-declared extremist and ‘desert mystic,’” as well as “a hell of a good writer,” observed Donna Seaman in *Booklist*. “Irreverent about man and reverent toward nature, Abbey wielded his pen as a weapon in the battle for freedom and wilderness and against arrogance and greed.” A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer commented that *The Serpents of Paradise* “makes for a splendid summary of his best work—though it does not slight his faults,” which include “occasional outbursts of xenophobia and old-fashioned sexism,” as well as “gleefully overweening destructive fantasies. . . . Anyone who doesn’t already know his work will find this volume, culled from more than a dozen books of fiction and nonfiction, an addictive introduction.”

Reflecting in the *New York Times Book Review* on Abbey’s body of work, Edward Hoagland called him “the nonpareil ‘nature writer’ of recent decades.” Hoagland went on: “He was uneven and self-indulgent as a writer and often scanted his talent by working too fast. But he had about him an authenticity that springs from the page and is beloved by a rising generation of readers.” “*Desert Solitaire* stands among the towering works of American nature writing,” stated Lichtenstein. “Abbey’s polemic essays on such subjects as cattle subsidies and Mexican immigrants, scattered through a half-dozen volumes, remain so angry, so infuriating yet so relevant that they still provoke arguments among his followers. As for his outdoors explorations, no one wrote more melodic hymns to the red rocks and rivers of the Southwest; no one ever defended them with more elan. It is in those nonfiction odes to the wilderness, by turns cantankerous and lyrical . . . that Abbey lives, forever.”

Speaking for himself in the essay “A Writer’s Credo,” Abbey declared, “I write to entertain my friends and exasperate our enemies. I write to record the truth of our time as best I can see it. To investigate the comedy and tragedy of human relationships. To oppose, resist, and sabotage the contemporary drift



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toward a global technocratic police state, whatever its ideological coloration. I write to oppose injustice, to defy power, and to speak for the voiceless. I write to make a difference."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born January 29, 1927, in Home, PA; died of internal bleeding due to a circulatory disorder, March 14, 1989, in Oracle, AZ; buried in a desert in the southwestern United States; son of Paul Revere (a farmer) and Mildred (a teacher; maiden name, Postlewaite) Abbey; married Jean Schmechalon, August 5, 1950 (divorced, 1952); married Rita Deanin, November 20, 1952 (divorced, August 25, 1965); married Judith Pepper, 1965 (died, July 4, 1970); married Renee Dowling, February 10, 1974 (divorced, 1980); married Clarke Cartwright, May 5, 1982; children: (with Deanin) Joshua Nathanael, Aaron Paul; (with Pepper) Susannah Mildred; (with Cartwright) Rebecca Claire, Benjamin Cartwright. Education: University of New Mexico, B.A., 1951, M.A., 1956; attended University of Edinburgh. Politics: "Agrarian anarchist." Religion: Piute. Military/Wartime Service: U.S. Army, 1945-46.

AWARDS

Fulbright fellow, 1951-52; Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship, Stanford University, 1957; Western Heritage Award for Best Novel, 1963, for *Fire on the Mountain*; Guggenheim fellow, 1975; American Academy of Arts and Letters award, 1987 (declined).

CAREER

Writer. Park ranger and fire lookout for National Park Service in the southwest United States, 1956-71; University of Arizona, Tuscon, teacher of creative writing, beginning 1981, became full professor, 1988.

WRITINGS

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- Abbey's Road: Take the Other, Dutton (New York, NY), 1979.
- (Self-illustrated) Down the River, Dutton (New York, NY), 1982.
- (With John Nichols) In Praise of Mountain Lions, Albuquerque Sierra Club (Albuquerque, NM), 1984.
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- (Editor and illustrator) Slumgullion Stew: An Edward Abbey Reader, Dutton (New York, NY), 1984, published as The Best of Edward Abbey, Sierra Club Books (San Francisco, CA), 1988.
- One Life at a Time, Please, Holt (New York, NY), 1988.
- Vox Clamantis in Deserto: Some Notes from a Secret Journal, Rydal Press (Santa Fe, NM), 1989, published as A Voice Crying in the Wilderness: Essays from a Secret Journal, illustrated by Andrew Rush, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1990.
- The Serpents of Paradise: A Reader, edited by John Macrae, Holt (New York, NY), 1995.

OTHER

- (Essayist) Thomas Miller, Desert Skin, University of Utah Press (Salt Lake City, UT), 1994.
- Earth Apples: The Poetry of Edward Abbey, collected and introduced by David Peterson, illustrated by Michael McCurdy, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1994.

Also author of introductions for books, including *Walden*, by Henry D. Thoreau, G. M. Smith (Salt Lake City, UT), 1981; *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching*, edited by Dave Foreman, Ned Ludd Books, 1987; *The Land of Little Rain*, by Mary Austin, Viking (New York, NY), 1988; and *Wilderness on the Rocks*, by Howie Wolke, Ned Ludd Books, 1991. Contributor to books, including *Utah Wilderness Photography: An Exhibition*, Utah Arts Council, 1978; *Images from the Great West*, edited by Marnie Walker Gae-de, Chaco Press (La Cañada, CA), 1990; *Late Harvest: Rural American Writing*, edited by David R. Pichaske, Paragon House (New York, NY), 1991; and *The Best of Outside: The First 20 Years*, Vintage Departures (New York, NY), 1998. A collection of Abbey's manuscripts is housed at the University of Arizona, Tucson.

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MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

The Brave Cowboy was adapted for film and released as *Lonely Are the Brave*, starring Kirk Douglas and Walter Matthau, 1962; *Fire on the Mountain* was adapted for film, 1981; *The Monkey Wrench Gang* was adapted for film, written by William Goldman and directed by Catherine Harwicke, for Columbia Pictures.

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SOURCE CITATION

Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2007. Reproduced in Biography Resource Center. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale. 2007. <http://0-galenet.galegroup.com.librarycatalog.pima.gov:80/servlet/BioRC>